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**Stage and Beyond.
Space and Place in Contemporary Theatre**

Edited by Carmen Gallo and Clément Lévy

Table of Contents

<i>Carmen Gallo</i> Introduction. “What can be the rule of this disorder?” Disorienting Spaces and Places in Contemporary Theatre	1
<i>Savina Stevanato</i> <i>Between the Acts</i> of Hybrid Spaces	5
<i>Maria Elena Capitani</i> Appropriating <i>Macbeth</i> in the Contact Zone. The Politics of Place, Space, and Liminality in David Greig’s <i>Dunsinane</i>	17
<i>Carmen Gallo</i> All the World’s a Beach. Staging Global Crises in Anders Lustgarten’s <i>Lampedusa</i> (2015)	31
<i>Serena Guarracino</i> ‘Elsewhere’ is here. The Politics of Space in Caryl Churchill’s <i>Seven Jewish Children</i>	43
<i>Andrea Peghinelli</i> Agency, Staging and Representation Strategies in Sulayman Al Bassam’s <i>The Speaker’s Progress</i>	57
<i>Fabiola Camuti</i> Theatre as a Shared Space of Exhaustion. Staging Contemporary Tragedies in Jan Fabre’s 24-hour Performance	71
<i>Pamela Bianchi</i> The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces. Fluid Spectatorship into Hybrid Places	83
<i>Vincenzo Del Gaudio</i> Remediated Spatiality. Performative and Medial Spaces in the Work of Imitating the Dog	97
<i>Salvatore Margiotta</i> A Strategy for a Different Stage Writing. Carlo Quartucci and Jannis Kounellis’ Work in the ’60s	109

Gabriella Riccio

The Body and the Scene. Territories of the Aesthetic-cognitive Experience
in the Artistic Practice of Dance

121

Reviews

Lisa Marchi

Brian T. Edwards, *After the American Century: The Ends of U. S. Culture in
the Middle East* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2017)

137

Sabrina Vellucci

Samuele F. S. Pardini, *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African
Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen*
(Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2017)

141

Giuliana Regnoli

Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava, eds., *Indian Literature and
the World*

147

Notes on Contributors

151

Introduction.

“What can be the rule of this disorder?” Disorienting Spaces
and Places in Contemporary Theatre

The experience provided by theatrical performances allows for a great variety of spatial relationships, probably surpassing that of any other form of artistic expression. The ever-changing ways of occupying and overcoming the stage, and of rethinking the ‘proxemics’ of bodies, can undoubtedly be considered one of the fundamental rules of theatre and its millennial tradition. Almost a convention in itself, this ‘rule’ has now become the driver of a creative spatial disorder that reflects the fragmentation of the contemporary world and enables the proliferation of new practices and policies concerning the practical engagement of bodies and places. As Una Chaudhuri aptly put it in her *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (1995), the most recent happenings, environmental theatre, performance art, site-specific theatre, immersive theatre and so on share some common goals: to encourage the audience to reflect upon the performance itself and reconsider the potential and limitations of its nature; to make people think about their own “position of privilege as audience for art” and to subvert societal practices and the well-established dogma of mimesis (22). What Peter Brook has termed “disorder” on the stage of the several places,¹ such as the nation, in which a play is represented and its own concept of nationality or cultural identity, the historical and geographical *other places* evoked or represented with their allure of reassuring exoticism or disturbing alterity.

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre. Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), 65.

All four aspects imply a political dimension and agenda since even the passive or active engagement of spectators with the performance can now be read as compliance with or reaction to mass societal conformism in art. Plays appealing to the naturalistic tradition can now be accused of advocating an adherence to the nineteenth-century bourgeois representation of the world, and appeal to a class partly responsible for the silencing and marginalization of minorities, the subjection of women, colonialist exploitation, etc. On the other hand, the rejection of the mimetic representation of the world and the demolition of the “home” as the rigid setting of naturalistic plays (in itself implying concepts like “family” and “nation”) have led to complex, blended, hybrid spaces like those experienced and crossed by people and authors in “exile”, one of the key topics of twentieth-century theatre, literature, art and history. Exile, and its sense of disorientation, can be considered a sort of postmodern geographical interpretation of Brecht’s estrangement, and has become the core of the theatrical experience shared by

² Nadine Holdsworth, Mary Luckhurst, "Introduction", in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 1.

performers and audience. According to Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst, eclecticism is the principal characteristic of contemporary theatre "in terms of the subjects it addresses, the sites it occupies, its increasing interdisciplinarity and the forms of representation it offers".² New forms and the new media have multiplied the possibilities for spatial experimentation, allowing British and European theatre (as concerns the essays gathered in this issue) to participate in the so-called "spatial turn", as Fredric Jameson defined it: that is to say, the increasing attention paid to geographical and spatial issues which has characterized the literary and philosophical debates and fostered – more or less directly – the rise of geo-centred approaches such as geopoetics, geocriticism and ecocriticism. It is widely acknowledged that since the second half of the twentieth century the reflection and representation of 'space' and 'place', and their shifting borders between the extremes of pure abstraction and hyperconnotation, have attained a central position in debate, undermining the centuries-old supremacy of 'time' and 'history' and their ideological fictions. The pretence to universality and objectivity that once fashioned a homogenous world has been replaced by attention to cultural stereotypes, imaginary literary places or spatial projections, landscapes and mindscapes reshaped by colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and terrorism (and its religious justifications) as well as by the intersection with new media.

These new critical ways of thinking about space/place are represented mainly in the first part of this issue, which collects essays on British plays dealing with national identity and security, economic and political stability, and migration. As is well known, 'new writing' theatre has always been engaged with social critique, and in the 1990s British playwrights strove to represent post-communist Europe and its difficulties. This political aspect became even more pressing in the 2000s after the attack on the Twin Towers, which imposed global terrorism and the debate on democracy as the new agenda for playwrights and directors.

In tackling these new interpretations of old issues, the forms of new-millennium British theatre have always looked to the two main models which characterized the past century: on the one hand *Don't Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne as example of a social portrait still pervaded by the naturalistic promise of transparency typical of "new writing" theatre; on the other *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, representative of a restricted experimental group of plays that defy conventions such as the plausible *chronotopoi* and the referential use of language. "The two kinds of writing have existed in a permanent state of tension, each challenging the other: the naturalists goading the experimentalists into being more comprehensible, with the minority challenging the majority to be more imaginative".³ All the papers gathered in this part of the issue offer an overview of the eclecticism of contemporary theatre by focusing on the manipulation of spaces and representations of places, interweaving spatial issues with phenomenological implications and political outcomes in the broadest sense. Savina Stevanato's "*Between the Acts of Hybrid Spaces*" helps us pinpoint the contiguities and

³ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen, 2011), 25.

differences between the modernist treatment of space and the ontological interspaces and liminality of postmodernism through an analysis of the theatrical performance in Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*. According to Stevanato, this work "testifies to an already postmodern ontology of dislocation, open-endedness, and changeability" since Woolf manipulates space "in order to convey the increasing hybridation between outsideness and insideness". Whilst Stevanato explores spatial crossings and "the impossibility of fixing any boundaries relevant to both identity and aesthetics", a stronger commitment to the importance of place in contemporary theatre can be found in Maria Elena Capitani's essay "Appropriating Macbeth in the Contact Zone. The Politics of Place, Space, and Liminality in David Greig's *Dunsinane*". As Capitani shows, Greig's 2010 play illustrates how it is possible to reappropriate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and stage the intercultural clash between Scottishness and Englishness to allude to the contemporary clashes emerging from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Eleventh-century Scotland is exploited as a chronotope to articulate the playwright's "stratified idea of place" since he "constantly oscillates between roots and routes, belonging and unbelonging, microcosm and macrocosm, local and global". Again revolving around the global and local consequences of political and economical phenomena is the theatre of Anders Lustgarten, to which I devote the essay "All the World's a Beach. Staging Global Crisis in Andres Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* (2015)". The play juxtaposes the island of Lampedusa and the Mediterranean sea, a physical space dramatically involved in recent mass migration but also an 'original place' for Western civilization, with London's indebted lower classes (often including people of foreign origins), suggesting the shared difficulties resulting from global inequality. Serena Guarracino's essay that follows, "Elsewhere is here. The Politics of Space in Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children*", tackles a free-license play published in *The Guardian* and performed worldwide in various different spaces even outside traditional theatrical spaces. This 'instant' play was written and staged as a reaction to Israeli military intervention in the Gaza strip and, as Guarracino shows through a linguistic analysis, testifies to contemporary theatre's attempts to shape "the performing space as a political space of engagement and confrontation". Andrea Peghinelli's essay "Agency, Staging and Representation Strategies in Sulayam Al Bassam's *The Speaker's Progress*" focuses on an appropriation of Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night* again provoked by historical contingencies. Al Bassam's Arab Shakespeare Trilogy, to which the play belongs was inspired by a perception of the issues and concerns of the post-9/11 Arab World. It juxtaposes the performance of *Twelfth Night* with video excerpts from a 1963 performance of a free adaptation from a supposed Arab Golden Age. As Peghinelli notes, "the screening of fragments of that past production provides a cue for the performers to create a dialogue, in a metatheatrical doubling of the narration between two different worlds" while the agenda of the Shakespearean play is rewritten with a different authorial voice to present the audience with "a

story of secularism and religious tolerance”.

The last four essays gathered in this issue focus more on theatrical experimentations dealing with the stage and the space of performance, and on the role played by the media in doubling and multiplying the experience of audience and actors through radical formal innovations. Fabiola Camuti’s essay on “Theatre as a Shared Space of Exhaustion. Staging Contemporary Tragedies in Jan Fabre’s 24-hour Performance” centres on the Belgian author Jan Fabre and his recent 24-hour performance *Mount Olympus* (2015). Camuti reads the play as “an outstanding example of contemporary theatre that, starting from avant-garde experimentation, redefines the spatial relationship between stage and audience” and strengthens the bond between performers and spectators, driving them to the threshold of exhaustion. In her essay “The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces. Fluid Spectatorship into Hybrid Spaces” Pamela Bianchi further explores the shifting boundaries of contemporary theatre and “the negotiation between visual art, museum spaces, and performing arts, which set up the spectatorship dialectic between temporal and spatial dynamics”. Her interdisciplinary approach focuses on the “exhibition space” as a hybrid space, a meta-theatre in which “the Renaissance monocular gaze” disappears. Vincenzo Del Gaudio takes us back to the British context with his essay “Remediated Spatiality. Performative and Medial Spaces in the Work of Imitating the Dog”, paving the way for an investigation of how digital media “relate to scenic space and modify its prerequisites and tensions”. He focuses on the principal works of the British company Imitating the Dog to show their use of a cinematic dramaturgy and attempt to employ the scenic space to redefine the boundaries of the urban environment. Finally, Salvatore Margiotta focuses on Italian New Theatre, and in particular on the collaboration between Carlo Quartucci and the artist Jannis Kounellis to show that they go beyond the notion of scenography to establish a closer relationship with the audience. We could not leave dance out of this survey of contemporary theatre, and the last essay we are happy to include is a wide-ranging reflection on space and dance by the choreographer Gabriella Riccio. She focuses on “the ‘body’ as territory of the creative and cognitive experience of the dancer-choreographer” and on “the ‘scene’ as territory of the aesthetic-cognitive experience of the spectator-witness” to offer insights into the role of the spectator in the performative dialectics. Although inevitably partial, this *Anglistica AION* issue hopes to offer useful analyses of thought-provoking plays and performances, but also to contribute to mapping theoretical and practical research on spatial representation and exploitation that are reshaping our own experience of the theatre and of the world.

Between the Acts of Hybrid Spaces

Abstract: This paper focuses on the complex and proto-postmodern treatment of space relevant to theatrical performance in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*. Woolf's explicit insistence on borderline trespassing and liminal spaces points to a move from modernism into a different ontological domain that borders on postmodern liminality and instability, even if it also tries to hold it back.

After previous forays across boundaries, in this work Woolf largely thematizes and manipulates space in order to convey the increasing hybridization between outsideness and insideness, fiction and reality. The spatial blurring between them, activated by an outdoor theatrical performance placing the audience's experience in a tangible rural space, results in the increasing dominance of reality and coincides with a meta-artistic awareness in the play's audience and the novel's readers. By thematizing and formally representing a complex dynamics of border zones, mixing spaces, and interspaces (ranging from the main theatrical metaphor to minor graphic hiatuses and including issues of identity and literary genres), Woolf's last novel testifies to an already postmodern ontology of dislocation, open-endedness, and changeability.

Key words: *Between the Acts*, postmodernism, spatiality, Woolf

1. A Peculiar In-Betweenness

Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* represents a complex and proto-postmodern treatment of space peculiarly relevant to its thematized theatrical performance. What makes this case worth considering is the productive dichotomy between a modernist form of spatiality and a postmodern one: the former mainly centripetal, the latter ostensibly bursting and centrifugal. Although the formal pattern of the novel provides a highly unifying spatial form¹ that still locates the work within a modernist aesthetic frame and specifically within Woolf's remedial poetics of wholeness, this last novel also crosses modernist borderlines and extends into a postmodern form of space. Woolf's explicit insistence on borderline trespassing and liminal spaces points to a move from modernism into a different ontological domain that borders on postmodern liminality and instability.² Her modernist longing is still recognizable in the search for a wholeness-providing spatial form which opposes the sense of becoming and postmodern nihilism. Although the beginning of a real postmodern period style can be set in the 1960s, postmodern features can be traced back to an earlier time, "to the late thirties or even earlier".³ Woolf cannot be labelled as a postmodern author but, in *BA*, she definitely pioneers a form of postmodern anxiety and a disposition to radical nihilism in that she experiences the "crisis of a new, disintegrative postmodern subjectivity and a new sense of the world as restlessly plural".⁴ With her last novel Woolf touches on the cognitive value of spatiality and borders on a heteropian kind of space.⁵

¹ This is my interpretation of Joseph Frank's original 1945 notion given in his "Spatial Form in Modern Literature". See my *Visuality and Spatiality in Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Oxford and Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012). This paper develops and completes my former approach to *Between the Acts*.

² Scholarly interest in the postmodern aspects of Woolf's production has developed since the 1990s. See Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); JoAnn Springer, "Woolf Enclosed, Woolf in Space", in Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins, eds., *Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (New York: Pace U. P., 1997), 218-227.

³ Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge U. P., 2015), 26.

⁴ McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

⁵ See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

⁶ Helen Southworth, "Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*", in Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth, eds., *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 50.

Proto-postmodern elements coexist with modernist ones, therefore the novel is characterized by an inner contradiction between a modernist epistemological level and a postmodern ontological one, a double pull that explains why, in Southworth's words, while it "marks an ending, it also constitutes a beginning".⁶ The end of the modernist side corresponds to the beginning of the postmodern with its focus on betweenness, liminality, flux, heterogeneity, thresholds, margins, boundaries, and its interest in illuminating what lies in the interstices. This includes drawing attention to crossing borders between fiction and reality, theatre and novel, actors and audience, nature and village, the sky and the earth, water and earth, animals and humans, past and present, we and I, outside and inside.

After previous incursions across boundaries, in *BA* Woolf largely thematizes and manipulates theatrical space in order to convey the increasing hybridization between outsideness and insideness, fiction and reality. The spatial blurring between them, activated by an outdoor performance which places the audience's experience in a concrete, rural space, results in the increasing dominance of reality, and coincides with a meta-artistic awareness on the part of both the audience of the play and the novel's readers. Spatial borrowing and blurring both lay bare the conventions of art and ridicule it, finally abolishing its remedial power over reality which literally invades the theatrical fiction. Crossing the threshold between the performative space of the pageant (second-degree fiction) and that of the surrounding reality of the audience (first-degree fiction) is a main spatial experience, which brings about other forms of crossing: between genres (drama and novel), and between different forms of identity. This causes an increasing (con)fusion which endangers historical, collective, individual, and artistic identity, and which also raises genre issues. Woolf's variety of boundary-crossing events is a form of jolty, fragmented, "heteroglossic, multigeneric assemblage"⁷ and explodes the traditionally delimited and codified space of identity and artistic performance into multiplicity, encompassing both a spatial and "linguistic euphoria".⁸ By thematizing and formally representing a complex dynamics of border zones, mixing spaces, and interspaces (ranging from the main theatrical metaphor to minor graphic hiatuses), Woolf's last novel testifies to an already postmodern ontology of dislocation, open-endedness, and changeability, and to an awareness of essential changes in aesthetics related to the nature and function of art.

1.1 A Dislocating Novel

Following the distinction made by Snaith and Whitworth between "space" and "place",⁹ Woolf's spatial bent encompasses references that range from distinctive and locatable places to metaphorical spaces of art, identity, Truth, and Being, which points to her unrelenting cognitive quest and aesthetic inquiry. Though also considering the former typology, my main focus will be on the latter and its manifold meanings.

⁷ John Whittier-Ferguson, *Mortality and Form in Late Modernist Literature* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 2015), 21. On interpreting the open-endedness of *BA* as a utopian feature, see Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2005).

⁸ Lisbeth Larsson, *Walking Virginia Woolf's London: An Investigation in Literary Geography* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 213.

⁹ Snaith and Whitworth, eds., *Locating Woolf*, 4-5.

When talking about music and poetry, Kramer reflects on liminality and interestingly argues that “[l]iminal experience, the sense of inhabiting or passing across a threshold, is regularly represented in the literature of all periods.... As a rule, the threshold itself is a narrow strip of space, a defile, set in a mediating position between other significant spaces”.¹⁰ It is quite significant that one of Woolf’s main spatial metaphors, both in her fictional and non-fictional writings, is that of the “strip” (a “strip of pavement”/“of board”/“of time”), which represents a safe connection between different spatial and psychological dimensions and, ultimately, between Being and non-Being.

¹⁰ Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 230-231.

Spatiality is deeply embedded in Woolf’s whole macrotext which is characterized by a strong commitment with space and a keen sense of place. As regards her fictional works, spatiality takes up different values on the level of both content and form including: a traditionally descriptive desire to narrate phenomenal spatiality; the formal construction of a spatial structure defined above as spatial form; an interest in mimetic and symbolic spatial landmarks, crossings and connections. In any case, Woolf’s interest in spatiality testifies to an ambiguous position since space is both a remedial provider of unity/wholeness, and also points to a form of “hostility to totalization and to the notion of the unified self”.¹¹ *BA* attests to a shift from a remedial use of spatial form to thematized and meta-dramatic spatiality on which cognition depends. Moreover, in the light of Jameson’s interpretation of postmodern culture as characterized by a spatial logic and turn, and a loss of temporal depth and connection with history,¹² Woolf’s late attention and disposition to spatiality may also be read in postmodern terms given the novel’s focus: on spatial crossing between the stage/theatre and the village/reality; on the attempt to foster historical awareness and construction of both individual and collective identity.

¹¹ Michael Hollister, “Spatial Cognition in Literature: Text-Centred Contextualization”, *Mosaic*, 28.2 (June 1995), 17.

¹² See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

If any text consists of certain necessary or inherent forms of spatiality which work both on the author’s constructing side and on the reader’s interpretative one,¹³ I would divide *BA*’s into two main categories (excluding the quite obvious textual space represented by the physical medium through which the text is presented such as a page, a screen, etc.) which are: thematized space (including all kinds of narrated spatial references), and symbolic/meta-fictional space (related to identity and meta-dramatic issues).

¹³ Vincent Juvé underlines that a novel may do without characters and plot but it necessarily implies space; see Flavio Sorrentino, *Il senso dello spazio* (Roma: Armando Editore, 2010). Sorrentino provides an exhaustive outline of recent spatial theories in literary studies starting from the 1950s to today’s geocriticism.

From *Jacob’s Room* (1922) onwards the evolution of Woolf’s writing shows a steady increase in fragmentation on the level of both narrated content and narration itself. Nevertheless, in each novel she always explicitly manages to restore fragments back to unity through an increasingly demanding formal control and organization. On the contrary, with *BA* she yields to the fragment’s power to disrupt and displace reality. What is new is not the focus on a confusing plurality, which she chooses to epitomize in Shakespeare’s words through obsessively repeated formulae containing “orts”, “scraps”, and “fragments”, but the fact that plurality remains so and proliferates.¹⁴ With this last novel, the step Woolf takes is

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Penguin Books, 2000). All quotes will be from this edition and pages will be given in parentheses after the quote. The quote is from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*: “orts ... fragments, scraps” (5.2.158-9).

beyond modernism and such ‘beyondness’ relates to both spatial betweenness and spatial dislocation. After representing artists in her previous novels, such as painters and poets, she chooses a playwright and the art of theatre to thematize an already postmodern sense of spatial dislocation as the epitome of an overall dislocation concerning individual and collective identity, reality, art, and Being.

References to the novel in Woolf’s diary entries bear witness both to the idea of a play and to the double nature of the novel which stretches between modernist and postmodern poles. The first mention of it, in April 1938, reads “a complete whole” and, after some days, the second refers again to unity and also to plurality: “Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed ... & anything that comes into my head; but ‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted ... composed of many different things ... a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole ... & a perpetual variety & change

¹⁵ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5 (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 133, 135.

¹⁶ Ibid., 139, 159. Woolf refers to the work in progress as “my Play (Pointz Hall is to become in the end a play)”, to which she returns in August together with the idea of disparateness: “P.H. is to be a series of contrasts.... Its to end with a play”.¹⁶ Her preoccupation with its plurality makes her wonder whether the “book will ever

compose”.¹⁷ It is curious that the writing of it also depends on a form of in-betweenness, since Woolf writes it while also writing Fry’s biography among other things, and admitting “P.H. in between. Oh yes – one cant plan, any more, a long

book”.¹⁸ She writes in gaps, between air raids, and the untamable plurality of the novel makes her use the same words in the novel and in her diary: “Scraps, orts &

fragments”.¹⁹ Nonetheless, in October 1940 she is pleased with it and in November she refers to herself as “writing in spurts” and also to a “new style – to mix” which relates explicitly to the diary’s shorthand style but may also recall previous references to the mixing of poetry and prose, foreshadowing a sort of

postmodern pastiche-like modality.²⁰ In November, a further entry confirms the theatrical aspect of the novel which she defines as “The Pageant”, as she also does when mentioning it for the last time in a 1941 February entry: “Finished Pointz

Hall, the Pageant: the Play – finally Between the Acts”.²¹ Such plurality of genres and titles is paralleled within the novel on many levels.

BA is a novel narrating a theatrical performance put on in an English village and, more precisely on the terrace of a country house named Pointz Hall. As the self-referential title explicitly points out, the focus is on in-betweenness and plurality which equally concern the pageant and the reality of the village.

The title immediately directs the reader’s attention to liminality and crossing (*Between*); dramatic fiction and plurality (*Acts*). The latter area implies a binary opposition between reality and fiction, which Woolf deals with in meta-dramatic and spatial terms: spatial crossings and confusion between the two dimensions of reality/audience/village and drama/actors/stage mean that physical crossings epitomize aesthetic ones and, hence, activate a cognitive process. Recalling an artwork which “leaves no gaps”,²² on the formal level, *BA* turns out to be a very

²² Gabriel Josipovici refers to nineteenth-century artworks, see his *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 128.

tightly-woven pattern, but on the thematic level it widely thematizes many forms of both gaps and spatial in-betweenness concerning the reality of the village and the fiction of the pageant.

2. Varieties of Spaces

Before considering Woolf's use and treatment of space and place, it may be useful to identify some of the novel's postmodern potentialities to which her treatment of space is related:

1. interest in history and relevant (de)construction of both individual and collective identity;

2. intertextuality and heterogeneity (including pastiche-like references to, and quotes of various authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Swinburne, Dryden, Jonson, Racine, Conrad);

3. interart combination of literature and music both within the pageant and in the life of the village (nursery rhymes, jazz, popular songs, waltz, etc.);

4. meta-fiction/-drama²³ which unmasks artistic illusion, laying bare the artificial device through a real interaction between fictional and tangible spaces (the stage and reality around, Miss La Trobe breaking upon the fictional world and also viceversa).

²³ This is not to be intended as Patricia Waugh's radical metafiction; see her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 136-137.

As a graphic space, the text of *BA* is itself hybrid since it lies between two genres: novel and drama.²⁴ A number of passages recall the layout of a script for two main reasons: 1. between quotes of dramatic lines, there are narrative sentences in parentheses which seem like stage directions but are, instead, the narrator's/audience's comments on what is happening on the stage; 2. a play within the play intrudes into the narrative and contemporarily provides real stage directions. The following are respective examples:

²⁴ See Steven Putzel, "Virginia Woolf and Theatre", in Maggie Humm, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2012), 437-454. The author argues in favour of the postmodern potentialities of Woolf's works by showing how successfully postmodern stage adaptations perform them.

- 1.

And see! There's a mouse ...

(he made as if chasing it through the grass)

Now the clock strikes!

(he stood erect, puffing out his cheeks as if he were blowing a dandelion clock)

One, two, three, four ...

- 2.

Sir S. L. (aside) *She speaks the truth there!* (Aloud) *You would have me understand, Madam... ?*

(She reveals herself)

Valentine... *O Flavinda, O!*

Flavinda... *O Valentine, O!*

(They embrace)

The clock strikes nine.

“All that fuss about nothing!” a voice exclaimed. People laughed. (54, 80, 83-84)

As the last example shows, the mixing includes various fictitious levels: the play-within-the-play script mixes with the novel’s words indicating the time and the audience’s reaction.

With regard to content, the novel’s thematized spatial mixing and crossing depend on the fact that the location of the pageant and the physical space of the village increasingly trespass one into the other, interacting and generating hybrid forms of spatiality.

The novel opens with a focus on spatiality, plurality, and openness: some of the villagers are at the Oliviers’ “talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden”, about the strange “site ... chosen for the cesspool” (5). From the start, outdoor and indoor spaces are made to communicate through open windows and doors which will insistently recur in the whole novel as spatial marks of trespassing. This focus is further enlarged, both spatially and chronologically, when Mr. Olivier suggests an imaginary view of the site from above which might recall the visual effect of a map: “[f]rom an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house” up to the Napoleonic wars (5). In accordance with the historical content of the narrated pageant, spatio-temporal coordinates are often woven together throughout the novel. Such variety of spatial references includes Pointz Hall with its rooms and the outside terrace, the Barn, the lily pond, the greenhouse, and the surrounding bushes. Beside the spatiality of Pointz Hall and its outskirts, the novel also refers to other geographical spaces such as India, Africa, France, Italy and, specifically, to the performative space and places of the pageant which are the stage, the dressing-rooms, and all other fictional spaces such as a painted lake or similar props.

Spatial sensitivity is continuously triggered in that different indoor and outdoor whereabouts recur and are continually walked into, through, and out of. Regarding Pointz Hall, we are led from the inner heart of the Oliviers’ house which is represented by a central alabaster vase, through its rooms (kitchen, bedrooms, library, dining room), where there are other spatial indicators which include: pictorial frames containing fictional painted space; mirrors dividing the mirrored space into outer/inner spatial slithers; bookcases which foreground the spatial location of words/books; doors generally open, or trembling, flinging, being kicked and standing (half/wide) open in the house, in the Barn, and in the greenhouse too; windows, open and closed, as good opportunities for spatial awareness; and thresholds as liminal markers. Woolf also frequently employs spatial adverbs and words relevant to the semantic dimension of crossing or bordering, and she often foregrounds them by clustering them together or repeating them in single sentences or paragraphs: “A ... lady, pausing *on the threshold* of what she once called ‘the heart of the house,’ the *threshold* of the library, had once said: ‘Next to the

kitchen, the library's always the nicest room in the house.' Then she added, stepping *across the threshold*: 'Books are the mirrors of the soul'" (12, my emphasis); "they all looked out of the window. Then the door opened" (30). Deictics also function as spatial markers: "There the stage; here the audience; and down there among the bushes a perfect dressing-room for the actors" (37).

The crossing between inner and outer spaces hinges on the terrace, a space between men and nature, reality and art. The decision to hold the pageant outside using the terrace as a stage, and the surrounding bushes as dressing-rooms, is intrinsic to the whole network of spatial crossings developing in the novel. Related to this, is a strong sense of spatial mobility which begins as soon as Miss La Trobe visits the venue and decides the bushes and the terrace are "the perfect place" for her play while "[p]inding in and out between the trees" (36-37, my emphasis).

Movement between indoor and outdoor spaces on the one hand, and in the outdoors, between real and theatrical spaces on the other, is fostered by the fact that the novel thematizes the setting up of the pageant, its performance interspersed with intervals (during which the villagers go to the Barn for tea, to the greenhouse, back into the house), and everyone's returning back home which comes full circle at the Oliviers' house. Within a narrative frame that deals with what happens immediately before and after the play, the novel mainly consists of the performance which is divided into four acts and three intervals that are given equal thematic importance, putting fiction and reality on a par and allowing the latter to variously intrude into the former.

Besides being denoted by movement, spatiality is also and often acoustically signaled and underlined (natural and animal sounds, noises, voices, music) since, when doors open, they let sounds pass through and Woolf insists on this feature, such as in the following quote where it is not individuals she presents but their voices moving through space: "Across the hall, a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice ... Bart's voice; quivering – Lucy's voice; middle-toned – Isa's voice. Their voices ... came across the hall.... Coming out of the library the voices stop in the hall" (25). Music also relates to movement from one place to another and/or staying in a specific place as when, entering the greenhouse, Isa and William "left the greenhouse door open, and now music came through it.... Another voice ... was saying something simple. And they sat on in the greenhouse, on the plank" (70). The space outside the greenhouse is immediately related, in similar terms, to the inside of the house through the same music since "[f]rom the garden – the window was open – came the sound of someone practising scales ... It was a simple tune, another voice speaking" (71). Another example concerns a second view from above which combines spatial markers, such as a door and a window, with sound: "A rushing sound came in through the open door. He turned. The old woman ... leant against the window. He left the door open for the crew.... Down in the courtyard beneath the window cars were assembling. Their narrow black roofs were laid together like the blocks of a floor" (45). This also provides a

form of crossing between a space above and a space below, because it establishes an equivalence between what should be in a higher position (the roofs of the cars) and what should be in a lower position (the floor). The mixing between these two dimensions recurs in mirroring images, such as when the lily pond reflects a “blue patch made by the sky” (28). Real mirrors also foster spatial awareness since they frame reality, separating it into what lies inside and outside their space. In the three-folded mirror, Isa sees a triptych of herself “and outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops” (11). The spatial dynamics between in and out is often foregrounded by spatial adverbs. The same mirror allows for this: “*Inside* the glass, *in* her eyes, she saw what she had felt ... *outside, on* the washstand, *on* the dressing-table, *among* the silver boxes ... was the other love.... *Inner* love was *in* the eyes, *outer* love *on* the dressing-table ... when *above* the looking-glass, *out of doors*, she saw coming *across* the lawn the perambulator” (11, my emphasis).²⁵

²⁵ However, there is also a different kind of space which is motionless and soundless. It is both the framed space of the pictures in the house, and an essential and innermost form of space which includes both indoor and outdoor areas. In the following quotes, the first relates to the Oliviers’ house, the second to a lily pond: “The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty, silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell ... a vase stood in the heart of the house ... holding the still. Distilled essence of emptiness, silence”; “Water ... lay there ... over a black cushion of mud ... fish swam.... Silently they manoeuvred.... It was in that deep centre, in the black heart, that the lady had drowned herself.” (24, 28-29). Throughout the novel, this simultaneously represents the wordless space of death and also of creation since Miss La Trobe’s words first “sank down into the mud”, then the “mud became fertile. Words rose ... pludding through the mud” (125). Hence, the same places and spaces may have different or opposite values.

