The Nothing That Is: Aesthetics of Anti-Theater

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For the listener, who listens in the snow
And nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is
Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man”

Nothing will come of nothing.
William Shakespeare, King Lear

If we ain’t got that then we ain’t got much
And we ain’t got nothing, nothing.
A Lyrics, “Nothing”

Wherever it comes from, morality or the aesthetic, the anti-theatrical prejudice is a conceptual vanity, subject to or victimized by theater, while going through every nerve-end to the dubious heart of drama, which has from whatever beginnings always distrusted the theater. I’m not merely referring here, with the author living or dead, to a certain protectionism of the text against the depredations of the stage, a tradition extending, at times with egregious vigilance, from Ben Jonson to Samuel Beckett to, recently and unexpectedly, Sam Shepard – once with-it in the counterculture, and its polymorphous perversions – who refused to allow a production of True West, if the combative brothers were misgendered, enacted by women. Propriety aside, and social construction, the liability of the prejudice, whose contingency is theater, is that it’s constrained ontologically even before it’s thought, for as Heidegger said of language, “Language itself is – language and nothing else besides. Language itself is language”. And though it’s been institutionalized, so it appears with theater, theater itself is, tautological maybe, but in the immanence of appearance, theater itself is theater, before anything else, or – in a spectrum of apprehension from Plato to Genet (sainted by Sartre for sanctifying appearance) – with a duplicitous presence suffusing everything else. That may very well prompt, in the deepest sense, a desire for anti-theater, which may paradoxically, in a strategic, desperate, or imperious theatricality, increase the quotient of theater, while never resolving the question of whether, in being theatrical as anti-theater, it ought to be more or less.

Either way, in a superfluity of it or on a minimalist stage, theatricality isn’t, in its containment or presumption of theater, even a shadow of it, only the merest facsimile, and even then we can’t be sure; for if theater is not entropic, a sort of leak in the Real, it seems brought into being by thought – though maybe the thing itself, disappearing in the perceiving, is precisely the leak in the Real. It seems no accident that the greatest drama is obsessed with that. As it happens, the most elusively theatrical figure in the canonical drama would seem, in escaping interpretation, to have reflected on this, and if we ask the simple question, what makes theater? the answer might be Hamletic: thinking makes it so. What’s then to be kept in mind is the theater’s incipience as appearance, because we have it in mind, from whatever it is it is not (reality? experience? life?), as it must have been, if it was, before there was any theater, or precipitous semblance of it, no less anything.

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like the notion that all the world’s a stage or society of the spectacle or, making a non sequitur of anti-theater, a precession of simulacra. If we’re not quite at the end of the real – bereft in an imaged world, with its superfetation of signs, no referentials, no metaphysics, only the vanity of a redundancy without any substance at all, not even the imaginary substance once thought of as illusion – the undeniable truth is that we’re not quite sure where we are. And so far as the theater reflects that, we’re back through whatever demystifications to its ineliminable seeming, or in its doubling over of life, the “Seeming, seeming”, distressingly seminal, as if precisely Measure for Measure (II. 4, V. 151), now you see it now you don’t – and with its indeterminacy, a sensation of the aesthetic. Autonomous? who can say? but as an effect of the nervous system, maybe autonomic.

Insidious it may be, or a reprise of illusion, but it’s not to be done away with by an alienating detachment or preëmptive imitation. Nor will it be carried away or contained by a kind of Brechtian narcissism, the ‘ontological-hysteric’ or wired-up objectification, in the theater of Richard Foreman, who’s still there pulling the strings, but – even before the dominion of exacerbated digitality – with the video game momentum of somewhat robotic bodies, a little sexier now, but no way “bodies that matter”. If the Brechtian paradigm has receded, or is now so familiar it needs some A-effect itself, it was the theatricalization of theory that – with the materiality of the body linked to the performativity of gender – appeared to take over the gestus, with a parodic amplification, as in the films of John Waters and the outrageous drag of Divine. In deconstructing Austin’s notion of performativity built around the marriage vow, and imitating an origin that really never was, the ‘corporeal style’ of queer performativity – truly queer, celebrating a stigma – derides the notion of a stable or coherent, self-identical body, with a preëmptive strike at specularity in a reversal of the gaze. Making a virtue of gender trouble, the bodily inscriptions of the performative are a nuance away from performance and, in its repetitive acts (“truly troubling”, 3 or so it is claimed, in the hegemony of subversion), disdainful of theatre – bourgeois theater, of course, which has always distrusted itself.