Most spatial references are characterized by varied forms of mixing, interference, and equivalence, on the levels of both reality and art. This is fostered by the coincidence of the village’s real spaces with the pageant’s performative ones, and also by the intrusion of the intervals between the acts, namely of reality (first-degree fiction) between fiction (second-degree fiction). Nonetheless, the mixing also concerns each separate level. For example when, during an interval, and hence solely on the level of reality, Cobbet equates the West and the East observing Mrs. Manresa’s behaviour as he “had known the human nature in the East ... the little game of the woman following the man to the table in the West as in the East” (67); or when natural spaces suggest architectural ones, in that the trees recall the columns in a church, and when architectural ones suggest others of the same typology, so that not only is the Barn “built of the same stone” of the church, but it also reminds people of a Greek temple.

3. Identity and Spatiality

The link between (de)construction of identity and spatiality is soon provided in the novel by the simple fact that moving from one room to another transforms the cat’s name as “his drawing-room name Sung-Yen had undergone a kitchen change into Sunny” (22). The centrifugal impulse of identity is also conveyed by the fact that the villagers’ names multiply and a single person may have more than one (such as Lucy Swithin who is also Cindy, Sindy, Flimsy, Batty). Being on the stage further implies taking on a different identity, which happens in a very peculiar way to the actors of the pageant who are in fact the villagers themselves. This makes their real identity interfere with the fictional one they have to assume and play, such as when the character of Queen Elizabeth is simultaneously recognized as Eliza Clark, “licensed to sell tobacco ... of the village shop” (52). Such mixing does not stop with the end of the play since the actors still “mingled”, which produces an apparently absurd result slightly recalling postmodern oddities: “There was Budge

the policeman talking to old Queen Bess. And the Age of Reason hobnobbed with the foreparts of the donkey.... Each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes” (116).

The actors linger between their fictitious and real identity, but the audience also experiences identity splitting and uncertainty because its images are projected into the theatrical space by being mirrored there when the actors turn reflecting objects and mirrors towards them. Coherently with the duplicity of the whole novel, this both contradicts Bart’s certainty about the villagers’ identity (“We remain seated – ‘we are the audience’”, 38), and also develops his own hint at the mixing of reality with fiction since being the audience is playing a part (“Our part ... is to be the audience”, 37).

In the fourth act, the pageant is meant to represent the villagers’ present time. Through the mirrors on the stage, the reality which exists facing it is reflected onto it, and the villagers almost appear to take the actors’ place. Despite this mirroring device, self-recognition is annoying and remains uncertain because it reveals “orts, scraps and fragments” (111). No final recognition is really attained because the villagers are “[n]ot quite themselves, they felt” (90). This sense of non-being is related both to movement and spatiality. As concerns the former, during the interval between the second and the third act, the villagers are described in spatially fluid terms as “moving islands” (90). Regarding the latter, in the interval between the third and the fourth act, their sense of non-being is spatially epitomized by “limbo” (106). It is of no surprise that these two occurrences are given in corresponding parts of the plot dealing with dramatic and spatial in-betweenness, i.e. between acts and intervals, and between the terrace and the surroundings where the audience moves during the intervals. Such foregrounded spatial dislocation and its related sense of ambiguous identity finally also reveal a lack of historical sense, continuity, and community.

4. Meta-Artistic Spatiality

A principal postmodern factor is also the novel’s emphasized self-consciousness of artistic production which points to the artificiality of art and to a lack of a “centering force”.²⁶

From the very beginning, the novel links the status of art to reality through spatial correspondences between them. The Oliviers’ terrace, “rising, made a natural stage. The trees barred the stage like pillars” and the lawn is also perfect because it is “as flat as the floor of a theatre” (47), but this is bound to generate confusion. The choice to put the pageant on out of doors, and so within reality itself, fosters spatial mixing since the outdoor reality where the stage is located intrudes into it and into the related dramatic fiction as well so that real animals become part of the fictional backcloth:

²⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 67.

[a] sheet had been spread on the Terrace. It was a lake apparently. Roughly painted ripples represented water. Those green stake were bulrushes. Rather prettily real swallows darted across the sheet. (98)

They were rolling up the lake and uprooting the bulrushes. Real swallows were skimming. (103)

The confusion between the two spatial dimensions also depends on the fact that the stage is often empty. The recurrent emptiness of the dramatic space (also accompanied by the actors' unheard words) makes reality intersect drama by being intrusive on the one hand, and remedial on the other. The latter case arises when the stage is empty and the performance risks total failure because the dramatic illusion has failed but "the cows took up the burden ... filled the emptiness and continued the emotion" (84-85). What is most significant is the meta-artistic value of spatial crossing which epitomizes a sort of aesthetic crossing and leads to a final sense of failure. The end of the last act is a climactic moment of spatial crossing since it represents the present moment and it brings the audience onto the stage thanks to the previously-mentioned mirror device which is directed towards them and where they see themselves instead of the actors. This overcomes the playwright's dramatic intention because it results in a complete confusion between the space of reality and that of drama. Further accentuating the crossing between reality and theatre, the mirroring also includes nature within the theatrical space, and thus confirms the breaking down of barriers. Besides, a real downpour showers the stage and the audience, imposing itself on both fiction and reality, putting them on a par thus destroying artistic illusion, but after the play is taken up again, "Lord! the jangle and the din! The very cows joined in. Walloping, tail lashing, the reticence of nature was undone, and the barriers which should divide Man and the Master from the Brute were dissolved" (109): the confusion between the two spaces risks shifting into identity between them and this spatial mixing also corresponds to crossing the borderline between drama and reality and functions as a meta-dramatic comment on the failure of art.

Besides confirming Miss La Trobe's previous thought that "[t]his is death ... when illusion fails" (107), this interchange between reality and fiction leaves the audience wondering about what it means, but no answer is provided. The mocking tone with which the narrator often glosses such breaches mildly compensates for the substantial failing of art whose illusion is revealed and cognitive function invalidated.

However, there is one occurrence of mixing between reality and stage spatiality which is not atoned and it refers to the impending war. The real reverend is on the stage, mounting the same prop used for Queen Elizabeth (a soap box probably representing a rock in the ocean). He starts talking to the audience when war aeroplanes rudely intrude into the airspace above and into his speech, disheveling the aerial and theatrical space of the novel: "each of us who has enjoyed this

pageant has still the opp...’ The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes ... came overhead.... The planes had passed. ‘...portunity” (114-115). The nth intrusion of reality onto the stage is so strong that it is also emphasized by the graphic division of the word which is split by some in-between lines.

Spatial trespassing between drama and reality are recurrent and people also trespass the spatial border between reality (the audience’s place) and drama (the place where both the stage and the dressing-rooms are located): “ignoring the conventions, a head popped up between the trembling sprays: Mrs. Swithin” (91). This also hints at postmodern theories on the addressee’s decisive role in the meaning-providing process of any artwork. It confirms Miss La Trobe’s experimental and postmodern desire to foster the audience’s active participation in the performance and in the attribution of a meaning to it (in the fourth act, with the intention to expose the audience to real present time making them realize they are the real actors of the present, she notes on the script “try ten mins. of present time. Swallows, cows, etc.”, 107).

So, at the beginning of the performance, in the audience, someone wonders “Was it, or was it not the play?” (47). Similarly, Miss La Trobe finally wonders: “if we’re left asking questions, isn’t it a failure as a play?” (118). The playwright’s and the novel’s meta-dramatic reflexivity can be read in Waugh’s postmodern terms as producing “fragments ... [that] are not at all explicable by any ... *a priori* transcendental system”.²⁷ For the same reason Woolf believed that this novel was a failure. Although *BA* still manages to achieve the formal and remedial unity she was incessantly searching for,²⁸ it also points to the impossibility of communication, of answering questions, and to the collapse of metaphysics.²⁹ *BA* partially falls within postmodern boundaries because it also alludes to the ontological dominant which, according to McHale, characterizes postmodernism’s questioning the existence of reality itself and its representing an unprecedented and pluralistic ontological landscape.³⁰

5. Inhabiting Liminality

In conclusion, Woolf’s spatial issue is multifaceted in *BA* as it includes: a. the thematized experience of the audience/villagers/readers through the theatrical performance they respectively enact, attend, and read about; b. the formal aspect of the novel which is a fragmentary and jolted *ensemble* of “scraps, orts and fragments” where different spaces are made to intersect and cross each other’s boundaries even graphically; c. the cognitive quest based on spatial crossings that reveal the impossibility of fixing any boundaries relevant to both identity and aesthetics. If, with McHale, we believe that postmodern literature’s ontological crossing(s) finally also represent(s) the ultimate and necessary crossing which is death,³¹ *BA*’s various forms of crossing already point to a cognitive spatiality of death. Woolf’s last quest epitomizes a postmodern discovery of the collapse of metaphysics with the novel

²⁷ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 24.

²⁸ In a 1939 January entry of her diary, Woolf writes about P.H.: “I think I have got at a more direct method of summarising relations” (*The Diary*, 200).

²⁹ I do not agree with Michael Bell on the fact that “the change from Modernism to postmodernism is not a difference in metaphysics so much as a different stage in the digestion of the same metaphysics”. See his “The Metaphysics of Modernism”, in Michael Levenson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1999), 9-32: 9.

³⁰ See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*.

³¹ Ibid.

itself situated between modernism and postmodernism, still longing for the former's remedial devices rescuing Being and totality from an increasingly nihilistic panorama, but clearly also testifying to the latter. As announced by the very in-betweenness of the title, the spatial experience will lead audience and readers to, and leave them in an ambiguous space between fiction and reality, inhabiting liminality, where spatial "shelter" (130) is lost and a curtain rises on someone speaking, whether it be on stage or in reality we are not to know. Despite the pageant's failure and Woolf's final distrust in art, the novel seems to approve postmodern possibilities. Miss La Trobe's lack of artistic words ("The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escape her", 124) is definitely turned upside down by the narrator's final words that take up the playwright's but with a different and auspicious turn: "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (130).

At the end of her modernist experience, Woolf represented the vacancy of art through a peculiar focus on spatiality and liminal confusion as she probably realized that "it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out of the bushes" (128). This is where Miss La Trobe hides, directing the play "script in hand, behind the tree" (73), but the new author Woolf may be referring to is bound to come out of his/her hiding to make him/herself see in meta-narrative terms, just as the postmodernists do.

Appropriating *Macbeth* in the Contact Zone. The Politics of Place, Space, and Liminality in David Greig's *Dunsinane*

Abstract: To a greater or lesser extent, the practices of rewriting and restaging a preexisting artefact imply some sort of movement, or – more technically – relocation. Remaining rooted in eleventh-century Scotland, David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010) – commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and first performed at the Hampstead Theatre, London – cannot be defined as a *transposition diégétique* or *transdiégétisation* (its Shakespearean source is not dislocated from its original spatio-temporal frame). However, this thought-provoking sequel to *Macbeth* (1606), whose title explicitly evokes the Bard's tragedy and the location of its final action, enters what Mary Louise Pratt would define as a 'contact zone'. In this light, *Dunsinane* becomes a site for intercultural clashes between Scottishness and Englishness, while simultaneously pointing at contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Divided into four parts corresponding to the four seasons, Greig's piece is set in the aftermath of Shakespeare's play and opens with the English forces camouflaging themselves before attacking Macbeth's castle. Focusing on the figure of the English general Siward and his young soldiers invading a hostile land, the play imagines what happens after the tyrant's deposition and Malcolm's installation. Exploring the complex idea of place/space in this revisionary appropriation of *Macbeth*, this article aims to show how a permeable, multifaceted, and protean country (un)written *sous rature* such as Scotland becomes a liminal and 'liquid' contact zone which is not only a battlefield for armies but also for cultures and ideas.

Key words: *Appropriation, Greig, Macbeth, place, politics, Scotland*

Out of Place: David Greig's Sense of (Un)Belonging¹

David Greig's troubled relation to the ideas of 'home' and 'belonging', and consequently to the notions of 'place' and 'space', is something inevitably problematic and complex. In a 2009 interview with Mark Fisher, Scotland's most successful playwright candidly declared: "I don't really have anywhere that I'm from".² Indeed, the Greigs came from a tiny place 50 km to the north west of Aberdeen while David was born in Edinburgh in 1969, brought up in Jos (Nigeria), where his father worked in the construction industry, and educated in an American Baptist school:

My parents made quite a big leap from a conventional working-class Scottish background to this rather glamorous expatriate environment, where people owned horses and had glitzy parties. It was a bit like something out of a novel and I loved it. We came back to Edinburgh when I was about 12 and I didn't like it at all. I would have preferred to have stayed in Africa.³

When he returned to Scotland with his family in 1980, David was a kid with no

¹ On this topic, see also Maria Elena Capitani, "The Sense of (Un)Belonging: David Greig's (Un?)Scottishness in *Pyrenees* and *Damascus*", *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 10 (December 2017), 19-39.

² Mark Fisher and David Greig, "Interview: Suspect Cultures & Home Truths", in Anja Müller and Clare Wallace, eds., *Cosmotopia: Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2011), 15.

³ Cit. in Hilary Whitney, "The Arts Desk Q&A: Playwright David Greig" (The Arts Desk, 6 February 2010), <http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/theartsdesk-qa-playwright-david-greig?page=0,1>.

⁴ Initially, Greig sounded American, while now he describes his speaking as ‘RP neutral’ – so neutral that his fellow Scots often think he is a foreigner.

⁵ Ian Brown, *Scottish Theatre: Diversity, Language, Continuity* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), 227-228.

⁶ Fisher and Greig, “Interview”, 23.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 15-16.

traces of accent.⁴ In addition, in 1987 Greig moved south of the border to study English and Drama at the University of Bristol. As Ian Brown puts it, “Greig’s early life marks him as a Scot outside Scotland”.⁵

After completing his degree in England, however, Greig felt deep down that he had to try to embrace his roots. Thus, he stationed himself permanently in his motherland, where he currently lives, in order to become a writer, or – more specifically – a dramatist writing plays for Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre: “It was to do with that particular audience. I knew that what I wanted to say was for those people. It was a conversation with them”.⁶ Greig’s sudden dislocation from his birthplace, his subsequent relocation to Africa, and the forced journey back – followed by an English entr’acte before the final settlement in Scotland – generated in him a strong sense of deracination and an impossibility to accept any preconceived notion of ‘home’: “if someone asks me where I’m from, I can’t really answer the question. So that troubles my concept of home: where am I at home?”.⁷

As a result of this displacement, Greig admits that he tends to establish an intimate connection with some places, probably to come to terms with the feeling of homelessness provoked by his fractured biographical journey. As explained in the above-mentioned interview, Greig’s dramas are peopled with articulate characters constantly struggling to re-negotiate their cultural identity and position in the world, possibly an unconscious strategy that helps the dramatist explore and seek to fill a personal void:

I have a very passionate connection to certain places. I attach to them and make them home. I know what it is that makes a place home to someone because it is that which is absent in my experience. Therefore I seek out that experience. I’m very interested in community or the sense of history of a place. There are lots of speeches in my plays where someone will look at the ground and imagine its past or talk about the social structure of a home or the sense of belonging. These are all things that people in the plays may speak longingly of and it’ll be me – I always have that feeling.⁸

Thus, Greig might be defined as a dislocated writer who delves deeper into the stratified idea of place and constantly oscillates between roots and routes, belonging and unbelonging, microcosm and macrocosm, local and global. The fascinating idea of simultaneously dwelling in two opposite poles proves to be extremely productive from a creative point of view, having fuelled Greig’s dramatic imagery and inspired many of his pieces: “I’m not in the middle of these two extremes – I inhabit both ways of being: a powerful compulsive desire to be rooted and a powerful awareness that I’m not. It’s the tension between those two things that produce quite a lot of the material in my work”.⁹

This personal and artistic strain is evident in Greig’s ambivalent relationship to Scotland, a topic that, as Clare Wallace observes, he “approaches with palpable circumspection, perhaps justifiably. Looming large here are questions of national

identity, the politics of place and representation”.¹⁰ Indeed, when it comes to Scotland, Greig seems to become wary and elusive. This ambiguity is well exemplified by the cautiously evasive answer he gave Caridad Svich when she asked about his Scottish allegiance in 2007: “I rarely write directly or recognizably about Scotland.... But I am always writing from Scotland: Of it? About it? Despite it? ... [My] experience of being Scottish is one of being intensely and viscerally attached to a place in which I am perceived as a stranger”.¹¹

Greig’s problematic relation to his motherland, originating precisely from his sense of alienation, is an arena of contrasts and paradoxes, like Scotland itself. The dramatist who is reported to have affirmed he certainly hated his country.¹² is the same person describing himself as “a geek about Scottish culture”,¹³ someone who has indefatigably researched Caledonian literary and cultural heritage to retrace its history and, in a sense, re-appropriate his own story: “Something in the desire to have a place I was from meant that I ought to know that sort of stuff. If you’re going to be a writer, you have to have a place where you’re from and this was the best option available to me”.¹⁴

However, it is important to bear in mind that identity is a fluid and unfixed category, which constantly rewrites itself and cannot be encapsulated in a narrow and rigid definition. If we compare Greig’s earlier statements with more recent ones, we can see how the playwright’s relation to Scotland has evolved over the past few years. For instance, in a 2012 interview, Greig argued: “The pie chart of identity does shift for me as I move through time” and unexpectedly confessed that, at that moment, he felt “quite at home in this [Scottish] culture, established within it in literary and theatrical terms”.¹⁵ However, immediately after, he added that that long-awaited sense of belonging was something unusual, which started worrying him: “I notice glimmers of the feeling of wanting to run away from that, wanting to rebel against it. I mean it’s an interesting, hopefully a relatively creative tension.... There’s something important in not feeling you’ve arrived”.¹⁶ Even if Greig is perfectly aware that he has officially become a member of Scotland’s theatrical establishment (his current position as Artistic Director of Edinburgh’s Royal Lyceum Theatre shows evidence of that), it is exactly the idea of ‘never arriving’, of crossing borders, and of unfinishedness that pushes a displaced writer to explore the politics and poetics of new geographical and theatrical landscapes.

Remarkably, this sense of open-endedness is entirely in keeping with Greig’s thoughts on theatre (which, for him, is an inherently political art form) and, more specifically, on what he terms ‘Rough Theatre’. In the essay closing the collection *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (2008), edited by Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders, Greig explains that he uses the word ‘rough’ to indicate something immediate, sketchy, unfinished, whose unsmooth texture is visible, something dangerous, perhaps even childish or adolescent, lacking accuracy but useful, “emotionally fragile, discombobulated, dislocated from time and place, hung over”.¹⁷ For Greig, ‘Rough Theatre’ is a transformative art form intervening

¹⁰ Clare Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 69.

¹¹ Cit. in David Pattie, “Scotland & Anywhere: The Theatre of David Greig”, in Müller and Wallace, eds., *Cosmopolita*, 54.

¹² Dan Rebellato, “Introduction”, in David Greig, *Plays 1: Europe; The Architect; The Cosmonaut’s Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* [2002] (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2009), x.

¹³ Fisher and Greig, “Interview”, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cit. in Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 160.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ David Greig, “Rough Theatre”, in Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders, eds., *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 214.

in the realm of the imagination, which exposes the underneath of an imperfect structure and opens up possibilities, a theatre that cannot change the world but can offer the audience “a moment of liberated space in which to change ourselves”.¹⁸ As scholars such as Clare Wallace, Verónica Rodríguez and Dilek Inan have demonstrated, and as this article will suggest, Greig’s palimpsestic play *Dunsinane* (2010), which adopts both intertextual and allegorical strategies and juxtaposes the epic with the everyday, can be read within the aesthetic frame of ‘Rough Theatre’.¹⁹

‘Travelling Tales’: Appropriating (and Displacing) ‘The Scottish Play’

The urge to repeat (in a different way) and to rewrite is an intrinsically theatrical practice. Taking into consideration the two-faced nature of the medium (dramatic and performative), in her seminal *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) Julie Sanders states that “[t]he dramatic form encourages persistent reworking and imagining. Performance is an inherently adaptive art; each staging is a collaborative interpretation, one which often reworks a playscript to acknowledge contemporary concerns or issues”.²⁰ Theatre is also embedded into the idea of collective memory, serving as a repository of easily reachable and malleable cultural capital, as Margherita Laera notes: “theatre is the site for the recollection, re-elaboration, and contestation of readily available cultural material, and for the production of new, and newly adaptable, ideas out of established ones”.²¹

An adaptor of different kinds of narratives, myths, folklore, and specific authors including Ovid, Plutarch, and Holinshed, Shakespeare left us a dramatic corpus defined by Sanders as “a crucial touchstone for the scholarship of appropriation as a literary practice and form”.²² Continuously re-read, re-interpreted, re-written, re-staged, re-worked or – more generally – re-made, the output of the greatest English writer has uniquely challenged and crossed cultural, artistic, geographical, historical, and generic boundaries, turning itself into a stratified, fluid, and porous transnational heritage, a treasure in transit(ion) which, “like a prism” – as Charles Marowitz suggests – “refracts many pinpoints of colour, rather than transmitting one unbroken light”.²³ Like a living organism transgressing its own borders and incessantly re-adapting itself to the world and the world to itself, the Bard’s extended corpus has become a privileged site for the examination of the poetics and politics of adaptation and appropriation as well as its aesthetic and ethical dimension as a literary and cultural practice.

Although it is not easy to draw a clear-cut distinction between the notions of ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’, a clarification is necessary at this point. In a recently emerged field such as Adaptation (and Appropriation) Studies, which is constantly enriched by contacts with various other academic disciplines (including Literary Studies, Theatre Studies, Film Studies, Cultural Studies, Translation Studies, Reception Studies), terminology tends to be highly slippery and unstable. As the title of her volume suggests, Sanders tries to distinguish between these two

¹⁸ Ibid., 220.

¹⁹ See Clare Wallace, “Unfinished Business – Allegories of Otherness in *Dunsinane*”, in Müller and Wallace, eds., *Cosmotopia*, 196-213; Verónica Rodríguez and Dilek Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday: David Greig’s *Dunsinane*”, *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 5.2 (June 2012), 56-78.

²⁰ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

²¹ Margherita Laera, “Introduction: Return, Rewrite, Repeat: The Theatricality of Adaptation”, in Laera, ed., *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 3.

²² Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 45-46.

²³ Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare: The Dramatic Medium* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), ix.

categories: adaptation “constitutes a more sustained engagement with a single text or source than the more glancing act of allusion or quotation, even citation, allows”, while appropriation “carries out the same sustained engagement as adaptation but frequently adopts a posture of critique, even assault”.²⁴ Drawing on Bakhtin’s belief that communication is always dialogic (“The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in an object”²⁵), the Shakespeare scholar Christy Desmet argues that the more radical practice of appropriation, which always carries political overtones, should not be defined as an imperialistic act of literary usurpation at the expense of the source (in our case, the Bard), but as a two-way relationship between the appropriator and the appropriated:

It is possible to see appropriation differently. The term itself signifies, at least historically, both theft and donation, giving and taking. Appropriation therefore may be seen as a dialogical phenomenon – not simply a conversation or collaboration between appropriating and source texts, but an exchange that involves both sharing and contested ownership.²⁶

In this light, borrowing Kwame Anthony Appiah’s terminology, Shakespearean narratives might be described as “travelling tales” whose transnational and transhistorical appropriations encourage a stimulating “cosmopolitan conversation”²⁷ across cultures. In this article, I will opt for the term ‘appropriation’, since it has the advantage of stressing the creative (and frequently subversive) potential of Greig’s play, while I will avoid ‘adaptation’, which emphasises the derivative quality of the rewritten product, a palimpsestic artefact that should never be considered a pale copy of the original.

To a greater or lesser extent, the practices of appropriating a preexisting tale from a different angle and restaging it imply some sort of movement, which could be defined – more technically – as relocation. If relocation usually refers to the transposition of what Gérard Genette terms *hypotext*²⁸ (the original text), the idea of a ‘transfer movement’ can also be applied to the figure of the source dramatist (who is metaphorically brought by the appropriator to the spectators) and to the receiving audience (invited to cross spatial and cultural borders). However, remaining rooted in eleventh-century Scotland, Greig’s 2010 thought-provoking sequel to *Macbeth* (1606) cannot be described as a *transposition diégétique* (*diegetic transposition*) or *transdiégétisation* (*transdiegetization*) (“an action can be transposed from one period to another, or from one location to another, or both”²⁹). Rather than dislocating the source from its original spatio-temporal frame, Greig’s appropriation of the Bard’s narrative indeed “relies heavily on its geographical and contextual framework – and on its specific standing in Scotland”,³⁰ as Julia Boll has underlined.

Dunsinane was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and premiered in February 2010 at the Hampstead Theatre, London, under the

²⁴ Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 4.

²⁵ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* [1975], trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: U. of Texas P., 1981), 279.

²⁶ Christy Desmet, “Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Appropriation”, in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 42.

²⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2005), 267.

²⁸ See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 11-12.

²⁹ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 296. The French original reads: “une action peut être transposée d’une diégèse dans une autre, par exemple d’une époque à une autre, ou d’un lieu à un autre, ou les deux à la fois” (Genette, *Palimpsestes*, 343).

³⁰ Julia Boll, *The New War Plays: From Kane to Harris* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 137.

direction of Roxana Silbert. This opening production was followed by a second one by the National Theatre of Scotland, first staged in association with the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, in May 2011. The play is set in the aftermath of Shakespeare's shortest and darkest tragedy and opens with the English troops camouflaging themselves before attacking the unnamed tyrant's (Macbeth) castle. Focusing on the character of the English General Siward and his young soldiers occupying an inhospitable place such as Scotland to bring peace and to secure England's northern border, Greig's re-visionary drama imagines what happens after the king's deposition and Malcolm's installation to the throne.

Starting from where Shakespeare left off four hundred years before him, Greig re-appropriates the tragedy universally known as 'The Scottish Play'. In an interview for the BBC, the dramatist admits that "to some degree for Scottish writers, it's always felt a little bit cheeky that unquestionably the greatest Scottish play was written by the great English playwright", and hints at the (postcolonial) idea of writing back to the English canon and to Shakespeare's take on Scottish history: "there is a slight sense of answering back a little bit. Playing with some of those concepts and characters, and claiming just a little bit of history from another point of view".³¹ In line with this, during an interview with Hilary Whitney, Greig deconstructs the Bard's widely received narrative on the figure of Macbeth as a ruthless tyrant:

³¹ Cit. in Nigel Wrench, "Writing Macbeth after Shakespeare" (BBC News, 10 February 2010), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/arts_and_culture/8508803.stm.

there's also something that most Scots know about the real King Macbeth, which is that he probably wasn't a tyrant, he was probably quite a good king. He ruled for about 15 years at a time in Scottish history when the turnover in kings was something like one in every six months, so he must have been doing something right. He also embarked on what, at that time, was an epic six-month journey to Rome; if you had been an unpopular tyrant that would have been insane – you'd have lost your kingdom. So he must have been very confident that his kingdom would be there when he got back. So the cheeky bit of me thought, 'What if the stories of Macbeth being a tyrant turned out to be propaganda, a bit like the weapons of mass destruction?'³²

³² In Whitney, "The Arts Desk Q&A".

Thus, towards the end of the first act, Greig provides the contemporary audience with his (anti-Shakespearean) counter-discourse on the real King Macbeth through the praising words of the tyrant's widow, Gruach. This fictional female figure is an extremely fascinating character who serves as Lady Macbeth's strong and scheming counterpart. Indeed, in *Dunsinane*, Scotland's queen is still alive and Lulach, her teenage son from her first marriage as well as the heir to the throne according to the House of Moray, has escaped during the English assault on the castle:

GRUACH He was a good king.
He ruled for fifteen years.
Before him there were kings and kings and kings but not one of them could

rule more than a year or so at most before he would be killed by some chief or other. But my king lasted fifteen years.

My king was strong.

SIWARD Your king murdered your first husband.

GRUACH Yes.

SIWARD You don't seem to mind.

GRUACH I asked him to do it.

SIWARD Did he always do the things you asked?

GRUACH Mostly.

SIWARD WHERE IS YOUR SON?

GRUACH I DON'T KNOW.³³

³³ David Greig, *Dunsinane* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 32-33.

The central characters of Siward and Lady Gruach represent England's imperialistic drive masked as peacekeeping mission and Scotland's fierce defence of its own history, territory, and tradition, respectively. Even if – on a personal level – these two figures are attracted by each other, they epitomise two irreconcilable political and cultural poles that will compete throughout the play. In this light, it might be argued that *Dunsinane* enters one of Mary Louise Pratt's liminal and uncomfortable 'contact zones', that is to say those "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today".³⁴ Therefore, Greig's follow-up to *Macbeth* (as well as Scotland's hostile territory) becomes a multilayered site for tense encounters between two enemy countries and two antagonistic identities, Englishness and Scottishness. At the same time, the play points at contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, opening up a wider field of interpretation and fostering a broader debate. As Trish Reid observes, "*Dunsinane* looks both inward, towards Scotland's past, and outward to comment on twenty-first-century global politics", thus "embod[y]ing the tension between national and international concerns".³⁵

³⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

³⁵ Trish Reid, *Theatre & Scotland* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65-66.

In an interview given during the rehearsal process, Greig himself declared that the play grew out of the zeitgeist:

About five years ago, I think, I had noticed that there was a lot of productions of *Macbeth* around the place and I could sort of see why there were productions of *Macbeth* because at that time we had just, I say we, Britain and America, had just invaded ... Iraq and occupied Iraq and so it seemed to me there's an element of looking at the military and looking at the idea of the overthrow of the tyrant.³⁶

³⁶ "Royal Shakespeare Company: David Greig talks about *Dunsinane*" (Royal Shakespeare Company – YouTube channel, 31 January 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZsAyy-KuRzQ>.

Despite the strong relationship between this drama and its sociopolitical context, Greig deliberately avoids including explicit references to current events. Therefore, *Dunsinane* should not be regarded as a purely polemical work about the disastrous consequences of the Western invasion of the Middle East in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Rather than dislocating *Macbeth* from its original

frame, Greig effectively displaces the military and (post)colonial discourses which permeate his sequel, creating a stratified and highly resonant contemporary piece in which the power dynamics of eleventh century Scotland and today's international politics are closely linked and fruitfully interwoven. As Boll makes clear, Greig adopts a subtly indirect approach to the Iraq question, drawing interesting parallels between the political pattern of Scotland (where, as Macduff explains, "[t]here are many clans and families but there are two parties that sit at the heart of everything ... Alba in the west and Moray in the north")³⁷ and that of Eastern societies:

³⁷ Greig, *Dunsinane*, 30.

Dunsinane is an example of how to engage with the Iraq war without using testimony, without situating the play in Iraq, or even in the correct century – in short, how to write about Iraq without writing about Iraq.... While the place is clearly Scotland, it is doubling for Iraq, demonstrated by the similar parameters of the operation – bringing peace, but also securing economic interests – and by the political set-up of the invaded country, which, crudely said, mirrors that of the Shia-Sunni split in present-day Iraq.... This fictional Scotland, like the actual one, is an old kingdom, perceived as 'barbarian' by its fictional and historical enemies and displaying a palimpsestic culture both in the play and in the present age. There is again a parallel to be drawn between the obliterated Celtic-Scottish past and that of Ancient Mesopotamia and Greater Persia, where the occupying forces were supposed to help settle in a new government that will shift the power structures in the country and ensure safety for Fortress West at its south-eastern fringe. In Greig's play, it is the northern border of the hegemonic power that needs securing against the barbarians: a minor variation in geopolitics.³⁸

³⁸ Boll, *The New War Plays*, 138.

In Greig's powerful palimpsest, a present-day transnational conflict in the Middle East, like a new layer of writing, has been superimposed on the (partly erased and re-imagined) fictional past dramatised by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. Far from being a mere backdrop, Scotland proves to be a 'rough', extreme, liminal, and multifaceted place (and space) in which antagonistic forces "clash and grapple with each other", as Pratt would put it, "in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination".³⁹

"Here We Are Rock, Bog, Forest and Loch": Scotland as a Liminal Place

Dunsinane focuses on the ideas of place and space from its very beginning. Opening the play with an epigraph borrowed from the fifth act of *Macbeth* – "What wood is this before us?"³⁹ – Greig immediately acknowledges his debt to the Bard and, through this initial reference to the Wood of Birnam, highlights the importance of place in the source text as well as in its contemporary sequel. Moreover, the title of Greig's follow-up not only pays homage to his literary father by indicating the location of the final action of the tragedy, but even more relevantly, as Wallace observes, "is noteworthy in the way it alters the focus of the source text, directing us away from Shakespeare's tyrant to the site of his demise, suggesting the precedence of place over personage".⁴⁰

³⁹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), 284.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 92.

The rhythm of the play, which is divided into four parts corresponding to the four seasons (from spring to winter), is determined throughout by the cycle of nature: “SIWARD: We’ll set a new king in Dunsinane and then summer will come and then a harvest and by next spring it’ll be as if there never was a fight here”.⁴¹ The action starts in spring: the English army prepares for battle at the break of dawn, while it rains. The young soldiers coming from the south are not ready to face the insidious, weird, and inhospitable land which lays ahead of them, as this monologue by the unnamed Boy Soldier shows:

⁴¹ Greig, *Dunsinane*, 24.

We boarded our ships at the Thames mouth.
There were two thousand of us and also
Some horses for the knights to ride and animals
For us to slaughter on the way.

We stood on the Essex shore a mess of shingle,
Some of us new and eager for a fight and others
Not so sure but all of us both knowing and not knowing
What lay ahead of us.

Scotland.

Scotland. Where we would install a king.⁴²

⁴² Ibid., 9.

The inexperienced Boy Soldier appears both excited and hesitant about the upcoming war and the mysterious land they are going to invade. When the English fleet lands in Fife, he is immediately struck by the savage nature of Scotland, which seems “a wild place compared to Kent”.⁴³ Rodríguez and Inan observe that the Boy’s four opening monologues, framing each act and throwing light on the daily side of experience, constitute a powerful technique adopted by Greig in order to “intertwine epic characteristics and everyday preoccupations”.⁴⁴ Indeed, the descriptions provided by the young soldier are not merely objective reports but emotionally charged personal accounts of war life combining reason and feeling.

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ Rodríguez and Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday”, 68.

Despite their adverse reaction to the harsh landscape and the difficult situation in which they find themselves, the English troops are supposed to obey orders, even when the Sergeant commands his men to imagine a forest and disguise themselves as Birnam Wood:

SERGEANT You –
— Sir?
SERGEANT Be a tree.
— Yes, Sir.
SERGEANT You and you and you – make yourself undergrowth –
—Yes, Sir.
SERGEANT Come on!
You’re supposed to be a forest!
You – make the noise of a bird –
...
Close your eyes –

Conjure up a wood – walk in it – look about you –

...

The forest's made of trees and in between the trees the darkness. It's not the something of it that fools the eyes but the nothing in between. All of you – get on your knees, dig your hands into the bog water – smear your faces with black mud – we'll make a forest of you yet! – come on!⁴⁵

⁴⁵Greig, *Dunsinane*, 10-11.

This physical fusion between the English army and the impenetrable Wood of Birnam is highly evocative and revealing about the cardinal importance that the notion of place assumes in this play (and, more generally, in Greig's entire output). If, in this scene, the boys turn themselves into a forest, shortly after, when Siward first meets Gruach, the body of the General becomes his motherland:

SIWARD ... I am Siward.

I am England.

Do you speak English?

GRUACH Yes.

SIWARD What is your name?

GRUACH Gruach.

SIWARD Gruach.

Gruach, what work do you do here in Dunsinane?

GRUACH Work?

SIWARD What is your place here?

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

GRUACH MY PLACE HERE IS QUEEN.⁴⁶

Moreover, we should note a final repetition of the word 'place' in this short duologue, implying a parallel identification between the tyrant's widow and her position in the castle. Even if, technically, Gruach can no longer be considered a queen since her husband has been killed during the English attack, as Siward later points out, "she is still a woman – and this is still her house and we're her guests in it".⁴⁷ As a female human being, in the gendered hierarchy of things, Gruach belongs to a more private kind of space, the domestic territory, in which she continues to occupy a dominant position. The convergence between people and place(s) is a recurring element in *Dunsinane*. At the end of the first act, for instance, several bodies of dead soldiers are brought into the castle yard and laid out in rows, being referred to exclusively by the name of their place of origin:

— Leicester.

Leicester.

Dunno.

Essex.

Cumbria.

Newcastle.

York.

York.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 35.

York.⁴⁸

Shortly after, Siward highlights the close correspondence between the recently installed king Malcolm and the country he rules: "When I say you – I mean Scotland. You are Scotland".⁴⁹ For Rodríguez and Inan, the frequent use of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 38.

metonymies (the title of the play perfectly exemplifies this technique) is an effective strategy through which Greig displays “epic versions of national identity”.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Rodríguez and Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday”, 63.

However, with all its nuances and contradictions, Scotland is an unstable signifier, a fluid and fragmented place doomed to ambivalence, which stubbornly resists definition and closure. Even Malcolm, the king of this paradoxical country, confesses that he is not able to grasp its true essence:

It's quite ridiculous isn't it? I'm King of this country and even I don't understand it. Sometimes I think you could be born in this country. Live in it all your life. Study it. Travel the length and breadth of it. And still – if someone asked you – to describe it – all you'd be able to say about it without fear of contradiction is – ‘It's cold’.⁵¹

⁵¹ Greig, *Dunsinane*, 29.

Constantly compared to England by the invading army, the bitterly cold country governed by Malcolm defies any received idea of ‘normality’ and revels in queerness. The Boy Soldier states that Scotland is a territory existing exclusively ‘in relation’ (as England’s dark and wild counterpart), a peripheral and slippery space where everything looks ambiguously uncertain: “And we began to wonder what sort of country this is / Where everything that in England was normal – / Summer, land, beer, a house, a bed – for example – / In Scotland – that thing would turn out to be made of water – / This is what you learn here – nothing is solid”.⁵² In other words, when you find yourself in this alien land of “rock, bog, forest and loch”,⁵³ it is wise to “be careful where you put your feet”.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 40.

Another element of difference and miscomprehension between the English colonisers and local people is inevitably the linguistic aspect. Although the play is performed in English, Greig points out that the Scottish characters speak Gaelic and includes their words in square brackets. It should also be noted that the educated Scots are bilingual, while the English suffer from monolingualism. This incapacity to understand the indigenous language of the enemy, Wallace writes, “places them at a disadvantage in their chosen role as mediators and arbiters of justice”.⁵⁵ After sleeping together and becoming more and more intimate, Siward wakes up next to Gruach and feels uncomfortable within her domestic microcosm, where women speak exclusively Gaelic while preparing food: “I don’t like to be in the presence of people talking secretly”.⁵⁶ Gruach invites the General to learn her language, but Siward finds it utterly incomprehensible:

⁵⁵ Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 94.

⁵⁶ Greig, *Dunsinane*, 76.

SIWARD Your language is hard to learn.
GRUACH We like it that way.
SIWARD Why?
GRUACH Your English is a woodworker’s tool.
Siward.
Hello, goodbye, that tree is green,
Simple matters.
A soldier’s language sent out to capture the world in words.
Always trying to describe.
Throw words at the tree and eventually you’ll force me to see the tree just as you see it.
We long since gave up believing in descriptions.
Our language is the forest.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 94.

A magnetic and extraordinarily clever woman endowed with supernatural powers, Gruach provides us with a fascinating description of the essence of both languages. Intriguingly, the powerful image of the wood comes back. For the dethroned queen, English is one of the basic tools of a woodworker, a “denotative”⁵⁸ language – as Wallace has rightly termed it – which can only formulate simple concepts. As an idiom revolving around the idea of literal meaning, English is the language of the invader, a language which colonises the world through concrete words. By contrast, Gaelic seems a dark and dense forest of signs, a connotative language in which words are laden with emotional and imaginative echoes, a space – like Scotland itself – inhabited by a myriad of secondary meanings.

Conclusion

When asked about the genesis of *Dunsinane* in 2010, Greig confessed that the play had been in his head for six or seven years. Although the main question for him was “What happened to Macbeth?”, the character he was most drawn to from an emotional point of view was Siward, a good and honest man who naively thought it was possible to impose peace on a wild land, too cryptic, tribal, changeable, internally fragmented and territorially distinctive to be understood by the pragmatism of the English. Interestingly, the vivid mental image that pushed Greig to write the play was that of Siward standing on the edge of a typically Scottish bog:

I had this image of a soldier standing on the edge of a very Scottish landscape, a bog. And the emotional feeling is that he has to conquer this land somehow but it's a bog. His desire is to do good, to be a good commander, but he knows he's about to step into this big horrible morass.... You don't necessarily see the image of the soldier standing on the edge of the bog, but it's there throughout the whole play.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Cit. in Whitney, “The Arts Desk Q&A”.

Greig's description of the bog image gives us a sense of the impact of a highly symbolic and shifting landscape on his re-visionary sequel to “The Scottish Play”, in which the setting becomes a character and characters merge with place. Scotland, David Pattie reminds us, “is both a world of bone, flesh, bog, and metal, and a world of seemings and appearances: the people who live there have come to understand that this apparent contradiction is in practice no contradiction at all”.⁶⁰ An absent presence looming large over Greig's entire output, this permeable, prismatic, and protean country (un)written *sous rature* becomes a liminal and liquid contact zone which is not only a battlefield for armies but also for cultures and ideas. In this theatrical space of infinite possibilities, Greig affirms, “the fabric of ‘reality’ will tear and we can experience transcendence”⁶¹ – that moment of

⁶⁰ David Pattie, “Dissolving into Scotland: National Identity in *Dunsinane* and *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 26.1 (March 2016), 25.

⁶¹ Greig, “Rough Theatre”, 220.

transcendence which, for him, is “the political foundation of Rough Theatre”.⁶²

⁶² Ibid.

The stratified inspiration behind Greig’s (re)writing – (hyper)textual, visual, and emotional – shows how a multilayered play such as *Dunsinane* originates from different sign systems. Crossing various kinds of borders and blending traditional roots with new routes, Greig’s appropriation of *Macbeth* does not trace its texture back to a single matrix. Rather, it is a palimpsestic artefact in flux and in transit, which, in Douglas Lanier’s words, “has no single or central root and no vertical structure. Instead, like the underground root system of rhizomatic plants, it has a horizontal, decentered multiplicity of subterranean roots that cross each other, bifurcating and recombining, breaking off and restarting”.⁶³ As an effective and affective product of ‘Rough Theatre’, *Dunsinane* exposes the “joins and bolts”⁶⁴ as well as the intricacies and interstices of its fascinating rhizomatic structure.

⁶³ Douglas Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value”, in Huang and Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, 28.

⁶⁴ Greig, “Rough Theatre”, 213.

All the World's a Beach. Staging Global Crises in Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* (2015)

Abstract: The paper revolves around Anders Lustgarten's play *Lampedusa*, performed at Soho Theatre, London, in March 2015 and later on the Aldeburgh beach at High Tide Festival in September 2015, when the migration crisis was at its peak together with the rise of xenophobia and populism in Western countries. The play tackles issues such as mass migration and financial crisis in Europe through the interwoven monologues of two characters both representative of local and global contradictions: Stefano, a Sicilian fisherman who lives in Lampedusa, and Denise, a white East Asian woman who collects debts for a payday loan company. The paper offers a close reading of the 'places' and 'spaces' mentioned in the play suggesting how they contribute to map the 'routes' of global crisis provoked by the politics of austerity and financial capitalism. It analyses the structure of the play and the characterization of the two protagonists in order to unveil provocative juxtapositions and frame the political engagement underlying Lustgarten's new millennium theatre. It contextualizes the play within the debates on global inequality and refers to Ashcroft's concept of 'transnation' as an interpretative key to the world of *Lampedusa*.

Key words: *Lampedusa*, *Lustgarten*, *global inequality*, *migration*, *political theatre*

1. All the World's a Beach

Lampedusa by Anders Lustgarten was performed on Aldeburgh beach on the opening night of the High Tide Festival in September 2015. The play tackles issues such as mass migration, economic crisis and globalization, and had debuted at the Soho Theatre in March 2015, during one of the peaks of the recent migrant crisis.¹ When it was staged again at the Festival, the crisis was still raging but a photo widely shared on social networks and in the media had compelled public opinion to partially revise their xenophobic ideas. This was the picture of the body of a three-year-old Syrian child, Alan Kurdi, washed ashore in Bodrum, Turkey. Explicitly inspired by that event, the Artistic Director of the Festival Stephen Atkinson together with Lucy Osborne, the play's stage designer, decided to perform *Lampedusa* in a wooden amphitheatre by the sea. The audience sat on benches, and the play was performed among them. Stephen Atkinson himself described what happened that night: "One audience member stood up mid-show and fainted.... Some audiences cried. Some were motivated to action. Others were affronted by Anders' mode of direct politics".² The performance had a profound impact, though it did not exploit sensationalist strategies. It simply, as Atkinson added, "personalized an overwhelming global event where fear clouded ethics and empathy".³

¹ *Lampedusa* was first performed at the Soho Theatre, London, on 8 April 2015 before transferring to the High Tide Festival, Aldeburgh, on 10 September 2015, co-produced by High Tide and the Soho Theatre. It starred Ferdy Roberts as Stefano, and Louise Mai Newberry as Denise. The director was Steven Atkinson, the designer Lucy Osborne, the lighting designer Elliot George and the sound designer Isobel Waller-Bridge.

² Anders Lustgarten, *Lampedusa*, in *High Tide Theatre, Plays I: Ditch, Peddling, The Big Well, Lampedusa* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), xiii. All quotes will be from this edition and pages will be given in parentheses.

³ *Ibid.*

2. No man is an island

The play challenges its audience by presenting confessional monologues by two characters representative of the most complex issues of our time – global inequality, mass migration and financial speculation – forcing us to compare the local and global consequences of the crisis and collective and individual responses to it. The first character to appear on stage is Stefano, a fisherman living in Lampedusa who accepted the job no one wanted: to retrieve the bodies of people drowned in the Mediterranean. The other character is Denise, a young British-Chinese woman who collects debts for a payday loan company to help her impoverished mother, also unable to work, and pay her University fees. At the beginning of the play she intends to graduate and to find another job elsewhere, outside Britain. She also despises those unable to respect the contract they have stipulated with the company. For his part, Stefano describes feeling overwhelmed by the experience of gathering dead bodies and only wishes that they would stop coming.

As is apparent from this brief overview, the play mainly belongs to the British tradition of social realism and realistic narratives about ordinary people. *Lampedusa* is a naturalistic play about two individuals and their private lives and everyday choices. It preserves the characters' sociological and psychological credibility, but lacks "the room with three dimensional objects",⁴ so typical of bourgeois drama, and dialogue or conversation as the main diegetic engine. The play relies on a double and parallel structure driven by the characters' two monologues. The timing of the two monologues is set by a spotlight, which turns on the character who is speaking and switches off when it is the other character's turn to speak. Only at the end, when both characters have reached a new awareness of human bonds, do their eyes meet. Light is extremely important, as are pauses and sound. A crucial role is played by a "beat" underlining the most touching passages of the characters' speeches, and by an original song called *Lampedusa* by the Malian musicians Toumani Diabaté and his son Sidiki Diabaté.⁵ It is played by Modibo, a Malian refugee who has just arrived on the island. Stefano describes the song as follows: "It's meant to be about all the people who've come here seeking a better life. The drowning and the terror. The hopes and the futures. I don't know if I can hear all that in there personally, but it's beautiful" (272).

This frame based on a bare but effective use of light and sound allow the audience to focus on the words of the characters, which increasingly reveal their implicit parallels: the difficulty to find a job due to the economic crisis, the difficulties to cope with people who risk their money or their life for economic reasons (migrants as well as the indebted British working-class). Rather than simply discussing the humanitarian migration crisis and social anxieties represented by private loans⁶ – adopting the conversational mode that usually characterizes

⁴ Ruby Cohn, *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge U.P., 1991), 3.

⁵ This moment from the play is highly reminiscent of the most beautiful scene of the recent award-winning documentary *Fuocoammare* (2016) by Francesco Rosi, also set in Lampedusa and dealing with mass migration towards Europe.

⁶ To have an idea of the rising fear surrounding the problem of household debt in the UK see this detailed article appeared on *The Guardian* on 18 September 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/sep/18/uk-debt-crisis-credit-cards-car-loans>.

political plays⁷ – the play offers the opportunity to reflect on root causes through the private stories of those personally affected. There is no opposition, but rather a juxtaposition of stories and experiences, which indirectly comment on each other without offering the standard political propaganda. The characters embody two sides of the same coin; they do not have contrasting views, but their stories are compared on stage to highlight geographical and diachronic (or perhaps historical) interconnectedness. Neither chose their job. Stefano was compelled by the economic crisis and environmental conditions in the Mediterranean:

My father was a fisherman. And his father before him. And before and before. I always thought, always knew, I'd make my living at sea.

But the fish are gone. The Med is dead.
And my job is to fish out a very different harvest.

Three years without work. Three years of pleading and queuing and niggly little bribes to a man who say he can help.

....And finally this. The job no-one else will take. (265)

The local history of impoverishment on the little island of Lampedusa intermingles with the global history of mass migration. At the beginning, Stefano's point of view on the connections between local and global issues is characterized by pessimism and anger towards migrants and their absurd idea of finding a better world in Europe: "And do the migrants not understand Europe is fucked? And Italy is double-fucked? And the South of Italy is triple-fucked?" (267). Migrants hope to reach Europe, while in Europe Stefano is forced to salvage dead bodies, and his brother, who has a degree in biochemistry, works as a chef in London. A similar attitude of despair and closed-mindedness characterizes Denise in her first appearances. She works for a loan company and hates the clients who squander their money on take-away food or massive flat screen TVs, and are then unable to pay back their loans. Through her words, Lustgarten alludes to the World Bank loans to African countries seen from the perspective of neo-liberalism:

The bottom line is: if you can't afford to pay a loan back, don't take one out.
Don't stand here quoting me figures, 'I only took out this much and you lot want three times as much back'.
Yes, thank you, Stephen Hawking, I can do maths as well, the interest rate is down there in black and white.

Learn some discipline. If you ant got the money, do without.
I have. I *do*. (265)

⁷ "Within the frame of [the] realistic dramaturgy, a pressing political issue is either discussed by characters and/or embodied by the characters themselves, whose narrative journeys represent different perspective in the issue in question", Sarah Grochala, *The Contemporary Political Play* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), 13. See also Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge U.P., 2003).

According to Denise, these people should be blamed for the state of the country. “You want to blame anyone for the state of the country, blame people like him – all the lazy bastards – I do, that’s why I voted Tory. But don’t blame migrants” (269). Through the lines of her monologue, we understand that Denise hates her job but needs it to finish her exams and run away from Britain.

I’m going to murder these exams.... And if the results are good enough, I can go anywhere. Australia, America.
China even. Doing well, ent they? That’d be fucking ironic.

Anywhere but here.

Slam the door on this washed-up country, turn me back, be *free*. I don’t know what free is, where I’ll find it, but that is where am I going and nobody will stop me. (269)

Britain, a dream destination for migrants from Africa and Middle East, is for Denise a place to run away from. The need for money and the hope of a better life somewhere else gives her the strength to face the complaints of female clients that she has violated “some code of ‘solidarity’” (264) and the general implicit accusation that she is a sort of traitor of the working class.

During the play, both Stefano and Denise change their initial attitudes. Stefano is forced to renounce his cynicism about migrants (“I resent them for their hope”, 267) when he reluctantly starts a friendship with Modibo, the Malian migrant who helps him and his colleague Salvatore with their boat. The closer encounter with the point of view of migrants – the latter being no longer a category, but a group of living human beings with individual emotions and motivations – compels Stefano to revise his ideas. At the beginning Stefano wants nothing to do with the survivors: “It’s not part of my job to have to listen to their stories. There’s too many of them” (271). But, on the umpteenth arrival of dead bodies on the island, Modibo answers Stefano’s questions about the motivations of migrants, and Stefano listens:

He turns to me and, very quietly, he says that it’s deliberate. That our glorious leaders *want* the migrants to drown, as a deterrent, a warning to others. They want them to see TV footage of the bloated bodies and the rotted faces of those who trod the watery way of death before them, so they’ll hesitate before they set foot in one of those rickety little deathtraps.

And he says they do see – and they get I anyway. They know what the dangers are, but they keep coming and coming because, in his words, ‘if those men in their offices knew what we were coming from, they’d know we will never, ever stop’. (277)

Migrants are aware of the dangers. They don't care if "Europe is fucked" because the countries they come from are far more 'fucked'. After this, Stefano is increasingly haunted by nightmares of rotten bodies, and the only friend who understands him is Modibo, who has in the meantime been granted temporary leave to stay. "He understands, not the words sometimes but the gist. They've all *seen* it, been through it, know people who've not survived. They know what's really happening" (280). At the end of his monologue, Stefano recounts how he risked his own life to save a boatload of migrants that was expected to be carrying Modibo's wife Aminata. He tells of Modibo and Aminata's joy at their second wedding on the island of Lampedusa "to celebrate her coming back from the dead" (290). Stefano looks at them and what he says about hope reveals how his encounter with Modibo, the true face and voice of migration, has completely changed his mind not only about the root cause of the phenomenon but also about the value of human bonds:

They don't know what'll happen. If either of them will get to stay long-term. But they're here, in this moment, alive and living. And that is all you can ask for.

I defy you too see the joy in Modibo and Aminata's faces and not feel hope.
I defy you. (291)

Denise undergoes a similar metamorphosis thanks to an unexpected friendship with one of her clients, a debt-ridden Portuguese single mother. She unexpectedly accepts Carolina's invitation to dinner and then decides to help her to defend her rights against the loan company's proceedings. At the end of the dinner, Carolina drives Denise back to her own mother who is having a heart attack, and discovers the terrible conditions of poverty and neglect in which the old woman lives and Denise once lived: "The grime between the bathroom tiles. The ring of encrusted shit around the toilet. The memories of boredom and terror" (280). The heart attack is probably caused by this fragile woman's scheduled interview with ATOS, the Paris-based multinational to which the British Government's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had delegated the administration of the test designed to determine whether welfare claimants are entitled to sickness benefits.⁸ Denise's mother is discharged from the hospital a few days later. Denise has already prepared all the documentation for the interview but her mother dies the night before. Carolina and her son attend the funeral and Denise cries at last, but then she must return to work and is overwhelmed by a sense of "hopelessness and helplessness" (287). Denise's last speech recounts Carolina's proposal that they live together to split the rent. Significantly, her last lines are about the so-called monkey trap generally used to demonstrate the inherent greed of monkeys (and thus of humans). This was the subject of her last exam.

⁸ Beginning when Tony Blair was Prime Minister and passing to another company in March 2015.

I wrote that the monkey trap experiment is fundamentally an indicator of *hope*. It speaks to our ability to walk away from delusions, from traps. To save ourselves from our baser instincts.

Me last line, and I can't believe I actually wrote this hippy shit but fuck it, was, 'Perhaps the ultimate purpose of the experiment is for the monkeys to teach us something'. (290)

Like Stefano's, Denise's last words are about hope. She recognizes the trap she was in, just as Modibo acknowledged the trap of the deliberate drowning of migrants, and Stefano that of cynicism. After these final speeches, the lights stay up on Denise who kneels before the urn holding her mother's ashes. Stefano delivers his speech on Modibo's second wedding and they finally look at each other. Denise empties the box and the play ends. Like the characters, the audience too is invited to judge global issues through their own individual responses to them. However, what they have seen on stage is anybody's right to run away from traps and disappointments, and a representation of their legitimate hope and effort to change things.

3. Beyond Lampedusa, Within Great Britain

From several points of view, Stefano and Denise can be considered national subaltern subjects whose precarious work and social status entail an increasing misidentification with the state, or, more precisely, with the policies of the European Union and the British government. Their living conditions – he is an Italian fisherman who can no longer work, she is a white/East Asian student working for a loans company – partially explain the resentment both feel towards the place in which they live and the transformation it has undergone due to globalization and economic crises.

Stefano lives and works in Lampedusa, a small island in the Mediterranean he describes as “a little dusty island you've never ever heard of, left to deal with all this alone” (267). Far from being the utopian or dystopian space of Western tradition, here the island looks like one of Foucault's *contre-espaces* of modernity, that is to say, those spaces “qui s'opposent à tous les autres, qui sont destinés en quelque sorte à les effacer, à les neutraliser ou à les purifier”.⁹ For example, it is significant that Stefano compares Lampedusa to Guantanamo, another island highly representative of the global war on terror, because the former is overcrowded with refugee centres just as the latter is with detention camps, thus denouncing the ambiguous status of the migrants detained on the island. Even more significant is the web of old and new geographies overlapping in the little island's history throughout the play. In the very first part of his monologue, which

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Le Corps utopique, Les Hétérotopies* (Clamecy: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009), 24.

opens the play, Stefano evokes the ancient identity of the Mediterranean as the birth-place of the world:

This is where the world began. This was Caesar's highway. Hannibal's road to glory. These were the trading routes of the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, the Ottomans and the Byzantines. If you look carefully, my grandfather used to say, you can still make out the wakes of their ships... We all come from the seas and back to the sea we will go. The Mediterranean gave birth to the world. (261)

This map of the ancient populations and "trading routes" crossing the Mediterranean is evoked just before Stefano begins his terrible description of the forms of the corpses retrieved during the night. Their bodies, he says, were "twisted into fantastical and disgusting shapes like the curse in that story my grandmother used to tell me" (261), depending on how long they spent in the water, the temperature and the tides. Instantly, the Mediterranean has been transfigured into a tomb, a grave of the Western world, or at least of the values on which its ideal of modernity was founded.¹⁰ The Mediterranean has completely lost its thousand-year-old identity, but it is still a space in which, to quote Said, we can find "overlapping territories, intertwined histories".¹¹ Now it represents the crucial space, or 'a third space'¹² for the crossings that are reshaping global interconnectedness and calling into question the ideology of globalization, a fact Stefano reveals to be aware of in this quotation from his second monologue:

Syrians are the latest thing. Palestinians last summer when Gaza got bombed. Egyptians and Libyans the past couple of years. We read the papers and we see a disaster, a crackdown, a famine, and we say: 'They'll be here next.' Makes me laugh when people call them 'economic migrant'. It's like an earthquake – you feel the tremors far away and you know the tidal wave is coming. (266)

This is a telling representation of the changing landscape of contemporary globalization. The ancient trade routes have been replaced by the escape routes required by local and global political and economic crises. Yet similar upheavals can also be felt in other, larger islands like Great Britain, as Denise soon remind us. From her 'in-between' point of view – she is British-Chinese though, as she says, "I'm not even a proper one. Don't fit anywhere, me. Mixed and mouthy and poor" (268) – Denise gives us a portrait of Great Britain as the country home to nine out of the ten poorest regions in Northern Europe:

Here's where they are:
West Wales
Cornwall
Tees Valley
Lincolnshire

¹⁰ See William Vernon Harris, ed., *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2006,) and Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke U. P., 2008).

¹¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 48.

¹² This is a well-known concept from Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). See also its re-elaboration by Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1994). On postmodern spaces and recent theory developments, see also Bertrand Westphal, *La Géocritique. Réel, fiction, espace* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), and Clément Lévy, *Territoires postmodernes: Géocritique de Calvino, Eco, Pynchon et Ransmayr* (Rennes: PU Rennes, 2014).

The Independent Republic of South Yorkshire
Shropshire/Staffordshire
Lancashire
Northern Ireland.
That's the top eight. Ninth is some wankstain in Belgium.
Tenth is East Yorkshire. (268)

Predictably, Denise also mentions the entry topping the list of the richest areas in Northern Europe: Inner London. The richest area is 'within' the same country as the poorest areas, as Francois Bourguignon has recently said of global inequality.¹³ Denise included these statistics in her politics essay at university but it was judged to be 'lacking balance' although these were government figures. She adds, "Do you want the truth or don't yer?" (268). The university here probably stands for the intellectual institutions that refuse to accept or even to see the nefarious effects of globalization within the most advanced countries. It also stands for local governments, which seem to irresponsibly undervalue the danger represented by the huge numbers of private loans reducing the weakest individuals to new forms of poverty and to a feeling of anxiety and rage against "other's poverty". As Billington stressed in his review, "In a short play, Lustgarten has no room to explore the practical question of how European society balances its moral obligation to asylum seekers with its own economic problems".¹⁴ Despite his explicit political engagement, Lustgarten pursues a higher purpose in the play than simply providing (albeit useful) information about global issues through provocative juxtapositions. The key aspect of the play lies in the affective turns and vital 'exit strategy' from cynicism that both characters find in the end, but also in the denunciation of the necessity to overcome national borders and speak out the global responsibilities.