As with modernist art and thought, which in the era of cultural studies has had a bad rap (masculine dominance, elitism, a depoliticizing formalism, and the emptying out of history), that apparently commodified theater seems at various levels to have anticipated its critique, as if the theater itself were proposing something like anti-theater. As for the queer reversed gaze, and its subversive look at the myth of interiority, and the inside/outside binary of what became, in the Method, the actor’s psychic space, it may be that its seeming seeing is something other than that. For as queer becomes method, it discovers again – as they did in painting, since Cézanne pushed his big mountain up to the picture plane – that there is no surface that doesn’t recede; and if the activity of perception changes what it sees, it’s in the seeing itself that interiority persists, as it always has in the theater, subvert it as you will. And so it may be, with all its sophistication, in a “discursive performativity” that, in “arguing with the real”, 4 confronts an impasse in the parody turning back upon itself – or, as Shakespeare says in a sonnet, with a stylish riff on delusion, “Seems seeing, but effectually is out” (Sonnet 113).

What’s in, what’s out is itself a dismaying problem – beyond specularity, or even the simulacra – in a dromoscopic, techno-scientific, biochemical, geneticist, informational world, with everything seeming to move, in the wake of the Enlightenment, with the speed of light or, as Paul Virilio thinks it, with “the light of speed”. 5 Channels, screens, PCs, cellphones, satellite dishes, CDs, webs and
weblogs, samplers, Ethernets: in the proliferous sensation of the multitudinous moment, the sheer repetitive promiscuity of the instantly mediated, what happens to temporality, or for that matter, materiality, no less the validating stasis of aesthetic autonomy? Lady Macbeth wanted the future in the instant, but with so many futures in the infinity of instants, what passeth show would, if it wanted to show, already be far in the past – though a past is problematic, with the wavelengths and frequencies picking up speed. So it is, if we pick up on the velocity and go with the implications, that theater/anti-theater wouldn’t even be an issue, though that wouldn’t necessarily relieve Michael Fried, who worried about the degeneration of art “as it approaches the condition of theater”. Defending an art-as-object wholly manifest in the instant, “a continual and perpetual present” insusceptible to the attritions of time, Fried insists on defeating theater, because it is given over to “a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective”. What is past, and passing, and to come might have been thus apprehended, when Minimal Art, and then Conceptual Art, first appeared on the scene, but if we’re now amidst the megabytes, minimizing the instant and swifter than any thought, what perspective can be expected when what’s coming has already passed and the simultaneity, if imaginable, is always already surpassed? So with theater/anti-theater: the binary would seem to depend on a here and now, but we’re living acceleratingly, anaphylactically, in a then and there, with nothing like the memory of a Bergsonian durée, since, in the immediacy of the remote, lightyears faster than the channel changer, “speed is the old age of the world”, where if you hadn’t seen it all in an epiphanic flash there was hardly even an instant for now you see it now you don’t.

Is this not something more than fantasy? Or if still not unfantastic, merely the virtual truth of a prospective virtual world? Maybe yes maybe no. But if Virilio is (as he would have to be, if what he’s seeing is so) retrospectively prescient, then with reality ‘foreclosed’, retracted by acceleration, “out of time in the strictest sense”, any apparency of the real in the form of theater would hardly be worth our attention, no more than a sheet of newspaper in a Florida hurricane. Or for that matter, the end of modernism, which like the end of history is always beginning again – not modernism, remember, but the beginning of its end.

But slowing down for a moment, taking time (or the restored illusion of it), in the recidivist way of rehearsal: a brief connection was made before, between modernism and the bourgeois theater, about which – as if in a matrix of anachronism and history (with the universe of the Matrix looming) – I want to say more. So far as that theater is an expressive function of modernism, it was from the beginning a good deal more conflicted, aphasic, destabilizing than, with the advent of critical theory, we’ve made it out to be – its gravity such, if thought, that its accretions of realism, density impacted, as if becoming a black hole, were an inside out eruption into a more far-reaching amplitude than those apparently predictable plots and box sets would seem to suggest. The atmosphere can be oppressive, but with the constraints of space and time there is, metonymically, a kind of impacted remembrance, too, opening up as in the unconscious, or as in the modernist visual arts, to the spatialization of time. If in Cubism, however, all of history appears to be there, geometrically severed, but (in the wake of Cézanne) up on the picture plane, and with an autonomy there, that would seem to be the reverse of what we have in the theater, with its proscenium arch, teasers and tormentors, surreptitious wings, and legacy of perspective. Yet I’ve seen productions in open spaces,
indoors, outdoors, or sprawling all over somewhere, the legacy there regardless, with text, without text, even through improvisation, old outguessable reflexes, much of it banal, irredeemably locked in the brain, as if a proscenium there — though maybe a false proscenium with no perspective at all.

But “Fie upon’t, foh! About my brains”, putting it into the plural, as Hamlet does, as if with brain damage arrested, the gaze itself is reversed, as he turns to the “guilty creatures sitting at a play” (II. 2., V. 573–575). In a space created, it would seem, by a high-tech Mousetrap — where the watchers are watching the watchers watch — we’re talking not only of graduated perception, but also, in reflecting that (no less reflecting upon it), accountable degrees of theater. As for the watchers in the audience, what brought them there to begin with, or — while digesting dinner, as in Brecht’s jaundiced view — compels inert attention, tuning in and screening out? Well, we all know that from the plotline, which has an ancient history: appearance, disguise, concealment, the lies, deceits, the overheard, the disclosed, the mortifying confession, guilt again, the cover up, and (what else to be expected?) the anxious relief of exposure — that suspect heritage in the bourgeois drama of the phallic Oedipal theater, all of which the new historicism or cultural materialism, or gendered or racial versions of the going revisionist Marxism, and with it anti-theater, has been determined to expose. And then we go through a cycle where we want to expose the exposure. As the debates continue in theory — and now beyond theory, whose future is dubious too — no doubt about it, there is a cloud of unknowing in our now conventional theater, as if “the scene upon the stage”, which Freud might have been describing in Totem and Taboo, “was derived from the historical scene through a process of systematic distortion — one might even say, as the product of a refined hypocrisy”.10 Or maybe, after all, not so refined. Anything can be cheapened by performance, but what’s not there, and should be, preys upon the brain, all the more as you look with what, “imagination dead imagine”, Beckett called “the eye of prey”.11 Is it a case of anti-theater when you want to stand up and shout, ‘Use your brains!’

We’ve all heard the platitudes (and may even recite them), in courses of dramatic literature, about not knowing a play until we see it staged. But much of the time, up there, we don’t see it at all, not to mention the liability — even with a fine performance, and sometimes especially so, as that gets in the way (transposed now to film/video, and frequently shown in class) — of not seeing it in multiple ways, incessantly re-imaged or, as by some inquest in the cortex, otherwise rehearsed. It might be thought of as closing the drama, or resisting theater, but I’ve been telling students for years (even while staging plays, and this important to the stagings) that they may engage with a play far more profoundly if they don’t go to a production, and then, grasping my head to define it, I’d insist that the brain is the best stage of all, the most expansive, versatile, dynamic, and volatile in containment. Think of it, I’d say, that englobed space behind the eyeballs (a site of immense “confabulation”, with never a repetition, “unstructured immensities”, and according to “neural Darwinism”, with a “value system”12) — now that’s what a theater should be! inexhaustibly ideational, with a repletion of image, as if the singular brain were fractured, dialectically plural, of untold and variable magnitude, and maybe as anti-theater, where (with all the neurons working) you can see it again and again, through every (mis)apprehension, in some other heuristic form, but not with absent vision. (There is, as with Charles Lamb and Goethe on Shakespeare, and particularly King Lear, an anti-theatrical precedent for keeping a play in the text and staging it in the mind, as with Gertrude Stein on reading, but that’s not what I’m talking about.) Vision may be, as they say,
a ‘transcendental signifier’, but then, so be it:
for theater, against theater, it always remains to be seen, and so it is in re-imagining what we think of as bourgeois theater, which was once, however impaired, also a matter of vision – and with a materialist disposition, a vision haunted by history, and its visionary gleam.