4. What is the Theatre for?

As Michael Billington underlined in his review of the play published in *The Guardian* on 12 April 2015, "What makes Anders Lustgarten exceptional is that he thinks globally",¹⁵ as he had already done in some previous plays quoted by Billington and dealing with Turkey's Roboski massacre (*Shrapnel: 34 Fragments of a Massacre*, Arcola Theatre, London 2015) and post-Mugabe Zimbabwe (*Black Jesus*, Finborough Theatre, 2013). An even stronger connection within Lustgarten's repertoire can be found with a 2013 play that raised questions similar to those of *Lampedusa: If You Don't Let us Dream, then We Won't Let you Sleep* (2013), whose title comes from the slogan of a protest movement beginning in Madrid's Puerta del Sol square. It was first presented at the Royal Court Theatre and its main theme was the economic crisis and the onset of austerity in Europe.¹⁶ Here Lustgarten, who was also involved in the Occupy movement, launched "a fierce attack on free-

¹³ "Inequality in standard living *between countries* has started to decline. Twenty years ago, the average standard of living in France or Germany was twenty times higher than in China or India. Today this gap has been cut in half. On the other hand inequality *within countries* has increased, often following several decades of stability", Francois Bourguignon, *The Globalization of Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2015), 2. For a brief overview of the relationship between globalization and literature, see Liam Connell and Nicky Marsh, eds., *Literature and Globalization. A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2011). See also Dan Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/12/lampedusa-soho-theatre-london-review>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The play was also performed during the week-long season of readings of new plays in translation from the European countries affected by austerity. The season was called "PIIGS" after the acronym used in economics and finance to refer to Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain, considered to be troubled and heavily-indebted countries. The Artistic Director was Vicky Fatherstone.

market capitalism where, despite a mixed critical reception, the sincerity of his critique of austerity is never in question”.¹⁷

In a sense, both plays contribute to the debates over the effects of globalization, and particularly its responsibility or otherwise for the rise in inequality in the world over the last two decades, especially ‘within’ countries. Lustgarten’s political ideas are clearly expounded in an article appearing in *The Guardian* five days after Billington’s review of *Lampedusa*, with the title “Refugees don’t need our tears. They need us to stop making them refugees”. Here Lustgarten openly blames the European Union’s *de facto* policy “to let migrants drown to stop others coming”¹⁸ after scrapping the important rescue operation, Mare Nostrum, launched by Italy in the aftermath of two terrible incidents in the open sea in October 2013. According to Lustgarten, “Like drones, and derivatives, migration policy allows the powerful to inflict horrors on the powerless without getting their hands dirty”.¹⁹ The mention of drones was intended to evoke the wars fought or funded by Europe in Africa and Middle East, while derivatives are the speculative contracts characteristic of contemporary global financial capitalism that have contributed significantly to creating a separation between the real economy and financial speculation. Both drones and derivatives draw attention to the *causes* of migration and to Western responsibility. “In all the rage about migration, one thing is never discussed: what we do to *cause* it”.²⁰

Obviously, mass migration is not a problem affecting only Lampedusa or the Southern Italy, nor a third millennium issue. Migration has been a highly sensitive issue for the British since 1989, a crucial year in European history and also the symbolic date after which immigration and economic stability became overriding discourses in the public sphere. The same remains true today, as the Brexit poll and its antagonism towards European policies on immigration showed in 2016.

In the 1990s Europe discussed and fought over the ‘borders’ of the European Union, reflecting upon the meaning of its identity while conflicts in its Eastern countries provoked a rapid increase in economic migration and people requesting refugee status in Western Europe (rising 481% between 1986 and 1991). This historical circumstance strongly affected the immigration policy of individual countries but also called into question the European Union’s overall ability to cope with such crises while still preserving its members’ prerogatives and defending the shared moral values underpinning its identity.

Whilst the 70s and the government of Margaret Thatcher had already contributed significantly to the politicization of theatre, during the 90s and early 2000s British playwrights “explored and interpreted the challenges faced by post-communist Europe”, setting events “in the countries of the former Eastern bloc and the Balkans”²¹ or staging the contradictions of that delicate phase of transition for the new democracies, as we can see in works such as David Edgar’s *Shape of the Table* (1990), David Greig with *Europe* (1994) and Caryl Churchill’s *Mad Forest* (1990), Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) and Nicholas Kent’s *Srebrenica* (1996), which

¹⁷ Mark O’Thomas, “Translating Austerity: Theatrical Responses to the Financial Crisis”, in Siân Adeshiah and Louise LePage, eds., *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 138.

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/17/refugees-eu-policy-migrants-how-many-deaths>, accessed 6 March 2018.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. According to Lustgarten, the largest share of the blame falls on the World Bank which “massively contributed to the flow of impoverished people across the globe. The single biggest thing we could do to stop migration is to abolish the development Mafia: the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development”.

²¹ Geoff Willcocks, “Europe in Flux: Exploring Revolution and Migration in British Play of the 1990s”, in Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst, eds., *A Concise Companion to British and Irish Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell 2008), 6. See also Dan Rebellato, “From the State of the Nation to Globalization: Shifting Political Agendas in Contemporary British Playwriting”, in Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst, eds., *A Concise Companion*, 245-262.

were pervaded by pessimism and a sort of scepticism over the concrete potential to change political reality.

The '90s were also the years in which globalization studies, driven by post-colonial discourse, exacerbated their critique of the nation, which was then considered as an idea to be reformulated, a community to be imagined or a concept to be profoundly re-defined.²² Generally, it was seen as an exclusionary political formation that was quite irrelevant from a global perspective. As Bill Ashcroft has recently stressed, "this was the case until the global financial crisis of 2008" when "with corporations dissolving and the share market plummeting, it was the nation-state and national governments that were called to the rescue".²³ Whilst the idea of the nation has been rehabilitated as an economic stabilizer, it nonetheless cannot fully account for the complex reality of our time. Therefore, Ashcroft proposed the idea of a 'transnation' "extending beyond the geographical, political, administrative and even imaginative boundaries of the state, both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation".²⁴ A transnation is a space "in which those boundaries are disrupted, in which national and cultural affiliations are superseded, in which binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other are dissolved".²⁵ Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* could be read as the theatrical representation of such a place, since its characters – Stefano and Denise – can be interpreted as subjects who "occupy a perpetual in-between space, an in-betweenness that is negotiable and shifting, demonstrating the actual agency of people as they navigate the structure of the state".²⁶ This idea of the transnation does not merely entail a new awareness of one's individual condition. It is a space from which the public denunciation of the national injustices (unemployment, racism, lack of welfare, among the many) can be articulated and represented.

Among the strengths of this work there is the fact that Lustgarten succeeds in widening the world-picture and the knowledge of his (mostly middle-class white) audience on global issues while compelling the same to become aware of what is happening next door. For example, he exploits the hate towards private loans company to shed the same negative light on World Bank and international finance. He compares the stereotypes on lazy white men stipulating loans they can't afford to the bias against 'economic migrants', who only wants to steal jobs and earn more money. These as many other devices are part of a sophisticated political strategy which does not suggest any solutions (he only talks about 'hope'), but explicitly appeals to actual responsibilities: speculations of the (global and local) finance, institutions denying what is happening as in the case of Denise's university, government relying on multinational corporation for welfare tests (evoked in the play by the Paris-based ATOS), media manipulating information as in the poorly known statistics about inequality in UK. In a recent self-presentation Lustgarten wrote: "I don't write for the usual reasons. I write because mainstream politics is dead: bought and paid for by an insatiable capitalism and motivated by a hateful, vicious brutality".²⁷ Obviously Lustgarten's theatre cannot replace politics,

²² It is hardly necessary to mention among the many classics such as Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016); and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

²³ Bill Ashcroft, "Transnation", in Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds., *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium* (London: Routledge, 2010), 73. On the relationship between the financial crisis and globalization, see also Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 2014); and Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents revisited. Antiglobalization in the Era of Trump* (London: Penguin, 2017).

²⁴ Ashcroft, *Transnation*, 73.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 78.

²⁷ Anders Lustgarten, *Plays: 1* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), ix. Before this statement, he presents his various nationalities: "I have a British passport, German surname, American parents and Scandinavian first name (though zero connection to Scandinavia).... I worked for a Kurdish human rights organization for a year.... then spent nearly a decade fighting the modern-day imperialism of development banks." (Ibid.)

but it passionately fosters ideas and reflections, compelling the spectator to measure and negotiate his involvement with the problems affecting the public and private sphere of the contemporary world, and that is what politics should do. But more than merely transfiguring social anxieties through the means of fiction, Lustgarten uses fiction to give an interpretation of the present world based on an 'ethical' engagement. And that is what, at the moment, theatre can do much better than politics.

‘Elsewhere’ is here.
The Politics of Space in
Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*

Abstract: This article focuses on *Seven Jewish Children* (2009), by British dramatist Caryl Churchill. The piece, written and staged in a few weeks as a reaction to Israeli military intervention in the Gaza strip, was published on *The Guardian* with free license to perform for whoever guaranteed a collection for Medical Aid For Palestinians. Consequently, it has been staged worldwide, by both professional and amateur companies, in traditional theatres and other performing spaces, in the original language as well as in translation. Its sparse dramaturgy sketches out a symbolic space, especially through its use of deictic elements such as adverbs of place; in turn, such elements enter in a mutual relationship with the different material location of each performance, where new audiences are invited to place themselves both physically and politically. By conjoining an analysis of the playtext with the performance devised in an art gallery by ROOMS Production in 2009, this contribution discusses *Seven Jewish Children* as a significant instance of the way contemporary theatre engages with the international politics of space and place.

Keywords: *adverbs of place, British theatre, Caryl Churchill, Palestinian Question*

I come from there and I have memories
(Mahmoud Darwish, *I Come from There*)

Children ‘elsewhere’

Caryl Churchill is one of the most experimental among living British playwrights, and her recent production still finds wide resonance both in Great Britain and abroad. Her work tackles issues such as war, ecological crises and the nefarious effects of global capitalism on individual lives, and her explicit political stance, conjoined with a consistent formal experimentation, has long been challenging theatre practitioners who have chosen to stage her work. Here, I present a discussion of *Seven Jewish Children*. *A Play for Gaza*, an ‘instant’ play written in 2009 as a reaction to Israeli military intervention in the Gaza strip. The play is significantly poor of geographical references, and articulates its performance space through a subtle web of place deictics, especially adverbs of place. The analysis focuses on how Churchill’s text works, as it were, by ‘subtraction’, using few defining linguistic elements in order to prompt audiences’ participation. I will then move to the analysis of a production of the play devised not for a ‘traditional’ theatrical space, but for an art gallery. Here, the audience can move around and inside the performing space, redefining both the time and place coordinates of the

dramatic action. This analysis highlights the variables but also the necessities in articulating space and place while staging this play, in order to show how *Seven Jewish Children* contributes to shaping the performing space as a political space of engagement and confrontation.

This sparing use of language is typical of what has been defined the third phase of Churchill's career as a playwright. As Lizbeth Goodman argues, Churchill's writing can be divided in three different periods. The first period mainly includes radio plays and television scripts until the 1972 staging of *Owners*, a somewhat prophetic play on the gentrification of Islington, the London district where she resided at the time. *Owners* was Churchill's first theatrical hit and opened the second phase of her career, when she worked with the main London theatre companies of the Seventies – Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment among them – and produced early successful plays such as *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Most of these works were heavily informed by second-wave feminist concerns and centred on women's political demands for freedom and equality.¹ The third period, which lasts till the present day, is characterized by her consecration as one of the most influential voices of British drama, including being awarded an OBIE for her career in 2001.²

Seven Jewish Children belongs to this last phase, characterized by a disruptive minimalism. As Gobert notes,

producing texts [lacking] stage directions, identified speakers, and even plot forces us to find its dramatic meaning elsewhere: in the interaction between the script (given different shape in each production by actors and directors) and spectators (made to perform, too, as they generate meaning).³

This effort at experimenting with the relationship between the written playtext and the material conditions of each performance has contributed to define Churchill as “one of the most significant political dramatists in Western theatre”.⁴ *Seven Jewish Children* expands on the work of plays such as *Hotel* (1997) and *Drunk enough to say I love you?* (2006) in explicitly conjoining dramatic experimentation and a concern for crucial political issues. It also follows suit by elaborating spatial coordinates both of the diegetic action and of the performance in idiosyncratic terms, creating a landscape where the audience must find their own collocation: these works can thus be defined, as Vicky Angelaki puts it, “textscapes ... elliptical, allowing space for spectatorial interpretation and critical initiative”.⁵

This aspect of Churchill's recent production resonates with the growing relevance of the theatrical space as a locus of political interpellation and negotiation. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued, since the 1950s Western theatrical practices have rejected the conventions of nineteenth-century theatre, in particular of established theatrical spaces, with the intent of bridging the gap between theatre practices and the everyday routines and concerns of the audience:

Guarracino – ‘Elsewhere is here’.

¹ *Cloud Nine* famously features cross-gender casting to reflect on the artificial constraints gender identity imposes on the individual, while *Top Girls* explores the themes of female genealogies and the relationship between women and power; for an analysis of both plays in relation to feminist movements see Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, 3rd ed. (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishing, 2010 [1997]), 31-45.

² See Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), 88-90, for an overview of Churchill's career until 1993; for an updated outline of her more recent production see Mary Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill*, Routledge Modern and Contemporary Dramatists Series (London: Routledge, 2014), and R. Darren Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

³ Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 166.

⁴ Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill*, 3.

⁵ Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 34.

The policies that underpinned theatre's appropriation of new spaces attempted to shift the threshold between the theatre and other domains of everyday life, create shared communities between actors and spectators, and institute a participatory form of democratic activity.⁶

No theatrical space, of course, is neutral or can be perceived as such during a performance; on the contrary it is articulated, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has argued, a "self-contained field of internal relations"⁷ where the audience's worldview is as part of the performance as the delivered playtext or the performers' bodies and gestures.⁸ One of the avowed aims of *Seven Jewish Children* is to question this worldview by taking a firm stance against warfare, but also giving a nuanced portrayal of the subjectivities engaging in armed conflict, hence asking the audience – whatever their previous thoughts on the situation in the Middle East – to question their vision and reconsider their position.⁹

The play was written and staged in a few weeks as a reaction to Operation Cast Lead,¹⁰ which took place between December 2008 and January 2009 in the Gaza strip. Timed just before presidential elections in Israel, the operation was claimed to be a way to stop Hamas from firing Qassam rockets towards the Occupied Territories, and was conducted first through air raids and then with land troops. It eventually claimed an estimate 1,000 dead and 5,000 wounded among the Palestinian population – mostly unarmed civilians, also due to the use (first denied, then confirmed) of white phosphorous by the Israeli army. Humanitarian associations (among which Amnesty International) and the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously censured the disproportionate use of military force and the numbers of civilians among the victims.¹¹

While the straightforward feminist approach of the Seventies has apparently waned in the face of the fragmented landscape of contemporary gender politics, Churchill's later works such as *Seven Jewish Children* make use of gender as an entry point to tackle issues such as large-scale warfare and genocide and the impact of technological development on human lives and on the environment. It is indeed girls who become central characters in plays that criticize the repressive reality created by armed conflicts: as in the previous *Far Away* (2000), which follows a woman's coming of age in a dystopian world of all-out war,¹² the 'seven Jewish children' are all girls and this, as Mary Luckhurst comments, "suggests that Churchill believes that girls suffer greater oppression than boys".¹³

However, the fact that the children featured in the play are girls can only be inferred from other characters' lines. The first and only stage direction of the playscript makes clear that the audience never sets eyes on them:

No children appear in the play. The speakers are adults, the parents and if you like other relations of the children. The lines can be shared out in any way you

⁶ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Policies of Spatial Appropriation" (trans. Michal Breslin and Saskya Iris Jain), in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz, eds., *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 219.

⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space (1998)", in Biodun Jeyifo, ed., *Modern African Drama* (New York-London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2002), 435-6.

⁸ See Tiziana Morosetti and Serena Guarracino, "Introduction: Postcolonial Embodiments in Contemporary Performance", *Textus* 30.3 (2017), 7-26, esp. Morosetti's discussion of the political use of theatrical space, *ibid.*, 15.

⁹ It would be interesting, although beyond the scope of this writing, to investigate *Seven Jewish Children* as a sort of contemporary agit-prop play: although its pro-Palestinian position may be clear enough to earn the definition, the play is devised in order to eschew easy affiliation with a political line or program, and different contexts have appropriated its fundamental anti-war vision in different ways.

¹⁰ The name of the operation (*Mintza Oferet Yetzuka* in Jewish) refers to Hanukkah celebrations, and in particular to the *sevivon* (or *dreidel* in Yiddish), the toy spinning top with which children traditionally play during the festivities. As Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri notes, "the name *cast lead* thus reminds us not only of the Lord's intervention on behalf of the Jews, but also of the innocence of a toy": an innocence which casts a dark shadow on the operation, which has claimed the lives of about three hundred Palestinian children. See Dalia Gavriel-Nuri, *The Normalization of War in Israeli Discourse, 1967-2008* (Lanham-Boulder-New York-Toronto-Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013), 43.

¹¹ See Human Rights Watch, *White Flag Deaths: Killing of Palestinian Civilians during Operation Cast Lead* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009); and Amnesty International, *Israel/Gaza. Operation 'Cast Lead': 22 Days of Death and Destruction* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2009).

¹² The war described in *Far Away* sees not only human armies, but animals and natural elements taking sides in a global war where elephants and Koreans, birds and Japanese people, grass and light are all involved in military actions; see Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2003); for a discussion of Churchill's dystopian plays see Paola Bono, "Caryl Churchill: uno sguardo profetico", in Roberta Falcone e Serena Guarracino, eds., *Terra e parole: Donne / Scrittura / Paesaggi* (Bologna: ebook@women, 2016), n.p.

¹³ Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill*, 22.

like among those characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time and child are different.¹⁴

¹⁴ Caryl Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), 2. Hereafter in the text, with Roman numerals marking the scene and Arabic numerals for the page of the quotation in this edition.

The seven children, one for each part in which the text is divided, are always elsewhere while, on stage, their family discusses on what they should be or not be told about the present situation. No *dramatis persona* is mentioned, and it is in the hands of the director and actor/s to decide how many characters to introduce and who delivers which line. As for the children, it is the formula through which characters address each other or the audience that makes the children's gender assignment explicit: "Tell *her* it's a game / Tell *her* it's serious" (I, 2; my italics).

Consequently, the gendering of the children from the title as girls plays a pivotal role in shaping the play's grammar of space and place, and this use of theatrical space makes gender identity in the text perform a highly symbolic, more than a pragmatic function. The ideological use of the 'child' as justification for violent and oppressive policies in a situation of conflict – *everything* is allowed to keep the child safe – is undone by the introduction of sexual difference in the picture; the girl child represents a subaltern subject position, subjected to oppression by the same system that pretends to protect her, and this, more than a biological gender identity, is what this gendering process points at.¹⁵

Apart from the shared condition of the absence of the child, the seven parts of the play are differentiated in terms of time and place. The play traces the history of the state of Israel, from the Holocaust until the present day: the first scene describes the persecution of Jews by the Nazis; the second follows the reconstruction of collective memory through family narrations in the aftermath of the war; the third sees the family leaving for Israel; while the last four follow the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from the early scrambles for land and water to the increasing military interventions, bulldozing of Palestinian settlements and refugee camps, and the condemnation of Israeli policy by international humanitarian organization.¹⁶ However, with the exception of the title and of another instance (discussed below), no geographical or historical reference is given within the dialogue of the play. The founding characteristic of the diegetic as well as of the performing space of *Seven Jewish Children* is not any clear and specific location, but its consistently being 'another' place from the one where each child is.

The script gives only the sparsest information about the performance space, and in what measure it should reference the historical context of each scene. The chronological collocation of the first three scenes is quite easily identifiable; the first, for example, has the adults discussing while the girl is in hiding from the men who are looking for her: "Don't tell her they'll kill her / Tell her it's important to be quiet" (I, 2). In a few lines, the scene conjures up the well-known imaginary of Nazi persecutions, and even sustains (but does not spell out) the identification of the girl with the icon of Jewish victims of the *shoah*, Anna Frank.

¹⁵ By reducing the girls to the ultimate unrepresentability within the performing space, Churchill here seems to echo Gayatri C. Spivak's concept of the subaltern subject not only as always, at least in discursive terms, feminine, but also as intrinsically unable to "know and speak itself": see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 272.

¹⁶ It is far beyond the scope of this article to offer an overview of the Israeli-Palestinian question; it is also a very hard endeavour to find nonpartisan reports on the matter especially after the current failure of the peace process. This is also due to the post-9/11 polarization of the conflict between different incarnations of the "Islamic state" on the one hand, and Europe and the US on the other, a context in which the situation in Palestine is alternately used by different factions to support ongoing warfare. For a recent and unbiased outline of the conflict since the founding of the State of Israel see Neil Caplan, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Contested Histories* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

The second scene includes references to a picture of the family, where the character/s points out the people who survived and those who have been killed: “Tell her *this* is a photograph of her grandmother, her uncles and me” (II, 2; my italics). The use of a deictic element (the demonstrative pronoun) makes the presence on stage of a picture of some sort necessary, thus shaping the space and its contents without the need for a stage direction. These forms of deixis are a founding element of the dramatic text, as Susan Bassnett already argued in a 1985 essay, which confronted the issues of theatre translation:

It now seems to me that if indeed there is a gestural language in a text, then there is a way of deciphering it and therefore of translating it, and so far one of the most hopeful lines of enquiry seems to be that of the *deictic units*. Since these units determine the interaction between the characters on stage, they also determine characterization and, ultimately, feed into the other codes of performance.¹⁷

Bassnett here follows Alessandro Serpieri’s insights on the role of deixis in dramatic literature;¹⁸ and although she later reconfigured her theory by downplaying the possibility to univocally identify and analyse a “gestic text” with the same clarity as the verbal language of a playscript,¹⁹ deixis remains one of the specificities of a text written for the stage. The mention of “*this* picture”, in the line quoted above, implies the existence of a material object, a prop with which the actor/s are supposed to interact; in much the same way, the repetition of the pronoun ‘her’ throughout the text creates its referent, i.e. the girl around whom every scene is constructed.²⁰

The choice of removing the girls off-stage defines the space of the play by repeatedly referring to a character (the girl) who also defines a place, the ‘elsewhere’ where she is located. The first scene is again exemplary in this respect, as it is the only one that gives any idea as for the whereabouts of the girl: she is not on stage because she is somewhere (possibly nearby) hiding – from her persecutors but also, in the actuality of performance, from the audience. The space where the events of the play unfold is constructed around the fact that on the material level the girl never comes out from her hiding place: her absence constitutes the space of performance (whatever that may be) in opposition to the place from where her presence may be not just evoked, but concrete, bodily, made flesh.

The absence of the girl from the space of performance allows for a symbolic Child to take shape in the words of the adult speaker/s, a Child who slowly becomes a means of control over people’s thoughts and actions. The subject introduced by the deictic pronoun ‘her’ works as a rhetorical representation of the ‘reproductive futurism’ recently emerged in queer theory, in particular through the work of Lee Edelman. Edelman argues that the symbolic Child’s right to safety becomes the moral justification for repeated acts of violence over real children: this justification cannot be refuted, because “[h]ow could one take the *other* ‘side’, when

¹⁷ Susan Bassnett, “Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts”, in Theo Hermans, ed., *The Manipulation of Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 98 (my italics).

¹⁸ See for example Alessandro Serpieri, “Ipotesi teorica di segmentazione del testo teatrale”, *Strumenti critici* 32-33 (1977), 90-137.

¹⁹ See esp. Susan Bassnett, “Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability”, *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* 4.1 (1991), 99-111.

²⁰ The opening “Tell her”, and its negative counterpart “Don’t tell her”, as emerges here and in the following quotations, work as a refrain for the whole play, in a relentless succession of broken lines with little or no punctuation which may suggest a delivery more akin to poetry than to naturalistic speech. However, the playtext includes no indication as to the tone of the dialogues (or monologues), and as a result productions broadly differ in this respect.

²¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

taking any side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side of ... a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends?”.²¹ This fantasy of the Child is not only repressive for those who are on the wrong side of the conflict, but also for the resident population: any sacrifice must be made in the name of the future child, so that “our present will always be mortgaged to a *fantasmatic* future in the name of the political ‘capital’ that those children will thus have become”.²²

²² Ibid., 112.

Being against a child’s well-being is an ethical impossibility; and yet, in a world where not all children are equal, being for the child means to authorize and support discrimination and violence against children. This emerges more and more clearly as the play progresses. In the sixth scene adults still hesitate to share with the girl the more violent aspects of the clashes in the occupied territories, especially those involving children: “Don’t tell her the boy was shot” (VI, 5). Yet in the long monologue towards the end of the play – the only line that consists of more than one sentence and is provided with punctuation – the speaker endorses violence over children as the necessary counterpart of the Child’s well-being:

Tell her about the family of dead girls, tell her their names why not, tell her the whole world knows why shouldn’t she know? Tell her there’s dead babies, did she see babies? tell her she’s got nothing to be ashamed of.... tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? tell her all I feel is happy it’s not her. (vii, 7)

To solve the contradiction that allows violence over children in the name of the Child, a widespread pedagogy is necessary: what should one tell (or not tell) to children about a conflict that happens in their name and kills young humans just like them? It is necessary to teach one’s own children that those ‘others’ are not like them, that they belong to a different space; yet the inherent ethical pitfalls of this rhetoric surface in the play’s use of spatial deixis, especially adverbs of place. These elements create a performance space that undermines the binary logic of us/them as well as of here/there, elements whose connotation changes as the family moves from one place to another. The safe space the character/s are struggling to create thus becomes unattainable, as remote as the one where the seven Jewish children are forever hidden.

Shaping the performance space through adverbs of place

Seven Jewish Children is wilfully sparse of geographic references, thus giving its concerns a universal scope; nonetheless, the only two toponyms mentioned in the play clearly locate the events in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the third scene the family is packing to leave the place where they are at the moment – which could be in Europe or the United States, or any other place where Jewish refugees found shelter in the aftermath of the Second World War. Among the

many things one can tell the child to make her leaving this place more bearable, the one closing the scene is: “Tell her about Jerusalem” (III, 4). No mention is made of Palestine, only of a promised land or better “*our* promised land” (IV, 5), as one character states in a later scene, as clashes with the Arab population make clear that the relocation has not been as easy as expected: “Don’t tell her they said it was a land without people / Don’t tell her I wouldn’t have come if I’d known” (IV, 5).

The piece itself, on the other hand, is subtitled “a play for Gaza”. This is the only place, together with the paratext explaining the conditions for performance, directly referring to the events that brought Churchill to write the play. *Seven Jewish Children* was written and staged as an immediate reaction to the news from the war zone, itself an ‘elsewhere’ from the comparatively safe London where the play was first staged, at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, on February 6, 2009. Concurrently, the play was published in *The Guardian*, with free license to perform and a request for a collection for Medical Aid For Palestinians, which was also beneficiary of the sales of the script printed by Nick Hern Books.²³ This accessory information contributes to geographically locate the events; the spatial coordinates of the script itself remain more elusive, articulated – with the exception of the aforementioned reference to Jerusalem – only through a relational dichotomy of adverbs that define the ‘here’ of the performance space against a ‘there’, the ‘home’ against an undefined ‘away’.

²³ Caryl Churchill, “Seven Jewish Children”, *The Guardian*, February 26, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/26/caryl-churchill-seven-jewish-children-play-gaza>, accessed 19 September 2017; and Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*, 8.

Given the relatively brevity of the play, consisting in only 1,302 words, and the lack of stage directions, even the rather small amount of adverbs of place featured here is particularly relevant. Adverbs of place represent a specific form of deixis in theatrical texts, as they contribute to shape both the imaginary space of the events and the extradiegetic space of performance: what is ‘here’ or ‘there’ indicates what is on and off-stage but also, diegetically, a location which is defined through a relationship of continuity or discontinuity to the space the characters occupy. In *Seven Jewish Children* these coordinates help to define the character/s through the place they are in, and their investment in its safety for the child – a child who is both ‘elsewhere’, because off-stage, and ‘here’, sharing the space the character or community of characters (and of characters and audience) constitute.

Table 1: here

1	Tell her we’ll be <i>here</i> all the time (I, 2)
2	Don’t tell her she doesn’t belong <i>here</i> (III, 3)
3	Tell her of course she likes it <i>here</i> (III, 4)

The adverb of place ‘here’ recurs three times in the play (Table 1), and in all cases it aims at constituting a shared space between the family and the child. In instance 1, the adverb encompasses both the place of the speaker/s and the ‘elsewhere’ occupied by the child; on the contrary in instances 2 and 3, both from

the scene when the family is leaving, ‘here’ is a hostile place, to which child and adult/s do not belong (although the girl cannot be told that), and that must be left for another place, a ‘there’ which she will like “even more” (III, 4), where “it’s sunny” (3), but especially where her ancestors lived (4).

Table 2: there (adverb)

1	Tell her it’s sunny <i>there</i> (III, 4)
2	Tell her her great great great great lots of greats grandad lived <i>there</i> (III, 4)
3	[Tell her of course she likes it <i>here</i>] but she’ll like it <i>there</i> even more (III, 4)
4	Tell her we’ll be <i>there</i> in no time (VI, 5)

It is significant that of the four recurrences of ‘there’ as an adverb of place (Table 2), three occur in the third scene, once in explicit opposition with ‘here’ (instance 3 in Table 1 and instance 2 in Table 2). In opposition with a ‘here’ of discrimination and painful memories, ‘there’ represents the beginning of a new existence, a place where “no one will tease her” (III, 4). The place-name “Jerusalem” (III, 4), the only one mentioned in the playscript, closes this very scene, sustaining the identification of the deictic ‘there’ with the actual city and, at the same time, with the symbolic New Jerusalem, the “holy of holies” and the “place of the presence of God” from John’s Book of Revelation.²⁴ In this overlapping of geographical location and symbolic place, the connotation of ‘there’ expand to include a larger project of safety and happiness, to which the girl is blessed to be part of: “Tell her she’s a special girl” (III, 4).

This connotation changes as the action relocates to actual ‘there’. In the last four scenes, ‘there’ as adverb of place recurs only once, and marks the negotiation of movements that is part and parcel of everyday life in Israeli settlements. Scene six opens with mention of a swimming pool and the checkpoints that the adult/s and the child will encounter in their journey there; but of course, as Jewish Israeli citizens, queues do not apply to them, and hence they will be “there in no time” (VI, 5). The swimming pool opens and closes the scene as a symbol for the life that the family is trying to build in the new place, and that is suffering impediments due to the scarcity of resources and the presence of Arab communities: “Don’t tell her the trouble about the swimming pool / Tell her it’s our water, we have the right / Tell her it’s not the water for their fields” (VI, 5). The final line of the scene, “Tell her we’re going swimming” (VI, 6), helps to define the swimming pool as the ‘there’ of peaceful and comfortable life which the conflict is making unreachable.

Together with ‘here’/‘there’, the ‘home’/‘away’ dichotomy also contributes to the shaping of the play’s spatial politics. ‘Home’, understandably, is featured both as adverbial and as noun, and as adverb collocates with ‘going’ and with ‘come’ respectively (see Table 3). ‘Home’ is thus spatially superimposed with ‘there’, reinforcing the idea that the family, wherever it is at the moment, is not and does

²⁴ For the complex superimposition of the actual city with the symbolic place of peace whose advent is described in the Revelation see the comprehensive (although controversial) study by Bruce J. Malina, *The New Jerusalem in the Revelation of John: The City as Symbol of Life with God* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

not feel in any way ‘at home’. However, this is true for the adult/s speaking but not for the child, who is apparently wary of leaving her friends behind and must be reassured that “she can write to her friends, ... her friends can maybe come and visit” (III, 3). The distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘home’ and ‘away’ does not belong to the child, but to the adults who superimpose their sentimental geographies onto hers.