A rising from the Enlightenment with a thwarted dialectic, it’s as if it were inhabited at the outset by some ghosting imminence of Ibsen’s Ghosts, its remorseless analytic brought to unspeakable terror, with glaciers and peaks in the background bathed in the morning light. Where Peer Gynt once was, the dead may awaken, in a kind of super-theater, site of the world beyond, but unsayable, Wagnerian, at the limit of wish-fulfillment upping the ante on theatricality, but as if the subtext of Osvald’s final line, “The sun – The sun”, were through the syphilitic blindness a sonorous delirium. How, really, should it be staged, and in the rush of repressed memory, what kinesthetic evocations? And would they be enough? For one can imagine that at the very dawn of the Enlightenment, embodied at dawn in the Festival of Dionysus, the first primeval murmurs were heard – the proleptic soundings of a still-unending cultural hysteria – from those subhuman figures in the caves below the mountain on which, in the Aeschylean drama, the fire-giving god of forethought, Prometheus, was bound, persisting there in a “mad harmony” with the punishing forces of nature, slashing winds, pitted clouds, lightning bolts, earthquakes, serving a higher power.

It may be that Shelley released him or some revisionist production, but I wouldn’t count on that. What is more likely, however, whatever we do in the theater, is that at some subliminal level all of it is remembered, all the more if resisted, and if not quite of the same dimensions, the delirium surely persists. With an ongoing animus against bourgeois theater, but nothing like Wagner’s resources for hypertrophic theatricality, something like it was aroused again, in the visceral ‘grain of the voice’, from way down in the throat, lips, tongue, glottis, teeth, the mucilaginous membranes, and scabbily out the nose, by the sound/movement exercises of the 1960s, and the participatory mystique of their psychophysical clamor. As with Dionysus in 69, this was one of the ways in which performance, disavowing the conventional actor, mere menial of the authorized text, would “escape the tyranny of meaning”, dismantling bourgeois value and – with bodies that matter naked, and more or less jouissance – thus transcending its theater, the mere “sensuous expression of estranged human life” (Which is actually how Marx described, not irrelevantly, it would seem, the movement of production and consumption.) As for the political apotheosis of that vociferous period, there was, with bodies spelling out its title and then naked all over the stage, the Living Theater’s Paradise Now, which also passed for the temporal instant as a sort of anarchically mesmeric, unmimetic materialism, with its libidinal economy flowing out to the streets.

In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx spoke of the senses as direct theoreticians, each of them formed by the labor of the entire history of the world; but he had in mind another materialism, which had to bring itself first to consciousness, in a “fully-developed naturalism [that] equals humanism, and as fully-developed humanism [that] equals naturalism”, only thence “coming-to-be”, through the long riddling burden of that estranging history, with paradise having to wait. And so it had been in the theater, which is in the play of appearance the form of coming-to-be, as it is – in more than etymology, and not merely with the specular gaze – also the shadow of theory, suffused with all the senses and with a sensory life. (As I used to tell my KRAKEN group, taking that as a datum, what we’re doing here is thinking, though some might think, in a kneejerk, that’s really anti-theater.)
As for performance itself, the sensuous expression of estranged life may occur with a certain dispassion, or as in the anti-theater of Brecht, by estranging the estrangement; but so with Ibsen too, in a dramaturgy that was radically other, a good long way from the boulevards and the assembly-line scriptures of Scribe. And if we now think we can predict Ibsen’s moves, the degrees of estrangement and passion were once, as contingencies of the perceptual, what aroused critique in the drama, while this degree or that degree, like any gesture on stage, or even an instant of held breath (not to mention Beckett’s play), may at a particular moment in history determine the force of critique, which sustains itself in estrangement because, so far in history, there is no other life. As he evolved a utopian vision, Marx was very conscious of that. As for Ibsen, it adhered like a guilty thought to the most ethereal theatricality of his most symbolic plays, as it did through the grain of the voice in the organless bodies of Artaud, and – in the consummate delirium of anti-theater – those immemorial incantations, prodigal in the air, also betrayed by the Real.

So, down to earth again, where the cruelties are sufficient. In a remarkable early letter, meant to deflect the Young Hegelians from ‘dogmatic abstraction’, Marx had called for “a ruthless critique of everything existing”, but in this regard – if they didn’t quite share a politics – it was Ibsen who virtually outdid him in conducting such a critique, which is why (historicize! to be sure, but speaking of truly troubling) one of his plays was attacked as if it were Artaud’s plague, as a running sore, a wound, an open drain, a cesspool. As for the dramaturgy of his realism, or the later departures from it, the paradox was that it constituted in performance, the truth of illusion there, a devastating critique of theater, along with the apparatus of representation we’ve been belaboring since, where the reality of appearance is confounded by the appearance of reality – though we’re still not entirely sure which of those phrases ought to go first, or (though I can see everything disappearing into the velocity of the virtual) whether there’s any reality at all without the duplicity of appearance. About the future of (an) illusion, it was Freud who acceded to that, after moving, in the anti-theater of psychoanalysis, from the mise en scène of the unconscious through Civilization and its Discontents, virtually admitting there, with a kind of tragic vision, that demystification had failed. Meanwhile, theater persists through anti-theater like the generic ghosting in Hamlet through the factitiousness of the Ghost, or, with Hegel turned on his head, through the ruthless critique like “phantoms formed in the human brain”.

It was during the period, approximately, from Freud’s Project for a Scientific Psychology to the inconsolable prospect of unpurgeable discontents that, in a sort of Moebius warp, theater and anti-theater merged in the vicissitudes of critique: from the early naturalism of Strindberg – whose preface to Miss Julie has a surprising Brechtian strain – to Pirandello’s bewildered characters and Gertrude Stein’s bewildering plays that, with elisions or traces of character, were really anti-plays, where “each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one” – which one is only one (and, until recently, a neglected one at that) among the avatars of anti-theater in the modernist avant-garde. And there were various ironies there, as in Futurism’s assault not only on the vacuities of boulevard theater, but also on the naturalism equaling humanism in the fully-developed realism. In refusing not only the mere mimicry, but even the accomplished mimicry that – as theory sees it today – reproduced what it critiqued, Marinetti and his cohorts actually went, with all the ferocity of his manifestoes, through an exponentially manic reality theater (with its own Survivor shows) after the manifest sublimity of a more immediate truth. It’s as if he were anticipating – though,
for all the ferocity, in a tamer version of less dimension – what Slavoj Žižek wrote about (with another performative put-on of his gleeful dialectic) after 9/11: the fundamentalist terror latent but secreted in the twentieth century’s “passion for the Real”, with martyrdom not only impassioned, but real, immediate and, guaranteed hours in heaven, sublime.

There were, to be sure, Boccioni and Carrà paintings, but the theatricalized spirit of Futurism was not confined to the flat walls of museums or stage sets, but went instead (as with Tzara and Dada too), to where the real action was, in cafés and cabarets, political parlors, sporting events, the offices of hostile newspapers, or out there on the streets, where in the notorious spectacles, with no play-acting, they even beat people up. And while the Surrealists were enamored of dreams and the unconscious, they also broke out of the frame of painting and plinth-based art into collage, photomontage, installations, assemblage, noise and body art, environments and, with multiple sites in the real world, not only performance art but the performance of everyday life. (As for beating people up, the only person I ever heard Beckett talk about with contempt was André Breton, because if you disagreed with him too much, he had you beaten up.) All of these, of course, are the going things today in a performative artworld that – as with the blood spatterings of Istvan Kantor, or his Machine Sex Action Group, or the costumes, prosthetics, and role-playing in Matthew Barney’s Viral Infection: The Body and Its Discontents – couldn’t care less about theater. As for the traditional avant-garde, and its incursion on everyday life, they may have deranged it in the process, but what then seemed weird or strange is – on stage, off stage, even in fashion, or blockbuster shows in museums – second nature now.

Or so it is until you think about it, when it may become threatening again, like the very substance of theater, which, not unlike a viral infection, keeps itself out of sight. As for the instrumental theatricality of whatever forms of theater – the entire repertoire of representation, its originary sources or pretensions to sacred rites – that was later exposed by exploitation demonically in Genet, who, as if nurtured by infections, sustains in the theater’s seeming what is indelibly there in life. (If that seems to be mocking deconstruction, Derrida tried to make the Genetic best of it in his mirroring Glas. This occurred after he already had to acknowledge, in an essay on Artaud, that to abolish representation is a tragic impossibility, that even to think its closure “is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. Its gratuitous and baseless necessity”. So it is at the end of The Balcony, when Madame Irma says to the audience, while closing up the Brothel, before extinguishing the last light, “You must go home, where everything – you can be quite sure – will be even falser than here. […] You must go home.” It may very well be, in our heart of hearts, that we really don’t want to go home, which is why I’ve often felt that at the sticking point of the most powerful plays – say, Oedipus or King Lear or Endgame (among those I’ve directed over the years) – we tend to be most evasive, as if analysis were closing in, or in the process of absorption also blanking out, or acknowledging a profundity that really we’d rather forget – and in order to get on with it, however estranged the life, that’s just about what we do. So, too, with anti-theater, as a scourge of falsehood and lies; relying as we do on appearances, it would be hard to live with that. At the extremities of exposure, we may actually incline to comedy, so we can laugh it off, though the comedy that really gets us is when we don’t know when to laugh. Is that theater or anti-theater, or the seeming between? If there’s an autonomy there, it’s that autonomy of indeterminacy that I won’t say is anti-aesthetic.
Herbert Blau