Table 3: home

adverb	
1	Tell her we’re going <i>home</i> (III, 3)
2	Tell her ... the country is waiting for us to come <i>home</i> (III, 4)
noun	
3	Tell her this wasn’t their <i>home</i> (IV, 4)
4	Don’t tell her <i>home</i> , not <i>home</i> (IV, 4)

‘Home’ registers the shift of the play’s imaginary landscape once the much coveted ‘there’ is finally reached. The adverb, signalling movement, becomes a noun, not a space but a thing on which a right of property can be claimed. Thus ‘home’ is preceded by a possessive and a negative, remarking that it belongs to the speaker/s and not to ‘them’ (Table 3, instance 3); indeed, as the family settles in a house formerly inhabited by someone else, the girl must not be told that “Arabs used to sleep in her bedroom” (IV, 4). The attempt to erase the Arab presence in the Occupied Territories, however, also results in the impossibility to appropriate the word and idea of home: as a consequence, ‘home’ as noun always depends on verbs in the negative, with even more emphasis due to the repetition of the negative particle in instance 4. The adult/s do not want to associate the concept of ‘home’ to the Arab population, as this would jeopardize their own claim over land and infrastructures; yet they cannot claim it for themselves either.

Table 4: away

1	Tell her they’ll go <i>away</i> (I, 2)
2	Tell her she can make them go <i>away</i> if she keeps still (I, 2)
3	tell her they’re going <i>away</i> (IV, 4)

‘Away’, differently from ‘here’, ‘there’, and ‘home’, does not define a specific place, and as such is not strictly a contrary form to ‘home’; yet it does define a movement away from something, while ‘home’ (when used as an adverb of place) defines a movement towards a destination heavy with emotional and symbolic import; and it is in this respect that the two words are considered here. ‘Away’ defines a separate place from the one both the audience and the character/s inhabit, including the child: as in the case of ‘here’, but in an oppositional way, it

circumscribes the space the absent child and the present adults share, and in this sense its work is pivotal to the grammar of space and place elaborated in the play.

The adverb recurs three times in the text (Table 4), and in all three cases it indicates the desired removal of some danger from the space the adults and child live in. In the first two instances, the danger is represented by the persecutors the child is hiding from; in the third instance, though, ‘they’ are the Arabs who once inhabited the ‘home’ and are now wished out of the territories now occupied by Israeli settlers. This echo channels an overlapping of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the persecution of Jews by the Nazis, a superimposition enhanced by the fact that, with the exception of the speaking adult/s, no other character is to appear on stage; and although many stagings, as will emerge from the following section of this article, have made full use of the creative freedom awarded by such a scarcity of authorial directions, none to my knowledge has peopled the stage with non-speaking characters, the ‘they’ that this use of the adverb ‘away’ clearly intends to push into a different space.

The use of adverbs of place in *Seven Jewish Children*, hence, constitutes an imaginary geography where the connotations of ‘there’ and ‘home’ shift from a safe haven to a problematized space expropriated by violence and inhabited by foreign bodies that have to be pushed ‘away’. This loose but at the same time clear use of deixis to define the space where the events unfold opens up to different performing practices as the play has been staged in different locations across the world. The relative few means necessary to stage the play in full has allowed practitioners from different languages, contexts, and locations to engage with Churchill’s text and give its geography of conflict a tangible, material location: as Gobert rightly puts it, “without characters, plot, speech prefixes, or stage directions, the play is an inkblot. It guarantees only that disparate meanings will emerge in the imagination of those who apprehend it”.²⁵

²⁵ Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 167.

***Seven Jewish Children* on the global stage**

It is impossible to offer a full report of all the productions of *Seven Jewish Children*; the strong political import of the play and the relative paucity of means necessary to stage it has made it especially popular among fringe and non-professional companies, whose efforts are often ephemeral and hard to trace. At the same time the minimal length of the play – which at its sparsest can last as little as under ten minutes – has made digital testimonies easy to produce and disseminate: a research with keywords “seven jewish children”+churchill entered on Google’s Video section offers as result of around 1,340 hits, which include advertising clips, news reports and cast interviews, together with full performances of different length, sometimes split in multiple videos. Moreover, these search keys only partially account for the performances of the play in translation: just to mention a few, two different translations of the text are available in Italian, both with a solid performance

history;²⁶ four translations are available in Spanish;²⁷ and although the play has been accused of anti-Semitism, it has also been translated into Hebrew, and staged in the streets of Jaffa in 2009 under the direction of Samih Jabarin, who was subsequently arrested for his anti-war activism.²⁸

As emerges from an even cursory exploration of online resources, performance spaces have varied widely, from 'legitimate' theatre premises – starting from the Royal Court where it was first performed – to occupied spaces where theatrical practices are part of an activist network directly involved in local politics: in Italy, for example, the piece was staged in Rome, both in the theatre Teatro Lo Spazio (September 17, 2009) and on the premises of Teatro Valle (on March 12, 2012), which at the time was occupied by a collective of artists and practitioners after a long period of neglect, and was home of many initiatives of civil theatre until its clearing out in 2014. And indeed, the play often resonates within spaces where the political role of theatre in the local community is already deeply rooted, and where pro-Palestinian activism is part of a wider agenda of civil action. An exhaustive overview of the material spaces that have hosted *Seven Jewish Children*, and of the ways in which the political geography of the play interacts with them, is far beyond the scope of this article; to offer a concrete example of how a mise-en-scène can both enact and manipulate the spatial politics of the text, the following pages are dedicated to the analysis of one staging whose specific characteristics offer some interesting perspectives on the way the play can be used to shape the audience's perception of 'here' and 'there', of 'home' and 'away', and their own location into it.

Most performances, while differing in the number and gender of characters and the assignation of lines, as well as in the use of scenery and props, tend to operate in a traditional theatrical space that separates the performers from the audience, and also respecting the play's chronological linearity from the first to the last scene. A different take is offered by the mise-en-scène devised by the ROOMS Production, which took place in Chicago in March 2009.²⁹ Using the space of an art gallery, instead of a traditional theatre, the production brings down the barrier between performers and audience by having the latter wander around or sit at the rectangular table at the centre of a single room; the performers are sitting at the same table, performing the scenes from the play simultaneously, with the exception of scene seven which is projected on one of the walls (Fig. 1). The play hence becomes a looping performance installation, where the audience can experience different moments of the play in any sequence they prefer. The chronological sequence is undermined, as everything (the persecution, the war, the journey to the promise land) is happening at the same time – it is happening now.

²⁶ The play was first translated into Italian by Masolino D'Amico in 2009, and the by Paola Bono in 2012. The translation by D'Amico is unpublished and deposited by Agenzia Danesi Tolnay; the one by Bono is included in Caryl Churchill, *Teatro I. Hotel, Cuore blu, Lontano lontano, Abbastanza sbronzo da dire ti amo?, Sette bambine ebreie*, ed. Paola Bono (Spoleto: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2013), 175-183.

²⁷ The Spanish translations have been the object of an extensive comparative study, including a broad press report of performances; see Paula Tizzano Fernández, "On *Seven Jewish Children* – Explication and Implication in Terms of Ideology", *Letras vivas*, http://travisbedard.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Tizzano_-_On_Seven_Jewish_Children_-_Explication_and_Implication_in_terms_of_ideology.pdf, accessed 7 September 2017.

²⁸ See *Seven Jewish Children: Street Play by Caryl Churchill (Hebrew)*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqvvytWeN-Qo&t=177s>, 3 maggio 2017; for the debate on the play's supposed anti-Semitism, see Charlotte Higgins, "Churchill's Gaza Play Accused of Antisemitism", *The Guardian*, 18 February 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/feb/18/caryl-churchill-gaza-play>, accessed 7 September 2017. Most criticism refutes this accusation, including Gobert (see *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 167).

²⁹ The production is available on Youtube in two parts; see *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part One - Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OBA30Ax51s>, accessed 26 September 2017; and *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part Two - Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV3iAskzQkg>, accessed 26 September 2017. The actual conditions of performance are shown at the beginning of the first video and at the end of the second, while the rest features a shooting of each individual scene.



Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part Two – Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*. Transition between scene 5 and 6.³⁰

³⁰ Fig. 1 and the following figs. 2 and 3 were produced by the author from the video of the performance available on YouTube (see note 29). We have tried to contact copyright owners where possible.

The chronological progression is preserved in the stage props, which highlight the role of communication and recording in creating a shared history and collective identity. All scenes feature characters interacting with some kind of recording

apparatus, with two exceptions (Fig. 2): the first, an elderly man, and the fifth, a young soldier, both talking into an old-fashioned phone. These are the two scenes set in conflict areas, one representing persecution and danger, the other victory and triumph over the enemy: “Tell her we won / Tell her her brother’s a hero ... Tell her we’ve got new land” (V, 5). The two scenes mirror each other, and may either be the two sides of the same conflict or one the consequence of the other, the former persecution justifying any means to obtain land and safety for the following generations.

On the other hand, the characters featured in the five remaining scenes negotiate what is to be recorded on a device that is different for each situation. The man and the woman reminiscing on the family picture annotate their stories on a memo pad; a woman thinking about how to



Fig. 2: Screenshots from *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part One – Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, scenes 1 and 6.

convince the girl to move ‘there’ is writing on a typewriter; another couple negotiating what to tell the girl about the early difficulties of life ‘there’ are recording their voices with a tape recorder; two women discuss swimming pools and checkpoints while writing on a computer, erasing and rewriting constantly. Neither spectators nor characters are the beneficiary of the telephone conversations, letters, notes and recordings produced in each scene, but someone else located ‘elsewhere’: what happens in the room is one node of a wider network of conversations, along whose lines an international community holds itself together in the face of adversity.

Guided through the room only by furniture and by numbers assigned to each character or group of characters, the audience finds itself as the intruder in the intimacy of the house, the foreigner eavesdropping on private conversations – a feeling heightened by the fact that, in the actual loop performance, the scenes were performed at the same time, forcing audience members to close in to individual scenes to follow the dialogue. Moreover, as much as spectators move around, the child and her ‘elsewhere’ is not available to them as it is not available to the characters. The separation between girl and audience, as well as between girl and characters, is inscribed in the text, but the fact that spectators share the same space as the characters (instead of the equally remote space of the parterre) and the use of distant communication devices completely removes her from ‘here’: she cannot be hiding under the table in the first scene or packing her toys in the next room in the third; she is somewhere indistinctly far. Moreover, the use of notepads and recordings may even imply that this communication is not intended for a present girl but for a future one, an imagined child for whose well-being, using Edelman’s words, the characters’ present and safety is mortgaged.

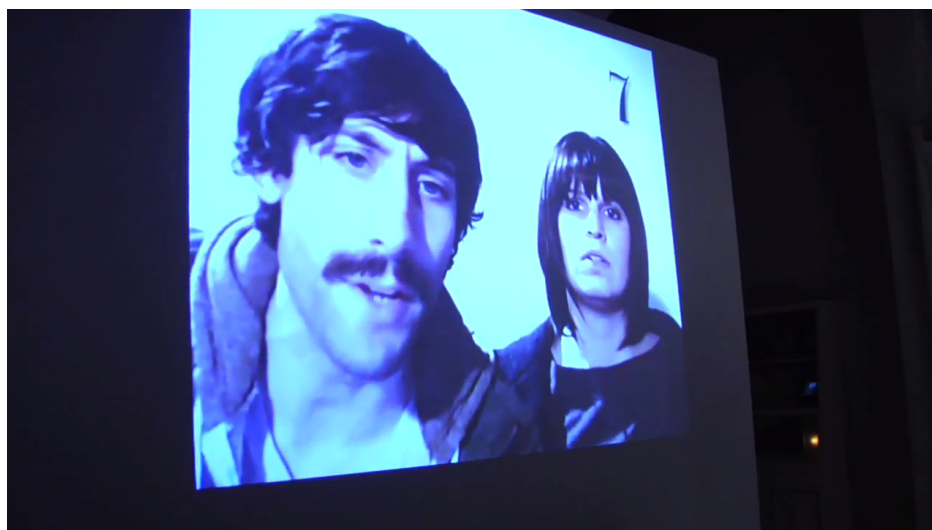


Fig. 3: Screenshot from *Seven Jewish Children A Play For Gaza Part Two - Official ROOMS Productions Documentation*, scene 7.

³¹ The call is actually a video played in loop.

This spatial economy is brutally overturned in the last scene, where a couple, projected on the screen, is on video call with the room (Fig. 3).³¹ The addressee of the imperatives “Tell her/Don’t tell her” suddenly becomes not an unknown subject located elsewhere, but the audience standing in front of the screen, who is directly interpellated by the characters to take responsibility for the girl. In this scene, the girl all but literally enters the room: the location of the conflict, previously on the other side of a phone line or of a computer screen, is now here, and the separation between place of utterance and place of reception, is both implemented by the removal of the actors’ bodies from the room, and questioned by the fact that now it is the audience who shares the girl’s space, who needs to take a decision about what to or not to tell her.

This interpellation is embedded as one possibility of the playscript: depending on whether it is staged as a dialogue or a monologue, the imperative opening each line can be addressed to another character or directly to the audience; and this can also shift from scene to scene.³²

Subsequently, the ‘here’ in instances 1 and 2 of Table 1 can include the audience or exclude it behind a theatrical fourth wall, while the ‘there’ in instance 4 of Table 2 can situate the audience in opposition to the characters, locating them on different sides of the checkpoints. Yet in the ROOMS production this situation is complicated by the fluidity of the performing space itself, and by the fact that the audience can literally move at leisure, sit at the table or look over the shoulders of the characters writing on the typewriter or computer. Moreover, spectators do not need to experience the text chronologically; hence, for example, the shift of ‘home’ from destination (adverb of place) to thing to be acquired (noun) may work very differently: in particular, instances 3 and 4 see the audience inhabiting the same place formerly occupied by the Arab family, as the deictic demonstrative pronoun underlines: “Tell her *this* wasn’t their home” (4; my italics).

From this very limited overview, it can be argued that *Seven Jewish Children* has succeeded in creating an international space in which a conversation on the consequences of war is taking place. Every performance reverberates in this space while creating one of its own, where place/s and character/s can even radically differ from any other. In each performance, the audience is required to take a stand, which is both physical – being there for the performance – and political.³³ Yet, complex mechanisms of interpellation and empathy prevent this stand from being part of a dichotomy opposing pro-Palestinian activism and Israeli supporters: on the contrary, starting from an uncompromising condemnation of violence and warfare, the play allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the political situation in Palestine. Palestine is not ‘elsewhere’, but part of a global landscape of conflict: as a consequence, the play points to collective responsibility and shared concerns as the only available starting points for the peace process.

³² Although it is beyond the scope of this contribution, it must be noted that the choice between monologue and dialogue has considerably affected translation choices when the play has been staged in foreign languages that differentiate between the imperative second singular and plural person. The two Italian translations, for example, have made different choices in this respect: D’Amico’s translation was staged as a series of monologues and subsequently features “Ditele / Non ditele”; while Bono’s was staged as a multiple character interaction, and hence reads “Dille / Non dirle”. For the translation by D’Amico see *Sette bambine ebreë*, directed by Francesco Randazzo, Teatro Lo Spazio (Roma), 17 September 2009, <https://vimeo.com/6879866>, accessed on 5 September 2017; the translation by Bono, on the other hand, is available as *Sette bambine ebreë – un dramma per Gaza*, directed by Marta Gilmore, Angelo Mai (Roma), 24 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK1VKPN69h4>, accessed 5 September 2017.

³³ As Marco Pustianaz has recently argued, the collective recognition of an event as theatre by an audience founds theatrical practice as such; this mutual recognition marks the creation of the performance space but also the ‘dawn’ of the spectator, who is born and dies as the performance begins and, eventually, ends; see Marco Pustianaz, “Crepuscoli dello spettatore. Attività, inattività e lavoro dello spettatore nell’economia performativa”, in C. M. Laudando, ed., *Reti performative: Letteratura, arte, teatro, nuovi media* (Trento: Tangram, 2015), 98–100.

Agency, Staging and Representation Strategies in Sulayman Al Bassam's *The Speaker's Progress*

Abstract: Sulayman Al Bassam wrote in 2011 *The Speaker's Progress*, an appropriation of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, as the third play of his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy. The urgency of making *Twelfth Night* into a story of secularism and religious tolerance – rewriting thus the agenda of the play with a different authorial voice – was dictated by Al Bassam's perception of the issues and concerns of the post 9/11 Arab World. Through an analysis of the text, and with references to the performance staged in Boston's Paramount Theatre, the article shows how this peculiar appropriation is the mixed result of interpretive histories of texts and of the interpreter's culture. As a matter of fact, the contemporary appropriation of *Twelfth Night* is represented on stage as the reconstruction of a 1963 performance of a liberal adaptation from a supposed Arab Golden Age. The screening of fragments of that past production provides a cue for the performers on stage to create a dialogue, in a metatheatrical doubling of the narration, between two completely different worlds, the past on film and the present of the contemporary Arab scene as it is interpreted by Al Bassam.

Keywords: *Al Bassam, agency, appropriation, Arab Shakespeare, performance strategies, trans-cultural dialogue*

On the evening of 19 March 2005 a small but composite audience of Western expatriates, of Palestinians, Lebanese, Eritreans, Somalis, and local Qataris gathered at the Doha Players' Theatre, in Doha, Qatar. The Doha Players company is a group largely formed by British amateur players which benefits from the support of the local community. That night they were putting on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, mounted in a colourful and lively Caribbean setting. The second part of the play had just started after the intermission, when a black Land Cruiser crashed through the front wall of the theatre and its driver accomplished his suicide terrorist attack triggering the explosive placed in the car and scattered dust and debris all over the building.¹ The bombing occurred on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, which US military directed from Qatar, probably as a way to revenge the pro-western attitude of Qatar government. The Doha Players Theatre may have just represented an easy target of Westerners and collaborationists to the berserk terrorist; however, they had gathered to attend a show in English, therefore in the language of the infidels, and for this reason, they also represented a symbolical objective. In the eye of the person(s) who planned the suicide bombing, they were inevitably connected to the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – led by Anglo-American forces – and with a global cultural supremacy whose influence in their distorted vision is inimical to Islam. As a matter of fact, whether it was planned or not, in the end terrorists also appropriated Shakespeare in what

¹ "Car Bomb Targets Theatre in Qatar", http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4365039.stm (accessed 1 November 2017); Oliver Poole, "Al-Qaeda linked to bombing in Qatar", *The Telegraph*, 21/3/2005; Brian Whitaker and David Pallister, "British theatre director is Qatar suicide bomb victim", *The Guardian*, 21/3/2005.

² Katherine Hennessey and Margaret Litvin, "Introduction", *Critical Survey*, 28 (2016), 3.

³ See Whitaker and Pallister, "British theatre director is Qatar suicide bomb victim".

⁴ See for instance Denis Salter, "Acting Shakespeare in Postcolonial Space", in J. C. Bulman, ed., *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁵ Forms of colonial and post-colonial response to Shakespeare have been studied and analysed in various works. See for instance, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds., *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2002); Sonia Massai, "Defining local Shakespeares", in Sonia Massai, ed., *World-Wide Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2011).

⁶ Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism", *Critical Survey*, 19.3 (2007), 114.

⁷ Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, 222. The name Al Bassam is often written with a hyphen. I decided to adopt the spelling without the hyphen as it appears in the volume of his *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama) and as he signs the Author's Introduction in the same volume.

we could define a 'conservative way': in spite of the numerous appropriations of Shakespeare that have been recorded in the Arab world, and also worldwide, which proved once again his plays are nowadays a "canonical world source",² as it happened his name, and the play that was staged in Doha, were associated to the pro-western policies against which they directed the bombing.³ The language of Shakespeare was then read as an expression of the political discourse that dominates the contemporary world stage, therefore as an instrument of oppression. We know that the times when 'Colonial masters' imposed their value system through Shakespeare are probably definitely confined to the past, but the question whether Shakespeare's role as a global phenomenon in the cultural market has turned him into one of the powerful global icons through which local communities are progressively Westernized, has prompted several answers. Even though there have been a few voices who continued to speak in terms of an extended authority of his cultural centrality,⁴ the large majority of critical analysis and studies on international Shakespeare receptions and appropriations have acknowledged different outcomes not be understood solely in terms of a progressive cultural impoverishment and erasure of local differences.⁵

Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey in "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism" recounted the Doha suicide bombing alternating and intertwining the empathic impressions of the tragic event with the analysis of *Twelfth Night*. They reread the text from the point of view of Malvolio to show that the reconciliation achieved at the end of the play is extremely fragile and easily threatened under the shadow of Malvolio's expulsion as an "inassimilable fragment". "In *Twelfth Night* innocence is constitutive and foundational", they write, "the play 'dallies with the innocence of love / like the old age' (II, iv, 47-8). But in the context described above it becomes harder to view the performance of *Twelfth Night*, in Qatar, ... as harmlessly innocent.... It is still possible to recall, now only has a faint echo from an old age, that celebration of *Twelfth Night* as a kind of prelapsarian festivity".⁶ With the jihad threat hovering over, we live in the shadow of terrorism in a constant state of anxiety, and it seems innocence is not possible anymore in our society as well.

Holderness' and Loughrey's essay provided inspiration to the Kuwaiti-British playwright Sulayman Al Bassam for the third play of his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy.⁷ In particular, their insightful reading of Malvolio partly suggested Al Bassam the political take on that character which is at the basis of *The Speaker's Progress*, his appropriation of *Twelfth Night*. Holderness and Al Bassam had already embarked on a scholar-dramatist collaboration, an interdisciplinary exchange that mirrors the cross cultural dialogue at work in the appropriation. Previously, Al Bassam's 'Arab' rewriting of *Hamlet*, *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, written in English and performed by a mostly British cast, won him a Festival Fringe First in Edinburgh – were it premiered in 2002 – and the Best Director and Best Production prizes at the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre in the same year. His

experimentation led him to discard Shakespeare language in search of a modern English into which rewriting *Hamlet* in an attempt to gain a specific and objective translation “of Arabic concepts and rhetoric into English”.⁸ The resulting product, in the author’s words was a “cross cultural construction”.⁹ As Holderness wrote about it in the introduction, “Al Bassam’s play maps a Middle Eastern political tragedy onto the template of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”¹⁰ (for instance, Hamlet becomes a jihadist,¹¹ and Ophelia a suicide-bomber. Shakespeare’s rotten Denmark becomes a corrupt Middle Eastern regime, and Shakespeare’s tragedy of revenge a war of terror against terror). In 2007, The Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned Al Bassam *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (initially conceived as *Baghdad Richard*) and when it played in Stratford it was presented as a ‘response’ – or alternative version – to Michael Boyd’s *Richard III*. For this adaptation, Holderness offered specific advice to Al Bassam. It was written and performed in Arabic with just a few scenes in English, and it toured many different countries (for the record, it was the first time the Royal Shakespeare Company produced a play in Arabic).

Each adaptation makes use of its source in a different way, mixing genres and working on the Shakespearean text to produce new and possibly unexpected meanings through an exploration of universal themes such as corruption, power, identity, religious censorship and authority. Shakespeare’s play became a vehicle for a politically and socially informed text. Since in an appropriation the nature of selves and texts is inseparable, as Joseph Margolis suggests, we should read it as an act of self-interpretation whose meaning is the mixed result of interpretive histories of texts and of the interpreter’s culture.¹² This seems to be the case with *The Speaker’s Progress*; as Al Bassam wrote in the Introduction to the play, “The radical disconnect between what was happening inside the Arab world ... and the relative stability and tranquillity of the cities where the works were scheduled to receive their premieres became a mirror, in my mind, of the disconnect between the Shakespearean tale and the tale to be told”.¹³ The fact that Al Bassam was sensible to the surrounding environment, from which his artistic creation was heavily influenced, doesn’t mean that *The Speaker’s Progress* is just a state-of-the-nation play. Sonia Massai, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural field’, provides a useful model to understand the dynamic interaction between established modes of critical and theatrical production and strategies of appropriation. As she argues, “the boundaries of Shakespeare as a cultural field have not only stretched, but moved altogether”, and therefore, “By stressing the fluidity of the field, its lack of any unilateral hierarchization and the permeability of its boundaries, Bourdieu provides a powerful model to describe not only the impact which world-wide appropriations of Shakespeare have on their audiences, but also [their] *raison d’être*”.¹⁴

The urgency of making *Twelfth Night* into a story of secularism and religious tolerance – rewriting thus the agenda of the play with a different authorial voice – was dictated by Al Bassam’s perception of the issues and concerns of the post 9/11

⁸ Graham Holderness, “Introduction”, in Sulayman Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), x.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Al Bassam’s depiction of Hamlet seems to have in turn inspired Holderness for his reading of Malvolio.

¹² See Joseph Margolis, *Selves and Other Texts: The Case for Cultural Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State U. P., 2001), 156-66.

¹³ Sulayman Al Bassam, “Author’s Introduction”, in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xix.

¹⁴ Sonia Massai, *World-Wide Shakespeares*, 6.

¹⁵ Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", xviii.

Arab World, of a sectarian world which carries the signs of "the collapse of old orders and the blasting of post-modernity on pre-modern societal structures".¹⁵ The challenge he faced was to succeed in provoking his audience and at the same time to make intelligible and engaging to an international playgoer a transposition so charged.

More than in the other two plays of his trilogy, in *The Speaker's Progress* not only did he appropriate Shakespeare, but also the Arab world as seen at the moment of transition into a new millennium. As Margaret Litvin noted, if in his previous Shakespearean appropriations "he has not always explained clearly whether his adaptations borrow, mock, or seek to transcend his bundle of stereotypes",¹⁶ in his third and last he "successfully provincializes"¹⁷ many Anglo-American stereotypes about Arab culture. The insistence on contemporaneity, stressed in *The Speaker's Progress* especially in the dialogue and the direct incitement to complicity with the audience, helped Al Bassam to get rid of outdated stereotypes and to comment "honestly (and thus of course provisionally) on a specific decade long slice of historical time (2001-2011) more than on the Arab world as a fixed geographic or cultural space".¹⁸ The Arab world is therefore an ever-changing panorama in which Al Bassam presents his plays, whose composite audience influence their reception. After he completed the first draft of the play in 2010, that landscape was going through an even more profound change since in the following months the so called Arab Spring blossomed in many Arab countries. He couldn't have predicted the revolutionary transformations that would have swept across many Arab countries only a few months later and therefore the play needed to change to address a new audience in a transforming world.

The Speaker's Progress opened in New York in 2011 and even if the languages spoken in the performance were English and Arabic, according to Al Bassam, it was written with Arab audiences in mind rather than chiefly for Western spectators. As a matter of fact, he wrote it in English and subsequently he had it translated into Arabic. Despite the fact that Al Bassam was schooled in Arabic till the age of eleven, he has not enough confidence to write creatively in that language.¹⁹

The performance begins undramatically: on the stage, on a big white screen, are projected black and white images of an audience taking seats in a theatre: it looks like an archive film. This isn't so much a screening, we infer, as a *séance* (perhaps, after seeing what happens later, we could call it an exorcism). We are asked to respond to another audience from another time; the emphasis, then, at the very beginning is on theatre reception, on 'how' we look at or see rather than on 'what' we are going to attend, on how the meaning changes when the social and historical environment changes. This kind of confrontation brings out the question of audience agency. In the current cultural polarization of Western and Arab worlds it could be easy to go to an Arab production of a derivative text by Shakespeare driven by ethnographic curiosity, somehow expecting what the production is going to represent according to a preconceived belief. As Litvin remarked, this could be a

¹⁶ Margaret Litvin, "Theatre Director as Unelected Representative", in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 113.

¹⁷ Ibid., 223.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xx.

deadening experience for an audience ignorant of the artistic conventions at work in a challenging production leading to a series of misleading readings.²⁰ An unseen history is made visible to others, but at the same time risks perpetuating its separation by 'leading our subject out of the mainstream and into an ethnically bound corner',²¹ as Sarah Dadswell acknowledges. In this case, theatre could work as a medium to promote a relocation of the audience's attitude or perspective, and could offer a moment to think about the various kinds of receptions and readings we can have during a play's run.

When black and white images fade out, a man in a dark suit walks on stage from behind the screen and gets himself to a lectern on the side of the stage. As a Speaker, he tells us he used to be a theatre maker but since in his own country the act of performance has been criminalized and all theatres have been shut down, he and his colleague artists have been forced into retirement. A series of emergency laws restricting liberties, comprising the suspension of the Internet, have been issued by the new government. But he is not asking for our sympathies nor is he complaining about the enforcement of such strict measures. He supports those actions, he denounced his previous work during the Artists' trials that have been taking place and he even offered to set fire to a theatre as a demonstrative act of faith for the new regime. As a matter of fact, he tells us theatre is an outdated medium "as a form of enquiry or representation"²² in his society and will therefore meet us halfway "embodying our discourse in a language that you will recognize and understand whilst respecting the regulations that now govern our cultural expression."²³ The new regime doesn't allow acting anymore, at least in the dramatic tradition as we are used to know through recognizable characters. The post-revolutionary scene accepts only speakers as vehicles for a discourse, the language itself and the world it represents is the focus not the performer. Al Bassam's use of a narrator (interpreted by himself) seems to be a re-thinking of the location of narration, from character to 'speaker' embracing the 'fictional' of a reported speech.

The obvious effect of this position is to distance himself from the message and to attribute it to an absent elusive entity whose presence is embodied in the language of authoritarian stereotype.²⁴ This post-revolutionary conduct resembles quite a lot a post-dramatic performance strategy. The speaker/narrator explains the audience that they are not going to see a performance of a play but the reconstruction of a performance of a play from the past. What we have here is a stage product that functions through a play between the live and the recorded, giving as a result a complex hybridity of form. Since in his own country it is not possible anymore to act, it seems he and his colleagues have discarded the notions of 'character', of linearity of sequence, and the knowledge he asserts to have doesn't fully secure the authenticity and the authority of his voice. As a matter of fact, "confessions testimony may be central to the composition of the text, but they may be a game, an act, a playful bricolage, a fabrication and manipulation of

²⁰ Litvin, "Theatre Director as Unelected Representative", 109.

²¹ Sarah Dadswell, "What is this Thing Called British Asian Theatre?", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 19.2 (2009), 226.

²² All the quotations from *The Speaker's Progress* are taken from Sulayman Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 141.

²³ Ibid., 142.

²⁴ See Hans Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006); David Barnett, "When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24.1 (February 2008).

²⁵ Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeny, eds., *The Routledge Drama Anthology: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (London: Routledge, 2016), 709.

²⁶ Tim Etchells, "Diverse Assembly: Some Trends in Recent Performance", in Theodor Shank, ed., *Contemporary British Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

²⁷ Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 143.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 142.