It was Freud who said we must learn to live in doubt, but the anti-theatrical prejudice, for one reason or another, has had its doubts about that – most of all, perhaps, at the intolerable limits of theater, where we sense ourselves seeing what we maybe shouldn’t see. Or through all the seeming, the indiscernible, the insidious, what we really can’t. Yet what would theater be if it didn’t move toward the unbearable, unless we’re prepared to abandon the greatest of all plays, especially tragedy, already much critiqued, or stage revisionist versions that arrest, expose, or otherwise set it right. But that, too, is a vanity of anti-theater, for would they really go away – that is, the rage, shame, remorse, immeasurable pain that, prior to any drama, brought them into being, insisting they be represented – if we should rewrite or abolish or parody Lear’s howls or his never never never never never, or even, in some mind-blowing enraptured form of belated epic redemption, substitute for them Molly Bloom’s yes I said yes I will Yes? In all this we might remember that it’s not only anti-theater or a strategic theatricality that deters what’s so overpowering in performance that you almost can’t think about it, but simpler things, like bad acting or directing or – again lightyears from what charges the theater, its grievous mortality and invisible wounds – lightweight production concepts, anti-theater by default.

Having said that, I may now retract it, or at least qualify the apparent fault. For while I think I know bad acting when I see it, or an overcharged or slovenly or empty production, the issue that determined my own rethinking of what I was doing in the theatre – after more than twenty years of doing it, radically changing what I did – is this: what do we mean by acting where why how for whom? and to what ideological end? Answering any one of those questions may mean that you’re for or against theater, at least that theater; and indeed, there is a sense in which the anti-theatrical prejudice, or the deployment of theatricality, becomes an issue of this form of theater against that form of theater. From the outset, however, I have not been thinking so much of theater forms as about the troubling question, undispelled by the correlative notion, in the becoming of theater, that theater is itself, of the materialization of theatre – unless it’s all theater, reality, appearance, whatever – from whatever it is it is not. Where theater happens in its emergence, as itself or not, it’s something else again, or at least would appear to be, which – like the “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”, or the activated nothing which opens Waiting for Godot, that “Nothing to be done” – baffles perception itself, and again demystification, or the distantiation of that Brechtian A-effect.

This is theater at ground zero, or like the concept of zero itself, about which it has been said, “If you look at zero you see nothing; but look through it and you will see the world.” And beyond mathematics, you may see more than that, or rather, see it and not see it, as in Hamlet’s closet scene, where Gertrude says all that is she sees, which, even if he’s hallucinating, and nothing there to be seen, is existentially something more – what he sees, what she doesn’t – than mere coinage of the brain. And so it is with what’s palpably there that none of us can see, neither the characters, nor the actors, nor those of us in the audience, in looking directly at it, or eyes with gazing fed, and no form of anti-theater can do anything about that, though it might break the gaze or intensify it, cutting to the brain. And that’s no coinage either, or the accursed commodification. Thus, when I’ve written before that the entire institution of theater, with all its apparatus, is a historical cover up for the ontological fact that the one performing there, that one, is dying in front of your eyes, I was not, as with queer performativity, talking of corporeal style, but rather – in the bodies that matter, the matter that makes the body – the theater’s generic substance, inarguably there
but imperceptible, compelling the specularity that it will never satisfy. Yet, if I can believe what I read in the newspaper, what passeth show may be, and sooner than we think, another passing phase.

In his apocalyptic imaginings, which he would insist is the virtual truth (quite literally so), Virilio had already foreseen a super-digitized world whose high frequencies would invalidate the body as an encumbrance, requiring, perhaps, the semblance of a biological body with a body art that mirrors its inexistence, with dying then irrelevant. Now we actually hear from (maybe way-out) geneticists – as from molecular artists like Joe Davis, who has made art of DNA by inserting coded messages into bacterial genes – that defeating death may be in the offing, or that, shy of total victory, a life expectancy of 4,000–5,000 years is now a prospect, and in the sights of the avant-garde. When, moreover, we hear from Whitfield Diffie, chief of security of Sun Microsystems, that “we live, largely speaking, in the last generation of human beings,” and that there are people alive today who will have unlimited life spans, well, that’s really likely to change our thinking about theater, as anything but a residual seeming, since the apparatus of representation on which the institution is predicated, even as anti-theater, becomes itself obsolete, as representation itself, reproducing what otherwise disappears, would itself more or less disappear into the interminable – which was in that other life the fate of psychoanalysis, in the vanity of interpretation of the dramaturgy of the unconscious.

Meanwhile, as if to augment these prospects there was a production called The Hanging Man – brought over recently from England to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in which dying becomes impossible through a series of events that are eccentrically, obsessively, and decidedly theatrical, no question of it. The production was developed by The Improbable Theater, which would seem to be a more sanguine mutation of my own The Impossible Theater. Subtitled A Manifesto, that book was written with an unyielding reality principle, that the theater itself is a form of impossibility, though impossibly so, or despicably, in the American theater, at the time I was writing the book, after the emergence of the Cold War. At one point, merging a phrase from the Cold War with terms from the New Criticism, I made this observation: “The ritual balance of power, the maintenance of ambiguity in perilous tension has also been one of the major preoccupations of art in the twentieth century”. And now in the twenty-first, what we’re calling an age of terror, it would seem for the time being, which is the time of theater, that the perilous tension is worse, even more ambiguous, with innumerable bodies dying, whether they matter or whether they don’t. Whatever the reasons for it, mea culpa as we wish, Orientalism, Occidentalism, the paranoia is growing, what with tunneled networks, stateless, like dreadnaughts spreading dread, with conspiracy theories and secrecies, homeland security dubious and everything out of sight. If you really think it over, how does any theater, by whatever theatrical means, really match up with that, or the pervasiveness of seeming that, in the material world, not virtual at all, appears in actuality – now a perversion of seeming? – to make it nothing but theater.

In this regard, mirrored (paranoia in abeyance), there is a level of behavior in theater that, like a subatomic particle, a muon or charmed quark, would – if there were an electronic microscope powerful enough to bring it into focus – disappear in the energy required for you to see it. (Which we can only hope won’t happen with the indeterminate jihad, Al Qaeda, or the suicide bombers.) Materializing as disappearance, theater escapes us in being theater, though we might think of it then as anti-theater, or, corporeal as it is, a correlative of anti-matter. (Which, among scientists, seems to have its own aes-
thetic.) As for actual theater practice, to the degree that it persists through the self-reflexive impasse of an ethos of suspicion, it may acquire a certain energy from what will never be resolved, which is how to determine though all the seeming whether at any historical moment there is an insufficiency or overdose of what we think of as theater. That we can do without it is absurd, since – if we’re to engage the issues at the level at which Plato introduced the prejudice, and Socrates pursued it – we have no choice in the matter; and we’ve had a form of theater that, in the perverse excess of its apparent undoings, or nothings to be done, was predicated on the absurdity, though some of the cruder theatricality, and its repetitive acts, appeared to overstate a case that can’t be overstated. Still, if we think we have it right, there’s nothing more certain in the seeming than the future of illusion, the insubstantial pageant fading, leaving not a wrack behind – except the empty space that, for Peter Brook, is (again) the beginning of theater, if an actor enters the space. My own view has always been that it needs no more than a look.

More theater, less theater. Actors have always proceeded on that wobbling pivot, which also defines historical periods, either acting too much or acting too little, though who in the world can say – actor? director? audience? – what is really enough? Every aspect of theater can be thought of the same way, from scenery, lighting, costumes, sound, to the timing of a play, its two-hour traffic or the aestheticized soporific of Robert Wilson’s earlier stagings, attenuated, aphasic, repetitive as a raga, with imperceptible permutations, seen unthinkingly as afterthought. Or, as the theater expands to operatic dimensions, there may very well be, even there in its grandeur, too much to be seen, which was actually an issue in the news recently – the case of Deborah Voigt, resounding voice, oversized body – the right weight of a soprano to be singing Ariadne, no less (auf Naxos) in a cocktail dress. What this suggests, even in the reduced proportions of other forms of theater, is that aside from too much acting there can also be too much actor, literally so, psychologically so, which we’ve heard in a tradition from Gordon Craig to Roland Barthes.