³⁰ This strategy seems to have been taken from Wooster Group's staging of *Hamlet*, performed since 2006, where the company re-imagined Shakespeare's tragedy "by mixing and repurposing Richard Burton's 1964 Broadway production, directed by John Gielgud, reconstructing a hypothetical theatre piece from the fragmentary evidence of the edited film", <http://thewoostergroup.org/hamlet> (accessed on 10 March 2018).

imagined and experienced events",²⁵ as Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeny put forward. And it is not important whether the events revealed are true or real, what matters is that they are narrated and witnessed. One of typical features is the blurring of the differences between the 'acting' and 'being', between the 'fictional' and the 'real'. A connection to the characteristics of postmodern performance as noted for example by Tim Etchells.²⁶

The Speaker informs the audience that short and ruined filmed scenes from a 1963 play (we will later discover it is an Arab adaptation of *Twelfth Night*) still circulate underground in segments of his society, generating "a mixture of nostalgia and civil disobedience".²⁷ What he is presenting now to this foreign audience are fragments of that film as proof of past mistakes, of a time when "revolution and, for that matter, theatre were all the rage"²⁸ spreading a deceptive and illusory image of false freedom. And where the film is damaged and scenes missing, he will have a company not of actors but of envoys (that is, other 'speakers' or narrators) from various Ministries, Leagues and Unions (there is just one Former Actress and she will later have a pivotal role), wearing neutral lab coats, to re-enact the damaged passages in a scientific reconstruction so as to expose all the corruptive potential of such a decadent cultural expression.

In a society where theatre is strictly regulated, even fragments of past productions can be subversive, their power is still feared and labelled as seditious: "Music is the food of love and love is the blood of freedom and freedom is the mother of progress",²⁹ as one of the characters says in the 1963 adaptation of *Twelfth Night*. What we are going to watch is the result of a meditation not only on Shakespeare's play but on its multitudinous history. I would like to put forward for consideration the often neglected fact that no play and no staging is original in itself and that over every staging of a play inevitably hangs the shadow of the other stagings which came before. The past and the present are in a dialogic relationship as we can see from the conversation between the filmed and the live. It reminds us that even when we alter the past, it is still hard to escape its ghosts – but also that the soul of that past performance lies invariably out of reach.

A buzz from the sound technician is the alarm signal to change scene and to assume the numbered positions as marked on a surviving promptbook. As the actors try to give flesh to the fading phantoms behind them, the production becomes largely a gesture-by-gesture duplication of what is happening on the screen behind.³⁰ The effect is of a constrained, old fashioned, clashing and often satiric attitude. But every now and then one or another of the performers will seem possessed, even just for a very short moment, by the spirit of that long-ago performance. We spot a crucial instant, then, "totally concrete and totally abstract" as Roland Barthes wrote. It is what he defines "the pregnant moment, [a] presence of all the absences (memories, lessons, promises) to whose rhythm History becomes both intelligible and desirable". It is a peculiar gesture, "or set of gestures, (but never a gesticulation) in which a whole social situation can be read. Not every

gest is social”.³¹ For instance, at the heart of the social progress, evoked in the line mentioned before, there is a woman, Thuraya/Olivia: it is a ‘social gest’ in the present that evokes a unique vision of femininity in the past of the 1963 production. “The Golden Age metaphor for the catastrophic present”, says Al Bassam, “is the fact that they allowed such ‘liberty of proposition’”.³² It is something that would otherwise live only in the imagination, but in the “blessed bower” of the laboratory – where the reconstruction is taking place³³ – the envoys are protected and formally they don’t have to act but just illustrate what the regime believes is degeneration. Notwithstanding, another social gesture like the cross dressing that will take place, when Fawz/Viola puts on the Captain’s jacket to be presented to Turaya as an eunuch,³⁴ exposes the incongruities and fallacies of such an experiment to rewrite history. In spite of “the government-sponsored revival played out on stage [which] tries to empty the performance of any radical sexual or political content”, I would say the sexual is indeed political in this case, “the actors run into trouble, simply by having a woman dress as a man. Shakespearean drama becomes a metaphor for radical dissent”.³⁵ The female body, in such a context, is in itself a social gesture and a revolutionary act. The reconstruction, then, assumes the shape of a covert operation, it becomes the medium through which the Golden Age can be re-imagined in the present in a sort of postmodern association. With regard to the function of the historical, “the postmodern self-consciously ‘replays’ images of a past that cannot be known, but that can only be constructed through a play of entirely contemporary references to the idea of the past”.³⁶ In fact, the supposed 1963 Gulf-Arab version of *Twelfth Night* is actually written and directed by Al Bassam and his metatheatrical move is a homage to the Arab tradition of Shakespearean mise-en-abyme. Through the isolated fragments of a reinvented past he wants to show that the only possibility to regain knowledge of a Golden Age where freedom was possible and the arts could flourish is through the imagination, through the eyes of the present audience. The form of the allegory used by theatre makers under the regime of Nasser, as exemplified in the incomplete relics of the past, could also work as an aesthetic critique here and now. Therefore, Al Bassam’s effort to gain the audience sympathy in the situation he is presenting (also as the director/narrator of the outer play) aims at making them feeling part of the recollection, they should be aware of participating in something dangerous but engaging and being incited to complicity: “if the audience allows itself to accept that complicity, then the arena of complicity should be the horizon of the allegory. The boundaries of the theatre space itself”,³⁷ as Al Bassam remarked.

There is also a camera placed on the floor front stage, from the Ministry of Information, recording the enacted reconstruction for “archive purposes only”,³⁸ but it suggests they are under surveillance. Another audience, then, is watching live and commenting on the past production and the reconstruction; consequently, the theatregoers inevitably confront their judgement with the imagined audience of the

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 173-174.

³² Litvin, “Appendix. For The Record: Conversation with Sulayman Al Bassam”, in Huang and Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, 234.

³³ On the scene, at the sides of a raised platform where the envoys perform, there are steel laboratory tables cluttered with various stage props.

³⁴ See Keir Elam, “The Fertile Eunuch: *Twelfth Night*, Early Modern Intercourse, and the Fruits of Castration”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47.1 (Spring 1996), for a thorough discussion of this theme in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

³⁵ Holderness, “Introduction”, in Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xiii.

³⁶ Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 20.

³⁷ Litvin, “Appendix. For the record: Conversation with Sulayman Al-Bassam”, 225.

³⁸ Al Bassam, *The Speaker’s Progress*, 146.

regime functionaries. The multiple readings of the performance and the multitudinous levels of its reception are inevitably intertwined.

What we see on stage are the representatives of an unspecified government, a portrayal of an unnamed nation and yet so full of recognizable features common to several inchoate, or imposed, democracies of our contemporary world. The risk of producing a shallow generalization, of showing the Islamic world as imagined or seen by a western eye is alarmingly there. But the metatheatrical doubling presented two completely different worlds, the past of 1963 on film and the present on stage, and therefore prevented any generalization about Arab 'culture' as a singular entity. Dan Rebellato suggests that theatrical representation is inherently metaphorical, its artifice always exercising the strategy of being "invited to see (or think about) one thing in terms of another thing".³⁹ Adaptation, accordingly, will always convey a metatheatrical hint since one text is seen and heard through another. If, as Rebellato argues, every actor is a metaphor for the character he impersonates, we should read the adaptation that attempts to recapture the spirit of the Arab Golden Age in the same way, that is as if "there is no make-believe involved, no amassing of propositional information, no artful subtraction from one to create the image of the other. We know the two objects

³⁹ Dan Rebellato, "When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?", *Performance Research*, 14.1 (March 2009), 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid. are quite separate, but we think of one in terms of the other".⁴⁰

When we come to a comic scene at Thuraya's place, between Nishami (the housemaid) and Tagtiga (the drunken uncle) the sound of the dialogue of the 1963 archive film is suppressed and only the sound of the audience reaction is left so as to "clearly expose the corrupting intentions of the scene", since according to the Speaker the acting is irrelevant and it would only distract. In this case, what the envoys provide is an interaction with the audience of the past production (either far or near) dubbing the actors on screen. This voiceover produces an effect similar to what David Lane observed about adaptations: "[They] encourage a 'double-reading' for an audience, as we interpret the new, adaptive text in its own right, and its relationship to the source text as well".⁴¹

⁴¹ David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2010), 183.

The Mullah Farhan of the video is what we suppose to be a stock character from classic Arab comedy, devised to mock his Islamist intransigence. In the reconstruction he is played by the Representative of the Tourist Board (RTB), a fanatic of the regime. In assuming that role, the RTB adds a feature of menace to his character; instead of the whipping stick of his counterpart in the film he waves a metre ruler, officially to check men and women remain at a safe 90 centimetres distance. But he appears, then, as the wicked schoolteacher who scares stiff his pupils. The metre also indicates a longing to control, to measure, the desire to provide restraint and respect for the rules. His intentions are frustrated because, as he plunges deeper and deeper into the reconstruction, he cannot help but reproducing the same weird moves of the stock character and therefore he assumes the same ridiculous attitude. We are sure that his pupils will mock at him as in the best school tradition.

The reduced version of the filmed adaptation of *Twelfth Night* has the dialogue compressed and only evokes Shakespeare language, so the exchange between Thuraya/Olivia and Fawz/Viola goes fast ahead:

Thuraya What would you if you were you?

Fawz If I were I?

Thuraya If you were you

Fawz Make me a willow cabin at your gate,

And call upon my soul within the house;

Write loyal cantons of contemned love

And sing them loud even in the dead of night...

Until Fawz/Viola interpolates the dialogue with lines read from a red notebook previously given her by the Speaker, surreptitiously. The added lines are the following:

I'd turn myself into a fruit seller

And set my body aflame in the square

I'd scratch your initials on the school walls

Take a bullet to the chest and turn the gash

Into a spring millions flock to drink from

I'd chant your name through a year of Fridays

Thuraya, Thuraya, Thuraya:

Huriya Huriya Huriya!!!⁴²

They too explicitly, undisguisedly refer to the episode that set fire to the Arab Spring in Tunis' Tahrir Square. This deviation from the script leads the Former Actress into politically dangerous territory and her cry for freedom is brutally repressed. However, the tragedy doesn't happen and the actress is harshly silenced by the RTB; the Speaker acknowledges there has been a mistake and the action moves on to the Tourist Board Presentation. That is the moment for dramatic irony, as on the sound of Muzak, the RTB describes the beauty of his country, included unspoiled true Arab Springs while on the screen are projected images of country landscapes with leaping gazelles. At the end of the scene, the Former Actress is searched and fingerprinted, while the red notebook has previously safely passed from one envoy to the other.

At another moment in the reconstruction, in order to respect the safety 90-centimetre distance Thuraya cannot take the hand of the Blind Poet, therefore they have to resort to a stratagem: the two envoys stand on the stage unaligned, their back to the audience and at short distance one in front of the other. With the help of a floodlight, their shadows projected on the screen backstage give the illusion of them taking by the hand. The contact is only possible on the screen, now blank, where the past is living in the pre-recorded film as the only space of illusion (or better of imagination?) where desire can come true, where a presence is made of

⁴² The author plays here on the homophony between the name 'Thuraya' and the word 'Huriya' which means 'freedom'. Freedom was shout in the performance which was anyway subtitled in English or Arabic, following the switch of the two languages during the performance. It is possible to watch a streaming recording of the production staged at Paramount Theatre at Emerson College, in Boston in October 2011, on the site of MIT Global Shakespeare: <http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/the-speakers-progress-al-bassam-sulayman-2011/> (accessed on 1 November 2017). The present analysis is based on that performance.

absences. They walk keeping the same positions till they reach the screen, and then separate on the two sides to let appear a dark silhouette of a woman behind the screen vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

At the opening of the Second Act – whose title is “The Tyranny of the Text” – the responsibility for the actress losing her mind is given to the audience. Their silence is not neutral, but complicit since it has fed her “wayward imagination”.⁴³

⁴³ Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 167.

The spectators, acting as a “shrouded faceless mob”, are therefore recognized as an active force whose energy has incited the actress “to loose her mind”⁴⁴ and whose silence advocated her cause. Therefore, the Speaker states that they must be educated and they must conform. This is a dangerous task for the envoys since it implies to carry on to the bitter end their task and it involves the use of the 1963 costumes.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

After a burst of laughing following a bawdy joke told by the blind poet, the Mullah/RTB annoyed by that chaos and anarchy tries to confront the Speaker who added up to it. While crossing the stage he notices something wrong and searches the papers on one of the laboratory tables finding the red book. That is the moment of revelation, the catastrophe. The Speaker, recognized as the undercover mastermind of the sabotage of the reconstruction, is forced to go behind the stage. The scene is underscored by a sinister, metallic sound adding suspense and anxiety on his destiny.

In the absence of the killjoy RTB, the envoys start to make use of the costumes and of the make-ups, prompted by the Representative of Writers Union/Drunken Uncle who incites them to discover the beauty of true interpretation of the scene for real effect. Furthermore, he covers with a scarf the surveillance camera. “No need to archive this. It is best retold by the heart”⁴⁵ he says while the lights dim and we are now in true representational staging, amateur style, but genuinely done. As we see on the screen the audience of the past that comes again to life, the cross dressed Blind Fool sings a traditional love song. It's a revolution from the past reviving in the body of the actors and of the audience of the present.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 171, the quotation cited is taken from the performance and it slightly differs from the printed text to which the footnote refers to.

Then, the Speaker re-enters holding a copy of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, it is clear he has been physically abused and he is now forced by the RTB to sign a confession which he reads:⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The published text has it in English while in the performance he reads it in Arabic.

I was the originator of the transgressive improvisation. I displayed wilful negligence in my duty towards the committee; I obscured the true origins of the 1963 play: an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, written in 1601. I have conspired with this foreign source. In my defence, I say only that my real intention was to highlight the majestic historical transformation prophesied in the Shakespearean play that brought, 40 years after this play was written, the Puritans to power in England. The Puritans, keen protectors of civic health and their nation's standing in the world, enforced the closure of all theatres that harboured the 'sinful' entertainment. England became a great nation because of the Puritans. Many scholars, religious and otherwise, verify this.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 173.

When the RTB takes again the role of the Mullah, it is not easy to say whether he is pretending or he is for real. Paradoxically, he is the only one allowed to interpret his real self.

Introduced and summoned by the envoy's conventional signal of the revolution (that is by the lifting of the open right hand), the evoked Puritans come on the stage. The Representative of the Women League reads from the act of the English parliament establishing the closing of theatres dressed as a Seventeenth-century puritan, probably in the hope to draw a closer parallel to what happened at present and on 11th February 1647 as the Speaker announces. On the screen we see a huge portrait of Oliver Cromwell. An excited Speaker asks the spectators to intervene and bear witness of what is happening. They didn't ask to turn off their mobile phones, so he now urges them to use them and to record what is happening: they don't have to imagine to be anywhere else now, they just have to choose how to deal with the present. The theatregoers are therefore turned into freedom's surveillance eye, they could even stream the repression of the Mullah/RTB or just take pictures of it to be uploaded. The speaker's plea is possible because the RTB doesn't speak and doesn't understand English. That is why he is much worried they must follow the text, they must act in accordance with it, the one that has been approved and no improvisation is allowed.

When the 'real' acting starts we are in the bower of an Orange Grove. The same scheme as before is going over again, envoys declare what will be going on in an Epic style but the supposed alienation effect is not there anymore. What the envoys want is to use theatre, true acting, and not cold representation, to catch the RTB in a (mouse)trap. They are at war, they have been betrayed, their revolutionary ideals have been frustrated so now they are thrown back on theatre. The stage changes as changes the way of acting. The laboratory tables of the envoys are now behind a row of orange trees. The scene is more clearly recognizable as from *Twelfth Night*, a forged letter has been left centre stage for the Mullah to find it. Here we have the scene of Mullah/Malvolio misreading of the letter. The scene is very like the one in Shakespeare, it is played by the Mullah/Malvolio kneeling on the front of the raised platform (the stage within the stage) and a dark silhouette of Thuraya/Olivia behind the screen who first echoes the lines from the letter and then says as reading the content of it. The pun on general polysemy stretches further to include the fact that the Mullah/Malvolio doesn't speak English: "If only you spoke English", says the letter, "Cast off your chains of servility, better be deemed ridiculous than be reviled. What others call madness is to me modernity. Be modern, be free, be brave".⁴⁸ And further on, Nishami, who forged the letter, ⁴⁸ Ibid., 180. whispers in a microphone as continuing the reading of Thuraya/Olivia: "Speak in the language of Power: in the language of the mind: in the language of lovers – speak English, Italian, Cantonese, French: show me the gift of your tongue".⁴⁹ To ⁴⁹ Ibid. which the Mullah/Malvolio interjects by saying in a menacing tone: "This is

⁵⁰ Ibid. improvised”, but then he pleasantly adds, “But I like it!”.⁵⁰ He has started taking pleasure in the acting, and this is very dangerous: it could be more efficacious to show the corruptive nature of theatre but it could also end up by being corrupted. The stage direction states that from this point onwards it won’t no longer be clear if the RTB is speaking in character or as himself. He is literally the shadow of himself: he is being dressed to woo the lady of the letter behind the screen and we see his silhouette. They make him speak in languages he doesn’t know while he woos the lady, he is prompted by the other envoys (now all in costumes) who speak in micros and make him saying things like “J’aime les femmes aux têtes nue”, “I can’t leave under oppression. I want to defect”,⁵¹ believing he is asking for sexual intercourse, always according to Islam practice as he specifies. But the word “defect” has been said, and he is then imprisoned in a cage for high treason, for being a spy. He is questioned on the raised platform, the torture scene of the Counter Revolution, a very Shakespearean moment as the Speaker states. The Mullah/Malvolio is treated as a fallen dictator and in the end the Young Woman sings the chant of Arab Uprising. When the Mullah/Malvolio takes off the scarf blindfolding him during the scene, he goes out collecting his papers and uttering Malvolio’s infamous malediction: “I will be revenged upon the pack of you”, we don’t actually know if he is in character or not.

Initially conceived as a caricature, in an analogy between the Puritan killjoy and moral fanatic, and the official from the anonymous Islamic State that forced the Speaker to abjure his artistic past, the figure of the Mullah/Malvolio goes over that monolithic block of religious ideology. It then splits in different currents as the ban on theatre is equated with a ban on freedom of speech and the Islamic nature of the imposition is removed, according to Al Bassam, from the outer story. Therefore, the Puritan analogy becomes a metaphor for state oppression less coloured by a unique religious faith. The Mullah/Malvolio is characterized as a priggish prim functionary, but one made confident and savagely terrifying in his very foolishness by the very role the regime asked him to play. The tension between him and the Speaker justifies the otherwise inexplicable function of the Speaker as the rebellion’s heroic source, “with the Speaker-Mullah symmetry the play acquires a hero, a villain, and some troubling resemblances between the self-righteous practices of the two”.⁵²

⁵² Litvin, “Review of *The Speaker’s Progress*”, *Shakespeare*, 9.3 (2013), 3.

Agency itself questions the audience alignment. It is possible to pity Malvolio and the Speaker for what they suffer not only for what they are, since they are certainly pathetic because they are so utterly cut off from everyone else by their anxious self-love and self-righteousness.

Al Bassam uses Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* as the inset play from which some major themes, elements and lines are taken. *The Speaker’s Progress* is a play about change, about the process of change and transformation from one state of affairs to another. The playtext had evolved toward a darker ending but then, as the playwright said, he gave the ending a more optimistic spin in response to the Arab

Spring, leaving it open-ended, still hopeful, but conscious that no post-Malvolio society will easily overcome its crippling past. He gives us the impression that we can't live as always on holyday, or in a festive comedy, we can't deceive ourselves anymore. But does Malvolio acquire self-knowledge? And the other characters? Even if in Shakespeare the finale of the comedy seems to point to reconciliation, to the convention of marriage – once the disguise is revealed and identity restored – we know that there is an individual who has been left apart. His exclusion from that society that is rebuilding a unity appears to be the irreconcilable dark side of the anxiety that agitated the story. It is not just a matter of religious orthodoxy. The very fact that Malvolio's vanity, his self-love prevails in his threat of revenge on the whole pack of them, could mean that Shakespeare "portraying puritanical Malvolio's notion of Providence as self-serving, [...] satirizes his character's belief in the unmediated, unearned, material blessing of the elect".⁵³

⁵³ Maurice Hunt, "Malvolio, Viola, and the Question of Instrumentality: Defining Providence in *Twelfth Night*", *Studies in Philology*, 90.3 (Summer 1993), 278.

Holderness and Loughrey are convinced that the fate of Malvolio is to be duped with false hopes since his appetite for status, wealth, and power tempts him with illusory aspirations and therefore he is doomed to experience disillusion. Nevertheless, as they point out, "Malvolio is the only character to be punished for his participation in a common destiny. He is the scapegoat, the victim who bears away with him the sins of the community". It is Holderness' and Loughrey's belief then, that the Western secular dream of materialist freedom, is the target against which Malvolio directs his threat: "Those who invest their existence in the expectation of perpetual pleasure, guaranteed happiness, the uninterrupted continuance of the game, will always be exposed to the resentment and resistance of those acquainted with anxiety".⁵⁴ In developing their reading of Malvolio, Al Bassam wanted to point out the dangerous outcomes that the irresponsibility of innocence can lead to on one side, and the self-defeat the excessive literalism of orthodoxies and the various form of State oppression are doomed to on the other.

⁵⁴ Holderness and Loughrey, "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism", 117-118.

The ethics of appropriation matter deeply and this case proves to be ethically complex. In order to make *Twelfth Night* into "the story of secularism and tolerance in the Arab world being devoured and by religious censorship and state authoritarianism" Al Bassam developed *The Speaker's Progress* into a new text and directed "the storytelling through this new channel".⁵⁵ Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin insist on the 'hybridity' of the Shakespearean accents when pointing to the fact that there is no single 'Shakespeare' that is reproduced on a global-scale; not only his work breeds 'hybrid' subjects, "but is itself hybridized by the various performances, mutilations and appropriations of his work"⁵⁶ generating multiple levels of hybridity as a potentially radical state, posing the conditions to "subvert the binaries, oppositions and rigid demarcations imposed by colonial discourses".⁵⁷ Arab theatre artists seeking to metabolize recent Arab-world events in or for the West have turned persistently to Shakespeare in particular – both from personal interest and in quest of a vocabulary their audiences can understand.

⁵⁵ Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", xix.

⁵⁶ Loomba and Orkin, eds., *Post-colonial Shakespeares*, 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

We then have to look for ethics in both the nature of intertextual and inter- or

trans-cultural relationship and in the political ideals they support.

Ethical appropriations as Jonathan Bate, implies, are those that use a genuinely dialogic approach to create liberatory political effects.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

The Speaker's Progress is “a play in the shadow of revolution”, as the subtitle qualifies it, and the dark area projected on it is a territory still to be explored: “But how shall we live?” “I want to fly”⁵⁹ are the very two last lines of the play delivered by the two women that remain on the stage, leaving the audience with no easy answers.

⁵⁹ Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 196.

Tom Ashbrook, who moderated the panel after one performance of *The Speaker's Progress* in Boston in October 2011, at a certain moment of the discussion asked Al Bassam: “What is your message?”, to which he answered, “We worked hard to remove a message”.⁶⁰ As an example of true political theatre the play investigates many issues rather than reifying a single concept, as I believe I showed; *The Speaker's Progress* is questing and open ended, unsettling, it draws on Shakespeare for a vocabulary of radical change and transformation, it deconstructs the elements of stagecraft and shows how the anti-production – that wants to oppose a reactionary exhibition of force – becomes a subversive demonstration that the power of theatre cannot be tamed.

⁶⁰ Amy Tighe, “Review of *The Speaker's Progress*”, *Boston Area Small Press and Poetry Society Scene*, 13/10/2011.

Theatre as a Shared Space of Exhaustion. Staging Contemporary Tragedies in Jan Fabre's 24-hour Performance

Abstract: The new conception of theatre in the 20th century is characterised by its attention to the actor's body and its performative possibilities as the main tool of communication with the audience. Avant-garde theatre practitioners started seeking out the roots of theatre with the intent of finding a new theatrical language. This in pursuit of what Richard Schechner has later defined as a "restored behaviour", that phenomenon which exists in every form of representation, from ritual to theatre, from shamanism to trance, and so on (Schechner, 1985). Using ritualistic practices and their power of inclusion, theatre reformers retrieved techniques filled with spiritual elements, providing the actor with tools to work on his/her awareness and to imbue the performance with new meanings, thus reshaping the canonical conception of the theatrical space. Bearing in mind this theoretical framework, it is possible to analyse the recent 24-hour performance *Mount Olympus* (2015), directed by Jan Fabre, as an outstanding example of contemporary theatre that, starting from avant-garde experimentation, redefines the spatial relationship between stage and audience. The paper will show how the performance achieves this by retrieving classical catharsis in a canonical, institutional theatrical setting while breaking the bourgeois rules of audience behaviour within the theatrical space, and by strengthening the bond between performers and spectators, reshaping their experiences by driving both to the edge of exhaustion due to its demanding duration.

Keywords: *actor's body, Mount Olympus, spectator's experience, relationship, ritual*

1. Introduction

The new conception of theatre in the 20th century is characterised by its attention to the actor's body and its performative possibilities as the main tool of communication with the audience. Avant-garde theatre practitioners started seeking out the roots of theatre with the intent of finding a new theatrical language. This in pursuit of what Richard Schechner has later defined as a 'restored behaviour', that phenomenon which exists in every form of representation, from ritual to theatre, from shamanism to trance, and so on.¹ Using ritualistic practices and their power of inclusion, theatre reformers retrieved techniques filled with spiritual elements, providing the actor with tools to work on his/her awareness and to imbue the performance with new meanings, thus reshaping the canonical conception of the theatrical space. This specific interest in source material and texts on mystic and ritualistic topics is strongly linked to what I will refer to as 'ritualistic spectatorship'. I am here particularly attracted to the quest for origins that seems inherent to many forms of research conducted in the past century by avant-garde theatre practitioners, which it is also possible to trace within more

¹ Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35-116.

recent forms of performance. In my analysis, I shall consider the 24-hour performance *Mount Olympus* (2015) by Jan Fabre and his theatre company Troubleyn as a case study. As my subtitle suggests, the performance is a contemporary attempt at restoring the glory of tragedy. It does so by not only pushing its performers to the brink of exhaustion and extreme sleep deprivation, but also by asking its spectators to offer up 24 hours of their time to be there. Apart from investing this time, not much else was asked of the audience. The auditorium was dark throughout, spectators were allowed to move in and out of the theatre at will, to visit the bathroom, eat, drink or sleep on the provided bunkbeds. This paper will show how *Mount Olympus* can be considered as an outstanding example of contemporary theatre that, starting from avant-garde experimentation, redefines the spatial relationship between stage and audience. It will also demonstrate how the performance achieves this by retrieving classical catharsis in a canonical, institutional theatrical setting but breaking the bourgeois rules of audience behaviour within the theatrical space, and by strengthening the bond between performers and spectators, reshaping their experiences by driving both to the edge of exhaustion due to its demanding duration.

Focusing explicitly on the role of the spectator in terms of movement, the spatial experimentation with the stage-audience relationship, I will question the relationship of the spectator to the performance in terms of ritualistic experience. Such shared ritualization places performers and their public in a specific participatory relationship. Part of my argument sets off from a historical point of view and consists in developing a historical frame that links Fabre with the avant-garde theatre practice and Reform of the 20th century. Before delving into the historical discourse, I wish to start by pointing out via a rather lengthy quotation from the writer of *Mount Olympus*, Jeroen Olyslaegers, the experience that was expected of the audience:

Afterwards it's weird to reflect on what we did with time. For me time is linked with catharsis; we have this old 19th century idea of theatre. We expect to look at a play, in a dark room filled with other people and expect a catharsis. For me it's a strange idea to expect an insight from a 2 or 3-hour play. What actually happened in ancient Greece were these big Dionysian festivals, competitions between different playwrights. People came to the theatre at dawn and watched for about 12 hours. They had dinner, had a drink, it was a coming and going and the catharsis was the entire experience. That's what we do with *Mount Olympus*. We actually stretch time, where the catharsis is totally different and much more violent for the audience to capture. After a couple of hours we strip away the intellectual human layer and what remains is pure emotion. It's not uncommon that people start to cry because there's no protection left. We've demolished it. That's the Dionysian power of it. I actually have Dionysus say this in the beginning of the piece: "we're all going to get you really, really crazy. We're going to get you mad". Which is what happens at the end.²

² Jeroen Olyslaegers in:
<http://www.etalorsmagazine.com/mount-olympus/>,
accessed 24 July 2017.

I am aware that one must be cautious when considering these assertions inasmuch as they are coming directly from inside the production. But I will take this quotation as a starting point after having experienced the performance as spectator. It raises numerous questions and can stimulate different reflections, especially concerning the role of the audience.

I will start by addressing the very beginning of the quote, in which the writer distances himself and the performance from “this old 19th century idea of theatre”, in this way recalling the discontinuity that characterized the Theatre Reform of the 20th century. And I will later address the interest of those avant-garde theatre practitioners towards ritualistic elements and practices in their attempt to trace an origin of theatre, which is strongly connected to Olyslaegers’s evocation of the ritualistic dimension of the Dionysian festivals.

2. A Step Back: Ritualistic Perspectives in the Avant-garde Theatre Practice

The 20th century Theatre Reform was inspired by a particular interest in the practice of acting in connection with its relationship with the audience. This century was characterised by reforms and new approaches that concerned not only theatre but also all those disciplines and arts related to the phenomenon of the avant-garde. As Christopher Innes wrote, the avant-garde movement “seems united primarily in terms of what they are against: the rejection of social institutions and established artistic conventions, or antagonism towards the public (as representative of the existing order)”.³ This same need for a concrete change, for a common coalition against the traditional/institutional vision of art was shared by many theatre practitioners of the same period, like Copeau, Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Grotowski, just to name a few. This perspective inspired the need to go beyond theatrical practice of the time, go back to theatre’s origins and find a new ideology. Analysing the work of the theatre reformers of the 20th century, the Italian theatre historian Fabrizio Cruciani has identified the concept of ‘making’ as the essence of this ideology. “To make theatre without thinking about theatre, its institution, one can think of recovering the minimum but necessary elements (the laws) that allow for a new theatre”,⁴ therefore “the definition of theatre (what it is) is detected in its concrete existence with the precision and the absoluteness of making”.⁵ The roots of this new theatre, then, lie in the work of the actor, in his or her relationship with the gaze of an audience, which actually experiences the actor’s physical presence. To better explain this need to go back into history and trace the origin of the experiential relationship between actor and spectator, I would like to refer to the work of one of the most important and complex figures in theatre reform in the 20th century, Antonin Artaud.

In *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud stated the necessity of a new physicality as new language and established the body as its basic unit of expression. His credo “No More Masterpieces”⁶ became a manifesto for many avant-garde artists,

³ Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre: 1892-1992* (London, Routledge, 1993), 1.

⁴ Fabrizio Cruciani, *Registi pedagoghi e comunità teatrali nel Novecento* (Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2006), 73 (my translation).

⁵ Fabrizio Cruciani, “Il «duogo dei possibili»”, in Clelia Falletti, ed., *Il corpo scenico* (Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2008), 167 (my translation).

⁶ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 74.

⁷ Christopher Innes, "Text/Pre-Text/Pretext: the Language of the Avant-Garde Experiment", in James M. Harding, ed., *Contours on the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 60.

⁸ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 80.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 81.

¹¹ Innes, "Text/Pre-Text/Pretext", 61.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26.4 (1974), 461.

whereas his *Theatre of Cruelty*, published in 1938 and almost totally unknown in the English-speaking world until the translation of 1958, became "a revolutionary catalyst that motivated the formation of counterculture performance groups".⁷ Especially in *The Theatre of Cruelty*, Artaud appealed to an archetypal notion of theatre as the primal force that could make possible a new relationship with the audience. Artaud proposed the idea of a *Total Theatre* that works on the spectator like Chinese acupuncture "which knows, over the entire extent of the human anatomy, at what points to puncture in order to regulate the su(b)tlest functions".⁸ He proposed a return "through the theatre to an idea of physical knowledge"⁹ that would break down all the barriers between the actor and the spectator. Through such physical knowledge the performing body, rather than through the thinking mind, can shake the spectators intimately/from the inside and charm them, like "the snake charmer" does, to finally "conduct them *by means of their organisms* to an apprehension of the su(b)tlest notions".¹⁰ Artaud suggests "an Affective Athleticism" which creates an affective attraction between the actor and the spectator and allows the power of the emotions grounded in the rhythm and tension of the actor's body to exert an influence on the same rhythm and tension in the spectator. The theatre proposed by Artaud completely opposes the bourgeois code that established a strict separation between the actor and the observer; on the contrary, he stated the principal unity between actors and spectators as a binomial formula in which both are indispensable to each other. In this manner, avant-garde theatre practitioners started searching for the roots of theatre with the intent of finding a new theatrical language.

The possibility of a new language, independent of the spoken words and made of gestures, actions and symbols "together with the sacred nature of the origin of theatre",¹¹ is what motivated the wide interest of the theatre reformers in ritual and spirituality as well as their resorting "to archaic, non-Western forms of religious theatre".¹² It is possible to trace a line of outstanding experiments by Western theatre practitioners who, since Artaud, saw ritualistic practices not as the answer, but as the tool with which they could examine theatre from a different perspective: The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, Richard Schechner's Performance Group, Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil, and of course Jean-Louis Barrault, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and, to some extent, Eugenio Barba. As will be demonstrated in what follows, it is possible to position Jan Fabre, and his latest work, in terms of continuing that kind of research in theatre making into the present day.

While analysing the relationship between theatre and ritual, it is interesting to outline, as Schechner suggests, "a process through which theatre develops from ritual; and also to suggest that in some circumstances ritual develops from theatre",¹³ thus putting the two terms Ritual and Theatre in a dialectical relationship. To do so, Schechner defined the characteristic of each term, naming them, respectively, "efficacy" and "entertainment", and opposing them to each

other.

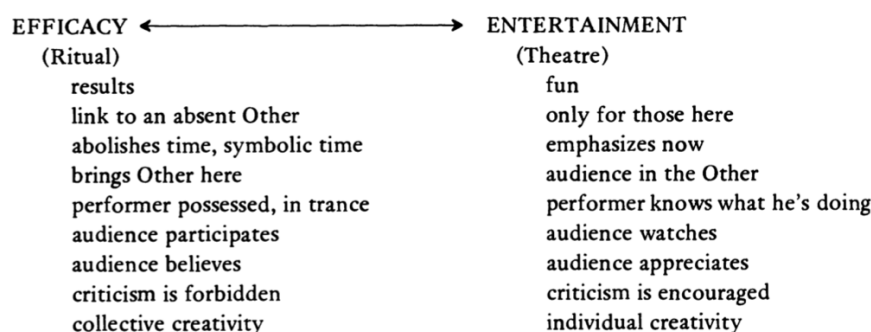


Fig. 1: Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26.4 (1974), 467.

Each term has its own characteristics, which are apparently in antithesis, but what seems to be important in Schechner's perspective is the possibility of Theatre to use, absorb, and include some of the characteristics of Efficacy, stressing them for the performative needs. In Schechner's words: "The basic opposition is between efficacy and entertainment, not between ritual and theatre. Whether one calls a specific performance ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends towards efficacy or entertainment. No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment".¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., 468.

One practical example is related to the concept of time: if in the 'entertainment-theatre' we are used to thinking of the event as happening in a precise moment; in the 'efficacy-ritual' time assumes an utterly different connotation. In the 'efficacy-ritual' time is symbolic and can be metaphorically abolished as a unit of measurement. However, the avant-garde theatre emphasized the concept of time by focusing on the actor's body, on its training, and on the creative process. Thereby the use of 'time' changes and this 'time' becomes efficacious: the attention paid to the creative process, "to the procedures of making theatre are ... attempts at ritualizing performance, of finding in the theatre itself authenticating acts".¹⁵ This

¹⁵ Ibid.

can be interpreted as a wish to provide the new theatre with the characteristics of efficacy, not at the expense of the entertainment, but working on the possibility of a simultaneous coexistence. "Avant-garde artists used terms like 'experimental' and 'research' to characterize their work, which took place in 'laboratories'. Efficacy lies at the ideological heart of all aspects of this new theatre".¹⁶ Thus, in its incorporation of ritual practices, the 'new theatre' is then based on the control of definite body skills related to the required concentration leading to its execution. This can be assimilated to what Victor Turner calls *flow*: that moment of extreme concentration and focus during which the actor/performer is totally in control and immersed in the execution of his/her activity, in which awareness and action melt

¹⁶ Ibid., 470.

¹⁷ See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Art Journal Publication, 1982), 52-58.

¹⁸ Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 48.

into one and their only goal is the fulfilment of the action itself.¹⁷ In order to achieve this *flow*, such an extraordinary state of awareness and inner control, the theatre reformers drew upon Asian traditions and techniques in which the ritualistic, the spiritual and the performative aspects are inseparable and in which ‘efficacy’ and ‘entertainment’ are both included in what Artaud defined as ‘Alchemical Theatre’.¹⁸ As will be later explained, this binary idea of ‘ritual’ and ‘theatre’ is subverted by Fabre. In fact, this strictly dualistic diagram takes a rather chiasmic shape when it comes to Fabre’s adaptation of the ritualistic forms of tragedy.

Seeking original, innovative forms, which strongly correlate to Antonin Artaud’s claim for an “Alchemical Theatre”, Fabre’s 24-hour work can be seen as a way of continuing to experiment with ritualistic elements and drawing upon ritualistic techniques, in order to explore mythological archetypes. These elements included non-verbal but bodily communication, spiritual healing, raising of collective consciousness, and especially the active engagement of performers with audience members. Fabre’s staging is in keeping with the use of ritual in avant-garde theatre as outlined by Schechner, where it is part of the attempt to “include their audience by creating special spaces and ritualistic-aesthetic actions”.¹⁹

¹⁹ Richard Schechner, “Performance Orientations in Ritual Theatre”, in Michael Issacharoff and Robin F. Jones, eds., *Performing Texts* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1988), 136. See also Robert J. Cardullo, “Ahistorical Avant-Gardism and the Theater”, *Neophilologus* 97 (2013), 446, accessed on April 1, 2016, doi 10.1007/s11061-012-9342-0.

²⁰ Innes, *Avant-Garde Theatre*, 3.

Christopher Innes identified as a unifying characteristic of the avant-garde its “quasi-religious focus on myth and magic, which in the theatre leads to experiments with ritual and ritualistic patterning of performance”.²⁰ In theatre terms this can be translated as a reversion to an ‘original’ form that can be explored in ritualistic practices such as, in the case of Fabre, the Dionysian rituals of ancient Greece. So, according to Innes: “Along with anti-materialism and revolutionary politics, the hallmark of avant-garde drama is the aspiration to transcendence, to the spiritual in its widest sense”.²¹ The theatrical exploration of ritualistic and spiritual elements, connected to the crossing of boundaries between the actor and spectator in the theatrical experience, has become one of the representative characteristics of 20th century Western theatre. Many avant-garde theatre artists experimented with ritualistic elements throughout the century, seeking to strengthen the bond between performers and audience and to recover the spiritual power that, in their opinion, theatre had lost. From this perspective, it is possible to detect in the work of Jan Fabre that connection between ritualistic and spiritual elements and their theatrical use and, in the specific case of *Mount Olympus*, it is possible to find the definition of a new scenic way of presenting the theatrical past. Clearly detectable is the application of principles retrieved from the ritualistic dimension of the performance to develop a new way of engaging with the audience experience, starting from his peculiar participatory conception of the theatrical space. In this sense, Fabre’s 24-hour-long performance, in its reconstruction of ritualistic, mythical, and tragic elements will be considered throughout this paper as theatrical research to rediscover the possibilities of the relational space between the performers’ and the spectators’ psychophysical

²¹ Ibid.

experience.

3. Sharing Tragedies in the Performative Space

One of the more eclectic artists of our time, Jan Fabre has over the past almost 40 years explored a wide spectrum of artistic practice, experimenting with boundaries and possibilities, whether working as a sculptor, performer, choreographer or director. A significant figure of the 'Flemish Wave', Fabre, along with prominent artists such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Alain Platel and Guy Cassiers, has continually negotiated those traditions – belonging first to avant-garde artistic practices, and then in to post-dramatic theatre – that, as I have pointed out at the beginning of this paper, have made of the rift with the establishment and the institution their distinctive feature.²² If many of above-named artists of the Flemish Wave were connected in a sort of elective affinity to the work and research of Jerzy Grotowski, especially concerning specific attention to the performer's body, Fabre more than anybody else has adopted the Artaudian lesson of cruelty by creating a form of 'Total Theatre' that can be put in direct filiation with the past century's experiments. Starting with his early works, he has re-read the concept of 'Body without Organs' from the theatrical philosophy of Antonin Artaud, deconstructing bodies, working on hyper-realistic sensitivity, and exploiting the idea of physicality in a visceral and anatomical way.²³ Artaud's concept of cruelty is often translated in Fabre's work as a sort of expanded idea of violence that revolves around the performers in every phase of their work, from training, to rehearsals, to the performance itself.²⁴ At the same time, Fabre's use of scenic cruelty is directed as an unconditioned reflex towards the spectators, who are subjected to an extreme form of shock, repulsion, and empathy. Transforming the actor, defined by Artaud as an 'athlete of the heart', into a 'warrior of beauty', Fabre brings on stage a sublime form of beauty that is never limited to the mere sphere of aesthetics or to the strict idea of form, but which unites the two with the keenness of feelings and the unworldly realm of the spiritual. There are some specific features that each Fabre production strictly maintains, such as the obsessive use of repetition, the brutal way of stressing the body, the fascination with everything that is tragic, and the fixation with the manipulation of time. All these characteristics reach their apex in the gargantuan operation that is *Mount Olympus*, the work that is probably his masterpiece, not just in terms of boldness and aspiration.

Mount Olympus: To glorify the cult of tragedy (a 24-hour performance), by Troubleyn|Jan Fabre, is a majestic contemporary re-adaptation of the rich corpus constituted by classical Greek tragedies. The production seems to have encountered extremely positive reactions and to have met the expected requirements for being what probably the director expected it to be: something to remember. All this, notwithstanding the risks of such an ambitious project. The production has been defined by one commentator as "historic", as a hallmark in

²² See Edith Cassiers et al., "Physiological Performing Exercises by Jan Fabre: An Additional Training Method for Contemporary Performers", *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 6.3 (2015), 274.

²³ See Christel Stalpaert, "The Reconfigurative Power of Desire. Jan Fabre's *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul*", *Arcadia International Journal for Literary Studies*, 40.1 (2005), 177-193.

²⁴ On the concept of the performer's body in the work of Jan Fabre see Luk Van den Dries, *Corpus Jan Fabre: Observations of a Creative Process* (Gent: Uitgeverij Imschoot, 2004).

²⁵ Freddy Decreus, "Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus*, or How to Conceive Culture in Transitional Times?", *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques*, 13 (June 2016), 1, <http://www.critical-stages.org/13/jan-fabre-mount-olympus-or-how-to-conceive-culture-in-transitional-times/>, accessed 24 July 2017.

contemporary theatre inasmuch as it becomes possible to state that "there is a history before and after *Mount Olympus*".²⁵ And undoubtedly it is something magnificent that has never been hosted in a theatrical building as we know it today: a multiplicity of generations of performers on stage, a multiplicity of bodies, a multiplicity of languages, with one common denominator: tragedy. Ascribable to the form of contemporary tragedy, if such a category can be said to exist, Fabre's performance sneaks into the historical/cultural/social fabric we inhabit as witness of the inner tragedy that belongs to every human being in contemporary society. It does not suggest solutions, let alone the possibility of redemption. Rather it amounts to an opening up to the possibility of embracing the tragedy that never ends. It revolves around the possibility of celebrating it in a seemingly never-ending event, in which pain, desire, and excitement strip away any form of political correctness, giving space to the hyper-reality of a visceral physicality: a fest of the flesh. And if the tragic event is endless, the same goes for human tragedy itself. The possibility of accepting it, of feeling a sort of sadistic pleasure from it creates the opportunity, time and time again, of a new beginning. It is precisely in this obsession with time, its manipulation, its elusiveness, in the excruciating use of repetition that Fabre sounds his clarion call for a brand new need for catharsis, in an attempt to resolve the enigma of the tragic. The idea of purification, the possibility of emancipating oneself from the cage of tragedy by embracing it, becomes in *Mount Olympus* the means to build up the relationship with the spectators, who in a tacit agreement with the performers undergo and accept extreme forms of emotions by signing the pact of together experiencing tragedy for 24 hours. Last but not least, the spatial element allows for a holistic experience that overcomes the dualistic conception that distinguishes 'theatre' from 'ritual' as theorized by Schechner. In this paper I will specifically focus on the last-mentioned element, leaving aside the temporal realm, aware of the fact that this opens up relevant possibilities for further reflections.

There are two main considerations regarding the specific use of the theatrical space in *Mount Olympus* that will constitute the following section of this analysis. The first one concerns a discussion around the 'physical space', i.e. the space of the theatre, the stage/audience relationship, and the theatrical building. The second consideration, which evolves as consequent to the first, refers to a form of ideal space: the 'space of experience'.

In line with other 20th theatre practitioners, Jan Fabre transfers to his use of space a strong dramaturgical meaning, or, better, the space constitutes a prominent part of the performance's dramaturgy in a wider sense. Recalling and adapting the ideas of Marco De Marinis about the theatrical innovations of the past century, Fabre conceives the space in a dramaturgical dimension, refusing the restrictions that are given by the specific architectonical configuration of a certain theatrical building, and, at the same time using those same restrictions as part of the performative process, thus in a way forcing the space to re-adapt itself to the needs

of his work.²⁶ If, as De Marinis states, one of the main innovations of the avant-garde theatre reform is constituted both by the conception of the theatrical space as dramaturgical element and by the acquisition of new spaces outside the canonical, institutional buildings, thus turning to alternative locations, then Fabre's operation can be considered as counter-avant-garde insofar as he brings his experimental work back to the institution, staging his performance in canonical buildings, whether these are the Berliner Festspiele, the Toneelhuis in Antwerp, the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam, or Teatro Argentina in Rome. While it is undoubtedly true that the ideals of the avant-garde of abandoning the bourgeoisie's codes thus gave back to the arts their freedom, it is also true that what followed the pioneering actions carried out in the first half of the past century has been a re-appropriation of artistic experimentations by a new form of bourgeoisie who constitute theatrical audiences nowadays. Or, in Roland Barthes pungent words: "L'avant-garde n'est jamais qu'une façon de chanter la mort bourgeoise, car sa propre mort appartient encore à la bourgeoisie....".²⁷ *Mount Olympus* becomes, then, a sort of site-specific performance. The choice made by Fabre of bringing his work within the space of the institution creates a short circuit in the reception of the visceral and experimental form of the tragic adaptation. It was indeed one of my first questions as spectator: why here? Why am I sitting in a red velvet chair? But the staging and the preparation of an event such as this one transcends the mere duration of the performance. The space in use in *Mount Olympus* is not only the stage, and not because the performers move around the orchestra or directly interact with the public as some might think. It rather encloses a holistic conception of the theatrical space in which the foyer, the toilets, the space right outside the theatre door, become part of the whole performance, insofar as they are part of the director's choices. Every time members of the audience chose to leave their seat and go outside to smoke, or drink, or sleep, they are deliberately leaving a piece of their own tragedy behind. Fabre forces the bourgeois spectator, accustomed to certain norms of supposedly respectable behaviour to share not only the carnality of his tragic work, but the carnality of his 'warriors of beauty' as well as the carnality of the fellow audience member, who sometimes sleeps and snores while sitting in a chair nearby. He does so by asking, demanding, that his public step outside their comfort zone which usually belongs to those theatrical plays that result in a two or three hours' evening event and which most of the time meet their conclusion in 'foyer chitchat'. The 'physical space' becomes in this event liminal, fluid, and vulnerable. Vulnerability is a key word in the analysis of the experience of Fabre's work. It progressively becomes clear to the spectator that the relationship between vulnerability, space, and time is intertwined. In the current historical juncture we inhabit, we are every day becoming more accustomed to forgetting about how to be vulnerable. Or worse, we are told every day, by society, by advertising, by politics, that we must give up our vulnerability because this will cause us pain and shame. This specific characteristic concerning vulnerability

²⁶ See Marco De Marinis, *In cerca dell'attore. Un bilancio del Novecento teatrale* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2000), 32.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, "À l'avant-garde de quel théâtre?", *Théâtre populaire* (May 1956); republished in: *Écrits sur le théâtre* [1964], ed. by Jean-Loup Rivière (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 203.

brings the discussion towards the second consideration around the use of space in *Mount Olympus*, i.e. the space of experience. The kind of experience the spectator has access to throughout the duration of the entire performance reminds us that, especially now, in this time, in this era, is the moment to be free from social pre-construction and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. And when you offer yourself with vulnerability you gain empathy, and when you have access to empathy you gain trust, a form of trust you can learn to enjoy over a 24-hour timescale. It is important to underline that my conception of experience here does not refer to the experience of the tragic per se interpreted as theatrical and/or literary genre. It does not revolve around the idea of the perception of a hero that arouses feelings within the spectator's personal sphere. Specifically, I have no interest in this paper in debating tragedy and its adaptations along the lines of genre theory. Especially as, from this perspective, scholarly speaking, such debate is quite vivid and is mostly focused on texts.²⁸ I am rather inclined to consider the work of Fabre on space and time, and Olyslagers for what concerns the text, not merely as the work of a director together with an author, but as a work of an 'operator', who in the Deleuzian sense operates on the threshold of representation and subjectivity, in pursuit of an affective co-presence of performers and their audience.²⁹ Fabre and Olyslagers' 'operator mode' transcends the intellectual and literary understanding of the text, the hero's actions and reasons, and it sometimes rises above myth itself. Talking about the experience of the tragic it is worth mentioning Lehmann's words on the subject at issue:

Tragic experience – which must neither be reduced to sentimental reaction nor thought to provide any insight in particular – requires further elucidation, then. It does not occur simply via (mimetically) perceived representation, nor is it constituted by way of a certain mode of perceiving the presence of performers per se. Rather, tragic experience arises in and out of the concrete *theatrical situation*. On the one hand, it remains a matter of personal/individual experience; on the other, it is tied to a situation that is not experienced individually: all theatre – as a rule concretely, but structurally, in any case – addresses a plurality of recipients.³⁰

The experience of the tragic then depends on many factor and cannot be reduced to just emotions and feeling, nor to just rational understanding of the tragic significance. In the specific case of *Mount Olympus*, the tragic experience is a total experience, which affects those who are there to share the moment. Knowledge of the tragic content is mostly taken for granted; the performers recite their texts sometimes in English, sometimes each in their own language, and the event captivates the spectator on an emotional and sensorial level. The whole space is filled with smells, steam, and sweat that become almost a tangible, primary tool to create communication and contact with the audience, and, on a transcendental level, part of the tragic text itself. After all, as again Lehmann claimed: "ancient

²⁸ For a better understanding of this issue see Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* [2014] trans. by Erik Butler (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 115-122. See also George Rodosthenous, ed., *Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy: Authorship and Directorial Visions* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017).

²⁹ See Laura Cull, "How Do You Make Yourself a Theatre without Organs? Deleuze, Artaud and the Concept of Differential Presence", *Theatre Research International*, 34.3 (2009), 243-255.

³⁰ Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 127.

tragedy was above all and almost exclusively a *theatre experience*, and that as such it impressed itself on the bodies and minds of those who witnessed it”.³¹ In the 24-hour time period, the audience is psychophysiologically affected in an idea of experience, enclosed in a stretched and enlarged conception of space: the shared space of exhaustion between performers and spectators.³² The idea of exhaustion is repetitive, fluid, and endless. It does not end when the curtain drops, it keeps on going inasmuch as Dionysus and his heroes have passed the baton onto the spectators, who in the Eisensteinian understanding of ‘ex-stasis’ have reached the point of no return in their tolerance of pain and tiredness. The exhaustion is so unbearable that the only way to survive the tragedy seems to be not to conceal the need to move beyond oneself. And the theatre space becomes an arena, the performers gladiators, and the spectators avid supporters who cheer their heroes when they ask them by screaming all together “and now give me all the love you’ve got!”.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² The idea of exhaustion has been here applied to the specificity of the spatial element, considered as vehicle towards a new form of shared relation between performers and spectators. However, this same concept constitutes the base for further theoretical development if analyzed in relation to the concepts of time, duration, and repetition in Fabre’s performance.

The idea of ‘shared space of exhaustion’ vaguely recalls the ‘shared space of actions’ that belongs to the neuroscientific discovery of the mirror neurons system. Such space, as Clelia Falletti pointed out, is not a metaphorical or a mental one. It is a rather physical, concrete and measurable space in our brain in which our neurons activate each time someone carries out actions in front of us. It is that space that mirrors the doer’s actions making the relationship with the observer possible. All this at the level of our nervous system, thus transcending an intellectual understanding of the other’s intention.³³ And if cognitive neuroscience has told us what theatre already knew since the beginning of its existence, i.e. that ‘to see is to do’ and that to attend a theatre event is never a passive action, then, in the case of *Mount Olympus*, it will not be too bold to say that performers and spectators share in that cathartic space that is the theatrical event, a level of exhaustion that is unique and that cannot be elsewhere reproduced. The participation in this tragic theatrical event is then, simultaneously active, insofar as the spectator ‘actively’ chooses each time what to watch and when to watch, and also passive in a ‘pathetic’ way. The spectator is forced to attend the event in the sacred space of the theatre, reproducing the Greek concept of ‘theoria’. In this way creating, as Gadamer points out in his phenomenological analysis of the tragic experience, the form of true participation, the moment in which the spectator gives in to madness. In Gadamer’s words: “being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching”.³⁴ This form of true participation, this truth that only the tragic gives access to, becomes real throughout the whole performance and reaches its climax during Dionysus’s final monologue in which he claims: “truth is what eats you alive, and yes, truth is madness... It goes on, and on, and on, and on, until every single one of you screams with madness. And even that, I can ensure you, it’s just the beginning”.³⁵

³³ See Clelia Falletti, Gabriele Sofia and Victor Jacono, eds., *Theatre and Cognitive Neuroscience* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 3-14.

³⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1975] trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 122.

³⁵ For what concerns the script, this is a transcription from the video of the performance available online. The official publication of the script is available only in Flemish. See Jan Fabre and Jeroen Olyslagers, *Mount Olympus: Het Script* (Amsterdam-Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij, 2016).

The true experience of the spectator, together with the performers, in the tragic space of *Mount Olympus* then takes place at the ex-static level that belongs to the cathartic realm. Fabre's production revolves around an idea of experience that is not just aesthetic and also not merely conceptual; it is not purely affective, neither is it based on a psychological process of self-reflection. It is an active and participatory experience and yet passive and 'pathetic', based on the tacit agreement of the awareness of a fictional process that is really happening and consuming itself in the 'here and now', and is repeated all over again and does not end. And if performers and spectators share exhaustion, desires, passions, smells, and sweat in this 'shared space' of the tragic, they also share the responsibility of nurturing the tragedy within oneself. Or as the warriors of beauty – in a moment of final relief – say at the very end to their partners in crime: "Take the power back.

³⁶ Ibid. Enjoy your own tragedy. Breathe, just breathe, and imagine something new!"³⁶

The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces. Fluid Spectatorship into Hybrid Places

Abstract: Arts are permeable. The current museographical approach seems to go towards a form of interdisciplinarity which leverages the encounter between arts. From the MAXXI in Rome to the Louvre of Paris, to the National Gallery in London, this interaction between different art fields (dance, theater, music, etc.), gives rise to new forms of aesthetic proposals. Choreographed expositions and exhibited choreographies are the rendition of this kind of negotiation between visual art, museum spaces, and performing arts, which sets up the spectatorship dialectic between temporal and spatial dynamics. Within a migration process, from the black box to the white cube, the theatrical body becomes a work of art, through a process of objectivation.

Likewise, the spectatorship participation is choreographed, as well as the very act of observation. Moreover, the exhibition space loses its architectural and statutory hierarchies, becoming a hybrid place, a meta-theatre and simultaneously a meta- museum. The point of view changes; the frontal perspective of the theatrical or cinematographic architectures, and the Renaissance monocular gaze disappear. This is a contemporary dynamic of creolization for which, within an exhibition context, the spectatorship enjoyment dialogue with a form of theatrically, becoming a critical device of transcultural mediation.

Keywords: *aesthetic experience, creolization, contemporary exhibition, interdisciplinarity, performing arts, visual arts*

In a classic aquarium, each fish is enclosed in a little compartment with its name in Latin above it. While in more recent aquarium all the species mingle together, and it becomes impossible to decide, when a fish passes in front of you, exactly what name you should call it.
(John Cage, *For the Birds*)

In 2003, Bernardo Bertolucci referenced the famous race through the Louvre galleries of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Bande à part* (1964), by launching the three characters of his film *The Dreamers* on the same path into the Parisian museum. Running inside a museum or lying down on the floor beside a work of art (*Dancing Museum*, Louvre, 2016) is normally conceived as forbidden behaviors within a normal exhibition context. Nevertheless, the evocation of this kind of actions offers today the possibility to question the contemporary museum approach devoted to a contextual interdisciplinarity and to a form of artistic creolization,¹ where these behaviors become a real aesthetic device of creation.

In the contemporary art system, art is by now a history of exhibitions,² art is contextual. Thus, while artworks can no longer be considered outside of their modes of presentation, exhibitions "have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known".³ As part "spectacle, part socio-historical event, part

¹ "An encounter of cultural elements coming from absolutely different horizons and which really creolize themselves, really stratify and confuse with each other in order to create something that is absolutely unpredictable and absolutely new, the creole reality". Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 13.

² Jérôme Glicenstein, *L'art: une histoire d'expositions* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

³ Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, *Thinking about Exhibition* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Laurent Fleury, "Le pouvoir des institutions culturelles: les deux révolutions du TNP et du Centre Pompidou", in Claude Fourteau, ed., *Les institutions culturelles au plus près du public* (Paris: Musée du Louvre/La documentation Française, 2002), 36.

⁶ See Nicolas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

⁷ To give a few examples of performance studies: Georgina Guy, *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation: Displayed & Performed* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Jackson Shannon, "Performing Show and Tell: Disciplines of Visual Culture and Performance Studies", *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4.2 (2005), 163-77; Susan Bennett, *Theatre & Museums* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Erin Brannigan, "Dance and the Gallery: Curation as Revision", *Dance Research Journal*, 47.1 (2015), 5-25; Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934); Richard Shusterman, *La fin de l'expérience esthétique* (Pau: Presses Universitaires Pau, 1999).

⁹ Marianne Massin, *Expérience esthétique et art contemporain* (Rennes: PUR, 2013), 28.

¹⁰ See Mathieu Copeland, *Choreographing Exhibitions* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2013).

¹¹ See the distinction between performance art, intended as an experimental corporal practice which is "exhibited in a direct, face to face relationship between the performer and the audience", and performing arts (or living arts): dance, music and theater. Between these two typologies of 'performances' resides a clear difference which affects the ontology of the theatrical act. While the performance art criticizes the methods of reproducibility typical of performing arts: "methods of narrativity, spectacularisation, and representation", on the contrary, performing arts underline the unrepeatable nature of performance, and its attachment to the spatiality and the temporality of the present. Barbara Formis, "Performance Here and Then", in Copeland, *Choreographing Exhibitions*, 56.

¹² "It is surely time to think about theatre and museums together since so many others do: cultural policy makers, urban and regional planners, arts and other marketing agencies, and of course, visitors". Bennett, *Theatre & Museums*, 77.

¹³ Julie Pellegrin, "This is not a Catalogue", in Copeland, *Choreographing Exhibitions*, 17.

¹⁴ Luca Basso Peressut et al., eds., *Mettere in scena, mettere in mostra* (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2015), 11.

structuring device",⁴ the exhibition seems to be a "potential place of action"⁵ in which the beholder meets his own limits and possibilities. In recent years, we have witnessed a turning point in the relationship between the notions of aesthetic experience and temporary exhibition,⁶ which can also be explained by the emergence of visual culture studies and performance studies which have highlighted the need for a re-reading of some key concepts, such as the theatricality of the exhibition, and display, the spectatorship performed, or even the exhibition space choreographed.⁷ Current museographical programs appear as attempts at interdisciplinary dialogue between different art fields, which propose to the public a new form of contemplation or aesthetic participation; in the specific context of contemporary art, the aim of the exhibition seems, in most cases, to want to create the preconditions for the staging of aesthetic experiences intended as a very work of art. Beyond the ontological issues,⁸ the aesthetic experience is no longer limited to artifacts, but it is a bodily encounter in a specific space and time, it is a: "sensitive relation that one maintains with the environmental context".⁹

From the MAXXI in Rome to the Louvre in Paris, to the National Gallery in London (just to name a few emblematic occasions), the reciprocal interaction between various forms of art – in particular, dance, theater and visual arts –, gives rise to new aesthetic experimentations: a kind of "choreographed exhibitions"¹⁰ or 'exhibited choreographies' which upset the spectatorship dialectic between temporal and spatial practices as well as the logic of exhibition display. These dynamics – forms of *metissage* and negotiation between modern and contemporary art, exhibition spaces and performing arts¹¹ – challenge the ontology of the theater;¹² better yet, by putting into relation the ideas of choreography and exhibition, they appropriate respective languages to create performing exhibitions in which the spectator navigates within a fluid environment and an ephemeral temporality. Furthermore, choreographing exhibitions within a museum context makes the artist's body (dancer or actor) the very subject of the proposal, that therefore deprives spectators of the traditional conditions of a theatrical gaze. Taking place in precise and temporary moments which overlap the museum daily routine, these interdisciplinary proposals lead the spectator to rethink his habits and his attitude towards the act of vision. "In the absence of scenery, of lighting or specific music.... The spectators [are] confronted not only with what [is] there to see, but also with the way in which they negotiate their own movements, themselves [catch] up in the train of the choreography."¹³

In this sense, an aesthetic of space arises; the aesthetic of the ephemeral, of the temporary, comes up creating a hybrid, fluid space where the spectatorship body moves by experiencing a new spatial and phenomenological dynamics. We might almost speak of an innovative spectatorship awareness that emphasizes the polysemy of the idea of space; by acquiring new identities and expanding its boundaries, the idea of space becomes "a temporary attribute bound not so much to the quality of architecture as to the uses which arise from it".¹⁴

Organized 'in' and thought 'for' places of art (museums, galleries, institutions, etc.), these types of choreographed propositions become the occasion to discuss some key concepts, such as the notion of objectification of the body, the crises of the art object, the documentary transmission or the archiving of the ephemeral, or even to discuss the current museographical politics that we could define as 'living'. In this regard, the concept of theatrical "museography"¹⁵ of Claire Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Jacques Ezrati allows forthwith analyzing these issues without forgetting the question of the spectator or the exhibition context. This exhibition approach is based on the concept of 'sensory exhibition', in which the public participates actively in the unveiling of the artistic event. This way highlights the dialectic between the political and economic museum necessity to seduce a *large audience*, and the use of a theatrical language to realize alternative exhibitions. In this sense, the idea of 'alternative' is used as an advertising factor to attract spectator curiosity towards new artistic contexts. In other words, the theatrical 'museography' allows awakening the interest of the spectator, by creating the conditions for the realization of 'spectacular' aesthetic experiences.