When I said a moment ago that the empty theater space only requires a look, it was not from a desire to create an impersonal art, like Mallarmé and others since, who, in attempting by diverse means to void representation, have wanted the actor out of it, in a vanity of poesis opposed to mimesis. For even when the acting is reduced to the gestural or the ideographic, even when in fact the actor is not there, but replaced by a puppet or other non-human figure, the mimetic is not extinguished, representation prevails, and if the human figure seems erased, it is there as on Freud’s mystic writing pad, if only as a trace. Theater remains to be seen because it is as remainder, and it wouldn’t be thus at all if it didn’t smell of mortality, something to be seen feelingly (as the blind Gloucester does in King Lear) in or out of the theater, that is, the institution. As for Barthes’ essay on the Bunraku, it is also in the tradition of critique that finds nothing more discreditable in the theater, no mode of theatricality, than that associated with mimesis and – with a repertoire of hapless gestures and self-indulgent mannerisms, even when focused in character – the corporeal presence of the actor. For all his exhortation of the grain of the voice (sidelined with the musicians in the Bunraku), Barthes prefers on stage the black-robed anonymous figures manipulating the puppets to the psychologized human body, which is no more than an execration in its posturing mindlessness. In the crossing of theory by practice, I must admit at times, as I’ve watched or worked with certain actors, sharing this view, though the preference for puppets is sometimes there when certain authoritarian directors push the actors around.
Where the actors are presumably liberated by sense and emotional memory, they would be doubly anathema to Barthes, not only because of their physical presence, and with it the smell of mortality, but maybe even worse, the inside risk of narcissism. As for the Actors Studio actor, with a technique disguising mimesis, or any appearance of theater, the liability in performance is – beyond that in the play – still another illusion, when the refusal of theatricality becomes, as iconically with Marlon Brando, a conspicuous symptom of it. If, meanwhile, there’s a certain jeopardy in casting, aesthetically or conceptually it may also be judicious, as a means of augmenting or minimizing theater, and thus, whether or not by intention, an incursion of anti-theater. As for what happens in a rehearsal, the degrees of appearance there: Do it again! the director says. What ‘it’, and how much? “It all”, or some intangibly furtive part of it? which, as in the Beckettian scene, can nearly drive you up the wall. What wall? Hollow, like the one Hamm insisted on going to, before being returned to the center – “Bang in the center!”34 – in the bottoming out of illusion. And how many times does one hear in rehearsal, No! that’s not it at all, you’re merely repeating yourself. Or, you’re merely acting. Which is, one would think, what you’re supposed to do in the theater.

What I’m essentially saying here – in a period of jaundiced value, where the familiar is distrusted, as ‘natural’, taken for granted, and essence disqualified – is that the theater is essentially, in every nuance, the site of anti-theater, and would hardly exist without it, no more than those subatomic particles without their anti-particles. But then, at a last psychic extremity of the anti-theatrical prejudice, another nuance of seeming, there’s something we tend to forget: another doubleness in the actor, not that of character, but of wanting to act and not. And I’m not speaking of the desire, out of technique into performance, for a consummate realism, but once again of the Real, the datum of any acting, ineliminable in the theater, the reality of stage fright. Shakespeare had it exactly when he spoke (in the best manual of acting I know) of “the imperfect actor on the stage./Who with his fear is put besides his part” (Sonnet 23) – the implication being that there is no other actor. If that appears to confirm again that the theater is inseparable from some instinct of anti-theater, it leaves us with the question out of which – through whatever imperfection, in the actor, in reality, in theater itself – the most powerful theater is made: why theater at all? That’s a question always preëmpting the autonomy of the aesthetic.

Notes
3  Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York/London 1990, p. 139.
4  Butler, Bodies, p. 189
7  Fried, “Art and Objecthood”, p. 146.
8  Fried, “Art and Objecthood”, p. 145.
9  Virilio, Ground Zero, p. 16.
Herbert Blau


18 Marx, Marx-Engels, pp. 87, 89.

19 Marx, Marx-Engels, pp. 84.


26 See the chapter on “Ghosting”, in the book written – in that uncertain period when I thought it might start again – around the work of my KRAKEN group, Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point, Urbana 1982, pp. 78–44.


30 Virilio, Ground Zero, p. 42.