If this approach, on the one hand, put in communication two distinct aesthetic regimes – presentation and representation –, on the other hand, also echoes back to the famous Jean Davallon's 'viewpoint museology', from 1992, that is an engaging method of presentation centered not on exhibited artworks but on the spectator. "Objects and knowledge are present as before, but they are used as material for the construction of a hypermedia environment which encourages visitors to evolve, offering them one or more points of view on the subject of the exhibition".¹⁶ Based on this consideration, while the phenomenological and spatial experience of an artistic proposition seems to aspire implicitly to the spectatorship seduction, a work of art becomes a real scenographic apparatus for the exhibition.

These two reflections find in Claire Bishop's in-depth analysis of contemporary museology a critical rendition: "Rather than a highly individualized artistic epiphany, viewers to these galleries encountered the euphoria of space first, and art second".¹⁷ In other words, contemporary exhibition spaces seem to be places of "sociability" capable of "providing visitors with the enjoyment of specific experiences".¹⁸ In this regard, Dominique Poulot, François Mairesse, Daniel Jacobi, and many other theorists have suggested considering places of art and, in particular, museums, as administrative instances, as economically and subsequently cultural institutions whose main objective is to attract the public, by catering to its needs. However, as Bishop underlines, "the steering question for the museum is not *whether* people will visit the museum but *how* they will view the works".¹⁹ Alternative and interdisciplinary practices thus appear as propositions able to begin a rethinking of the museum's role and the value of its collection and spectatorship visits. In this sense, the display activities of museum institutions, which put into dialogue different systems of re-presentation – dance, theater, visual art, music,²⁰ etc. –, while offering new opportunities for an aesthetic and artistic creation, they

¹⁵ Claire Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Jacques Ezrati, *L'Exposition: Théorie et Pratique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004). The authors propose a critical comparison between exhibition issues and modalities of staging: *artistic* approach, *scientific* approach, and *theatrical* approach. While, the first approach, artistic, characterizes the exhibitions of objects, following the traditional view of the history of art, the scientific approach is related to the exhibition of knowledge and it meets the pedagogical and cognitive demands of an attentive public.

¹⁶ Jean Davallon, "Le musée est-il vraiment un média?", *Publics et Musées: Regards sur l'évolution des musées*, 2 (1992), 115; see also Jean Davallon, *L'exposition à l'œuvre: stratégies de communication et médiation symbolique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999). In his text, Davallon proposes three models of museology which correspond to as many types of exhibits and to as many exhibition spaces: object museology, idea museology and viewpoint museology.

¹⁷ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology: or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Koenig Books, 2013), 5. Bishop argues and analyzes the considerations of Rosalind Krauss's text "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism Museum" (1990).

¹⁸ Dominique Poulot, *Musée et muséologie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 112.

¹⁹ Bishop, *Radical Museology*, 37.

²⁰ Not to mention the latest extra cultural experiences, such as yoga or gymnastics at the museum.

²¹ Jean-Jacques Boutaud, “Du sens, des sens. Sémiotique, marketing et communication en terrain sensible”, *Semen*, 23 (2007).

²² Daniel Jacobi, “Exposition temporaire et accélération: la fin d’un paradigme?”, *La lettre de l’OCIM*, 150 (November-December 2013); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

²³ Claire Bishop, “The Perils and Possibilities of Dance in the Museum: Tate, MoMA and Whitney”, *Dance Research Journal*, 46.3 (December 2014), 66.

²⁴ Josette Feral, *Théories et pratiques du théâtre: au-delà des limites* (Montpellier: L’Entretemps, 2011), 102.

²⁵ Jacques Sato, “Littéralité et théâtralité”, in Louis Dieuzayde et al., eds., *Le Langage s’entend mais la pensée se voit* (Aix-en-Provence: PUR, 2007), 172.

²⁶ Marcin Fabianski, “Ce que le musée du Louvre n’était pas en 1793: De certains musées pourvus d’une rotonde à coupole, lieux de débats érudits”, in Edouard Pommier et al., eds., *Les musées en Europe à la veille de l’ouverture du Louvre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995), 128-155.

also become the result of a very form of exploitation of performing arts. This condition could be considered as a new exhibition need which uses the communicative,²¹ economic and social²² power of specific programs including performing arts in the galleries or museum spaces, in order to create what Bishop defines as a “Tino Sehgal effect”.²³

In any case, whether for aesthetic or more pragmatically commercial purposes, contemporary attention to the ‘exotic’ occurs as regularly into the artistic programming of museums, or within contemporary artists’ creative approach, and that implies a general rethinking of the relationship between visual arts and performing arts, or better yet, a re-reading of the choreographic context and the exhibition vocabulary. The displacement from the traditional theater to an exhibition space involves a series of ontological adjustments that resize the idea of moving body, of the orchestra and scene, of social space, and spectator gaze. At the same time, this migration from black-box theaters to white cube institutions puts into question the very notion of theatricality which, appearing as “the result of a perceptive dynamic, that of the gaze which connects someone or something watched (subject or object) and a watcher”,²⁴ thus becomes a device, a medium capable of proposing: “a new configuration of artistic experience”.²⁵

Besides, it should be noted that most of the museums or contemporary exhibition contexts are equipped by auditoriums or stage spaces to accommodate ‘spectacular’ propositions. This tendency to present performing arts in specific places recalls the ancient architectural hierarchies of the theater, such as the traditional distinction between the orchestra and the stage. However, this attitude seems to have been overshadowed by a current way, for which performing arts conquer museum spaces, from the entrance to secondary corridors; these kinds of interventions, which do not respect the formal and functional distinctions, equalize and democratize the exhibition space, by eliminating architectural hierarchies between noble spaces and connecting spaces, rest areas, or passageways. Thus, the scene is everywhere and nowhere; space becomes a hybrid place, and the beholder emancipates himself by conquering the stage that he shares with the artworks/body in motion.

As a sort of compromise, while the museum seeks in the theater the narration of a corporeal temporality, the theater, for its part, solicits in the museum the documentary research. Therefore, it would seem that the current artistic programming has generated meta-museum places and meta-theatrical places; hybrid spaces in which different languages overlap mutually, giving rise to a sort of hybridization between different forms of re-presentation which confer on the museum its original value of the sanctuary of Muses.

“Can savant feasts, under the auspices of the Muses, be held in contemporary museums?”²⁶

painting excels and is superior in rank to music, because it does not perish immediately after its creation, as happens unfortunately with music.

(Leonardo)²⁷

In 1728, Ephraïm Chambers defined the museum as: “Every place which houses things having an immediate relationship with the arts and the Muses”.²⁸ These latter, while they presided over the arts and sciences, also ruled “musicians and poets, presiding over banquets and sacred festivals”.²⁹ In other words, the “most august sanctuary of the Muses”³⁰ was originally an interdisciplinary meeting place; not by chance, the etymological definition of the term *musetion*³¹ refers to a place of reflection and philosophical debate.

The current artistic and cultural context is far from Michael Fried’s postulate, for which: “art degenerates as it approaches the condition of the theater”,³² as it is also far from Greenberg’s laconism and even from Lessing’s oldest debate against Horace’s *Ut Pictura Poesis*. Unlike the formalist and modernist ambition which aimed to valorize the differentiation of statutory boundaries of the arts, nowadays the “arts of time and the arts of space”³³ meet again, by generating a relationship where the ideas of temporal succession and spatial juxtaposition coexist. Although having had distinct evolution and specific fields of development, in some cases, visual arts and performing arts have crossed each other. We should think, for example, of the ideology of alternative spaces, developed both in the exhibition sphere (the 1970s in America, just to mention the most historicized case) and in the theatrical field (Eugenio Barba’s *Third Theater* or Trisha Brown’s spatial experimentations). In addition, over time, we can recognize some examples in which art met theater and vice versa, such as the Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*, the Futurist *Serate*, or even in the 1950s, when the crisis of the representation has been, among other things, an opportunity to experience new performative forms, for Merce Cunningham, John Cage or the Black Mountain College.³⁴ Afterwards, the falsified reality of Luigi Ontani, Gilbert & Georges’s living sculptures, Cindy Sherman’s disguises, or the cases of theatricalization of Orlan and, in the cinematographic field, of Pier Paolo Pasolini, are other examples which witness the continuous and tight dialogue between these two representation systems. In present time, finally, some artists – such as Lili Reynaud Dewar, Ragnar Kjartansson, Dector & Dupuy, Cesare Pietroiusti, Nadia Vadori-Gauthier, Julien Prévieux, Boris Charmatz, Sasha Waltz, Jérôme Bel, etc. – have overlapped different representative and communicative levels, by appropriating the narrative and aesthetic potential of moving body.

In these latter dynamics, several concepts such as the moving artwork, or phenomenological experience, or even instantaneity, duration, active or passive participation, introduce the basis of a new spatial and temporal consciousness of spectators. In particular, the spectatorship participation is choreographed and theatricalized, as well as the very act of observation: the body of the beholder

²⁷ “Ma la pittura eccelle e signoreggia la musica perch’essa non more immediate dopo la sua creazione”, Martin Kemp, *Leonardo on Painting*, trans. by Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 35.

²⁸ Ephraïm Chambers, *Cyclopaedia* (London, 1728), 605; reprinted in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences*, X (Neufchâtel, 1765), 893-894.

²⁹ François Antoine Pomey, *Pantheum mythicum seu fabulosa deorum historia* (Frankfurt, 1701), 151.

³⁰ Borelly, “Description de la Galerie de Médicis”, *Journal d’instruction publique*, 3 (1793), 179.

³¹ Marc-Olivier Gonseth, “Le dépôt, la vitrine et l’espace social”, in Pierre-Alain Mariaux et al., eds., *Les lieux de la muséologie* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2007), 6-7. See also François Mairesse, *Le musée temple spectaculaire: une histoire du projet muséal* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2002), 17.

³² Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 139.

³³ Gotthold E. Lessing, *Laocoon, ou Des frontières de la peinture et de la poésie* [1766] (Paris: Hermann, 1990), 120-121.

³⁴ Though the lack of real and conceptual aesthetic consciousness has made the performing arts simple exhibition devices or documentation items, until at least the 1960s.

becomes, very often, the object of an implicit transformation that, depending on contexts and museographic goals, transforms the visitor in a device, in an obstacle, or in the real subject of the artistic proposal. Likewise, dance, theater, or cinema are not to be considered as mere subjects of a historical or documentary exhibitions, but, on the contrary, as tautological devices of their own staging. In other words, choreographies or theatrical performances are not exhibited in the form of archival elements (historical footage, posters, etc.), but are temporarily staged in a museum context, becoming the real objects of worship, the real works of art which upset the traditional logic of the exhibition display.

³⁵ Walter Moser, “L’interartialité: pour une archéologie de l’intermédialité”, in Marion Froger and Jürgen E. Müller, eds., *Intermédialité et socialité* (Münster: Nodus, 2007), 69-92.

³⁶ John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings ’73–’78* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan U. P., 1979), 179.

³⁷ Michel de Certeau, “L’opération historique”, in *Faire de l’histoire*, 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

We could speak of a form of *interartiality*,³⁵ that is an interaction between different arts which, while maintaining their own specificity, still dialogue through a conceptual compromise between proximity and distance. Within a sublimation process that seeks to overcome the statutory boundaries – “the fences [are coming] down and the labels are being removed. An up-to-date aquarium has all the fish swimming together in one huge tank”³⁶ –, a kind of closeness of attitudes and modes appears. We could define this condition as a neighbourhood of foreign productions stem from different social spaces and different methodologies and histories³⁷ seeking to improve each other.

This communion which enhances differences becomes even more understandable when we think of the evolution of the very idea of theatricality. While in the 1950s and 1960s, this notion was used to distinguish and to make the theater autonomous from other arts (especially dance and performance), today, on the contrary, this differentiation is attenuated and emphasizes the possible ways of interaction. This change of perspective has enabled, foremost, a re-evaluation of spectacular dynamics and theatrical languages which, by themselves, become aesthetic and conceptual devices to be exhibited. In this way, whilst maintaining the distinctiveness of each context, when these worlds and systems come into contact, their dialogue determines some contact zones, namely: “social spaces where cultures meet, collide and confront each other, often in contexts of relation power highly asymmetric”.³⁸ In these situations, “subjects construct themselves through their mutual relationships”,³⁹ by juxtaposing “in a single real place many spaces and locations which remain, for themselves, incompatible”.⁴⁰ This is, therefore, a set of different “situated” dialogues that have been readjusted in order to appropriate a new space able to create other forms of translation and interpretation.

³⁸ Mary Luise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”, *Profession 1991* (New York: MLA, 1991), 575.

³⁹ Mary Luise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “Les hétérotopies”, in Daniel Defert, eds., *Michel Foucault: Le Corps utopique, suivi de Les Hétérotopies* (Fécamp: Nouvelles Éditions Ligne, 2009).

Performing the Spectatorship Gaze

Le rôle du musée n’est pas seulement d’informer et d’instruire, il est même vraisemblable que cela ne soit pas son rôle du tout et qu’il ne le fasse qu’à la marge. En revanche, il est de provoquer des éveils, sensibles, émotionnels, intellectuels....

(Serge Chaumier, *La muséographie de l’art*)⁴¹

⁴¹ “The role of the museum is not only to inform and to instruct, it is even likely that it is not its role at all and that it does so only at the margin. However, it is to provoke sensitive, emotional, intellectual awakenings”. Serge Chaumier, “La muséographie de l’art ou la dialectique de l’œuvre et de sa réception”, *Culture et musées*, 16 (2010), 35.

Beyond the artistic proposals of artists, today we should probably investigate the stakes that a performing proposal, intended as an institutional event, can produce within a museum context. In this regard, if, on the one hand, it is necessary to wonder how the museum opens to the logic of the scene, on the other hand, we should insist on what it means to exhibit today, by putting into discussion the very role of the art institution. Many examples exemplify these issues from a contemporary point of view, such as the exhibition year of Tino Sehgal at the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam (2015), the solo show *Simon Forti: Thinking with the Body* at the Salzburg Museum (2014), the exhibition *Yvonne Rainer: Body Space Language* at the Ludwig Museum (2012), or *Move! Choreographing you* at the Hayward Gallery (2011). In these proposals, the encounter between performing arts and visual arts spatializes moving bodies as exhibition devices, by creating a moving scene. At the same time, several contemporary art manifestations show how the reinterpretation and critical rereading of theatrical and spectacular languages and their narrative potential can lead to new proposals and aesthetic events, such as the *Nouveau Festival* of the Centre Pompidou, or *Do Disturb* at the Palais de Tokyo.

That being said, first of all, an ontological distinction must be made, since, depending on the different places or institutions, the interdisciplinary nature of these exhibition dynamics varies for aims and realizations. Then, we can distinguish between contemporary art museums, which are more inclined to propose dynamics crossing stylistic and conceptual boundaries, and museums of modern or ancient art, or museums of other natures, scientific, historical, etc. For this latter kind of places, the process of hybridization seems to exploit the communicative power of theatrical languages, mostly choreographies, to propose new ways to live the museum and its collections, and other forms of vision and aesthetic enjoyment.

Speaking of that, the program set up by the Louvre in Paris, *Nocturnes du Vendredi*, proposes classical ballets held in normal exhibition spaces. During these occasions, the interaction between dance, artworks of the collection and the ornament of the rooms, questions the limits of spectatorship gaze. The absence of a real distinction between scene and orchestra makes the beholder free to meander into the room, changing his point of view in relation to dancing bodies and the exhibition outfitting of the specific moment. Within a choreographic partition, artworks, mostly sculptures, thus temporarily lose their nature of work of art to become, instead, almost scenographic devices, accessories or mere decoration, which activate the staging of actions; therefore, moving bodies are objectified, acquiring the status of artwork. The exhibition space, for its part, become a very scenographic architecture: exhibition halls lose their first nature of containers to become, through a conceptual overlapping, meta-theatrical spaces. A temporary new scenery thus comes to the public.

This brief example emphasizes several questions concerning both the nature of the museum artworks and their role in the exhibition process. Within these

choreographed dynamics, the action of putting on display merges with the creation process, making the theatrical gesture a heuristic device. In this sense, the question of temporality and duration of action goes hand in hand with the statutory definition of the performed gesture, as Mathieu Copeland underlines: “Time is fundamental in an exhibition made of, and in, movement. In this orchestrated time, these gestures only last as long as it takes for them to be realized and experienced. To choreograph an exhibition is to confront the ephemeral nature of movements”.⁴² Here, Copeland highlights the interdependent relationship between the idea of realization and the idea of exhibition process, revealing the ephemeral nature of both contemporary exhibition and aesthetic experience. “A choreographed exhibition will only exist for the time needed for its overall realization”.⁴³ In this way, the spectator finds himself living a nomadic visual experience, chasing the bodies in motion and repositioning himself at every displacement of the artworks.

⁴² Mathieu Copeland, “Choreographing Exhibitions: An Exhibition Happening Everywhere, at all Times, with and for Everyone”, in Copeland, *Choreographing Exhibitions*, 21.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Guy, *Theatre, Exhibition, and Curation*, 24.

⁴⁵ *Louvre* (Paris), *MAC VAL* and *La Briqueterie* (Vitry sur Seine), Sioban Davies Dance and the *National Gallery* (London), *Dansateliers* (Rotterdam), *D.IDS Dance Identity* (Pinkafeld), *Civic Museum* and *Palazzo Sturm* (Bassano del Grappa).

Dancing Museum is, for its part, another example which places onstage the spectator, seeking to investigate what it means to attend an exhibition, and to explore “traditional ideologies of conservation and curation wherein alternative arrangements of body and object can be imagined and repositioned”.⁴⁴ Stemmed from the collaboration of choreographers, dancers, and video artists, the project has proposed, for two years, choreographic exhibitions in European museums.⁴⁵ Beyond the will to experience space phenomenologically, the objective of this project was to take advantage of dancing bodies in order to propose to the public a new way of looking at the work of art, of contemplating the space and of experiencing a museum place. In April 2016, *Dancing Museum* invaded the Louvre's spaces, precisely the rooms of the Department of Oriental Antiquities, performing other methods of aesthetic reading and museum visit; as a kind of promenade, the event proposed an experience, halfway between a different apprehension of the museum and a different approach towards a contemporary idea of theatricality.

During the choreography, dancers have surrounded sculptures with their bodies, walked into the halls, danced in transitional corridors or lied down on the floor, just below a showcase and next to unaware visitors of choreography. By pushing the beholder to change perspective, these dancers have questioned the normal rules of museum behavior, offering to the public the chance to experience new points of view. Moreover, being dressed normally, without any sign of recognition, the dancers mingled with the spectators, preventing them to clearly distinguish between dancers and simple visitors. As in a system of overlapping, several statutory levels emerged, from the spatial and temporal superposition of different exhibitions to the encounter between distinct kinds of spectators - those who were in the halls to admire an artwork and those instead who were there looking for dancers. According to these experiences, the theatricality of ephemeral gestures would replace the presence of museum objects, through the staging of an experience in which the spectator becomes, depending on the occasion, an actor, a

scenic element, or a disturbance factor. In any case, the beholder's new role relativizes the choreography, by sublimating the uniqueness of the 'here and now'. An unusual proposition arises, which is neither visual art, nor performing arts nor performance art, but a hybrid event composed by the immediacy of the performative gesture, the uniqueness of the experience and the museum spatiality.

Beyond the concepts of objectivation of the body and of aesthetic experience, these two examples cross boundaries between the sacred space of art, the scenery, and the beholder's privileged place. Thus, within a fluid and hybrid place, halfway between a theatrical stage and a museum space, the spectator's point of view is upset. The typical frontal perspective of the theatrical architectures, as well as the Renaissance monocular gaze which blocks the viewer in a specific place, disappear to leave room to a multidirectional experience. In a sort of parallax, which multiplies the paths and points of view from which to experience the vision, the spectator is activated by a multipurpose perception and involved in the choreographed exhibition. While observing, the spectator also participates in the exhibition, therefore, his behavior becomes an exercise of aesthetic creation. By abandoning his condition of passiveness, about which Susan Sontag⁴⁶ realized a deep reflection (at least from a cinematographic or photographic point of view), the spectator conquers the scene in the illusion of having acquired an emancipated condition, almost becoming a work of art, a real exhibit.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

⁴⁷ Duncan Cameron, "Effective Exhibits. A Search for New Guidelines. The Evaluator's Viewpoint", *Museum News*, 46.5 (January 1968), 3-45.

What experiences and what audience should thus be considered? How should we think of the ways of use and enjoyment of these new narrative modes? Can we still speak of a visiting path or should we consider introducing a free experience and various modalities of spectatorship perception?

Performing the Idea of Exhibition

The new museums of the future will ... seek to promote different modes and levels of interpretation by subtle juxtapositions of experience. Some rooms and works will be fixed, the pole star around which other will turn. In this way we can expect to create a matrix of changing relationships to be explored by visitors according to their particular interests and sensibilities. In the new museum each of us, curators and viewers alike, will have to become more willing to chart our own path, redrawing the map of modern art, rather than following a single path laid down by a curator.
(Serota, *Experience or Interpretation*)

By taking modern and contemporary art museums as examples, these choreographed events have to be interpreted not as in the examples seen above – as a proposal realized in order to develop new forms of vision and perception of museum collections –, but as a real exhibition of contemporary art which questions mostly the process of exhibiting and the creative act.

The intervention of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker⁴⁸ at the Centre Pompidou

⁴⁸ *Work / Travail / Arbeid*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 26 February-6 March 2016.

(2016) allows going further in this reflection. At this occasion, the choreographer conceived a nine-hour-a-day show, executed by the dancers of the Rosas group, and exhibited in the South Gallery of Beaubourg. During these hours, the dancers walked and danced to music by Gerard Grisey, following geometric and circular paths that they traced with chalk on the floor. Throughout these choreographies, the spectators were not only free to wander in the exhibition space but were even invited to invade the scene in a peremptory way, to become almost an obstacle to trajectories drawn and followed by dancers. The musicians, likewise, were on the scene, playing and sailing on the same trajectories. Thus, musicians, dancers, and spectators intersected each other, by sharing the same space which was also connected with the outside, through the large glass window of the gallery which overlooks the Tinguely's *Stravinsky Fontaine*.

Unlike the examples discussed above, this exhibition has not taken advantage of the narrative potential of the artworks of the collection to create possible interdisciplinary encounters. The choreographed exhibition or, in this case, the exhibited choreography of the Belgian choreographer interrogated the profound significance of the act of putting on display. Among other things, this is even more evident if we consider that the Rosas group dancers were the only 'objects' to contemplate in the gallery. Unlike the Louvre example, where dancers, as semantic devices, questioned the viewer on his visual and perceptual relationship with the museum objects, in the case of the Centre Pompidou, the dancers, together with the spectators and musicians, were the only items to look.

The Boris Charmatz's *Musée de la Danse*, exhibited at the Tate Gallery in London (2015) and at the MoMA in New York (2013), is another example in which the absence of traditional works of art in the exhibition space made the actors and the spectators' bodies the subjects of the spectatorship gaze. At the London exhibition,⁴⁹ for two full days (48h uninterrupted opening), 90 dancers invaded the Tate Gallery spaces through performances, dances, ballets, or even muscle heating to the public which finally participated by becoming the implicit subject of this proposal. In addition to the dance sessions scheduled at specific times and in different galleries of the London museum, also the Turbine Hall was invaded by Charmatz's dancers. The huge open space of the Turbine Hall, usually devoted to contemporary art installations, has thus become a dance hall for different types of dancers. Indeed, we can distinguish two different spectatorship conditions: a spectator who preferred to stay on the margins of space, sitting on the floor and contemplating the dancers, and a spectator who, on the contrary, chosen to get onstage and take part in the event. Once again, a moving artwork arises; like a wave, dancers' bodies wander inside a space to be discovered differently, putting into question the discontinuity of the various temporalities of the logic stage, and emphasizing a temporal and conceptual overlap.

The interventions of Sasha Waltz at the Museum of contemporary art and architecture (MAXXI) in Rome and at the Neues Museum in Berlin (2009) are

⁴⁹ BMW Tate Live: *if Tate Modern was Musée de la Danse?*, Tate Modern, London, 15-16 May 2015.

other emblematic examples. At these occasions, the Berlin choreographer created simultaneous dancing performances by offering to the public a first exploration of the museum space. Both for the MAXXI in Rome, built by Zaha Hadid, and for the Neues Museum, restructured by David Chipperfield, the choreographies of Sasha Waltz inaugurated the reopening of these places which, for the occasion, were exposed empty, without any traditional artworks installed.

In both cases, Waltz unveiled a particular way to understand the architecture of the place, intending it as a theatrical scenery. The curved shapes of the walls, the oblique lines, the horizontality and the verticality of these museums have been sublimated thanks to the movements of the dancers. By considering space as the result of the communion between its architecture and its uses, the choreographer proposed a form of architectural dialectic which connects dancers' bodies and spectators' bodies. With Waltz, the body thus becomes the vehicle for an architectural message. Conceiving this choreographed exhibition as an exhibition in motion where the viewer moved together with the artworks (bodies), Waltz organized it on a set of simultaneous stages which the public could discover individually. Through an architectural and phenomenological experience, the spectator was thus free to choose his personal vision perspective, to create a specific museum path, and finally, to write and read his own personal exhibition. In an exhibition space that was emptied of any object, and saturated by a gestural, aesthetic, and experiential presence, bodies have moved in different temporalities. Therefore, the viewer has had to confront not just about what he should have looked at, but also about the way he should have looked, negotiated and adapted his movements, within a space almost become a real stage.

One last example, Tino Sehgal's *Carte Blanche* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2016) finally summarizes the dynamics of the interrelation between performing arts and visual arts, as well as the emergence of a new form of spectatorship. At this occasion, the whole structure hosting the Parisian art center has been emptied of any kind of scenery device or foreign elements to the architecture of the site.

The exhibition space has unveiled, showing its structural conformation and thus becoming a huge stage in which an indefinite series of actors and dancers alternated day after day, overlapping with the audience. According to the artistic practice of the artist, who tries to go beyond the preconceptions of the exhibition meaning, and to focus on interpersonal exchange and aesthetic experience that these series of performed situations produce, the ephemeral and random nature of relationships emerges with clarity.

Once again, we are faced with a series of bodies, spectators, and actors, whose artistic and aesthetic status cannot be totally distinguished. The non-enunciation of the fictional performance and the non-presentation of the artistic device reveal the idea of a singular, personal, and intimate body, which then overlaps the notions of artwork and object. In this way, it is no longer a matter of distinguishing or contemplating a body that walks, dances or plays, but of becoming aware of own

position and role in a social space. Therefore, the lack of statutory limits able to define the perimeters of what the fiction, the representation, and the real is, imposes a rereading of the concept of representative temporality. The use of theatrical languages within a museum context involves thus a reconsideration of traditional terms and conditions. The spectator's freedom to choose when to come into contact with the artistic event allows depriving the proposition of its nature of theatrical reproduction, giving it a random status of unique and unrepeatable experience.

The solo show of the Norwegian artist Ragnar Kjartansson, at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2016, concludes, then, this reflection. Among the various showed artworks, *Bonjour* (2015), was a performance which repeated, during the entire duration of the show, the fleeting encounter between a man and a woman in a life-size setting. In this case, the repetition of the scene – interpreted by the actors continuously, during the opening hours of the art center – allowed the spectator to experience not only different theatrical moments, but also the narrative potential of the casual encounter, thus combining the ideas of the museum visit and the theatrical vision. At the same time, the installation of the artwork, by appropriating the language of theatrical scenography, completely overturned the scene/orchestra relationship. Indeed, while, on the one hand, the gestural repetition within a museum context allowed the spectator to become aware of a new meta-theatrical temporality, on the other hand, the theatrical scenery and its installation in the exhibition space also interrogated the spectator on his place and point of view in an exhibition context.

Located on the second floor of the museum, the two-level installation was visible both from one of the balconies of the second staircase of the building and from the ground floor. This theatrical installation was exposed as an art object, almost sculptural, and this condition not only allowed the spectator to turn around the whole stage, thus experiencing the 'behind the scenes', but also showed the representation from a totally overturned point of view, emphasizing the communicational and aesthetic power of an interdisciplinary encounter.

Where does the stage begin?

In all the examples discussed, a new spectatorship body emerges, thus becoming the accident that triggers the unconscious. Chasing the dancers in an empty museum (MAXXI, Waltz, 2009), dancing with them (Tate, Charmatz, 2015), experiencing a different form of temporality and theatrical spatiality (Palais de Tokyo, Kjartansson, 2016), becoming an obstacle to ballet dancers (Center Pompidou 2016) or even the subject of another spectator's gaze (Palais de Tokyo, Sehgal, 2016): in each of these cases, the spectator was questioned, and his presence was interrogated both as a moving body and as a thinking body. The viewer shares the same stage space of the actors, thus becoming the Pasolini's

spectators of *Che cosa sono le nuvole* (1967), who burst onto the stage to intervene in the theatrical action. The viewer finds himself immersed in a new and democratic space, where there is no real statutory or hierarchical distinctions. It is thus a temporary hybrid space, which becomes a scene thanks to the body which delimits its ephemeral boundaries.

This condition could be considered as an ontological break which democratizes (normalizes) exhibition spaces, by favoring the loss of their functional and factual characterization. Thus, the exhibition, while freeing from the modernist rigidity, crosses the threshold, invades the atrium, and appropriates transitional passages, interstitial junction, corridors, and staircases. Otherwise, this condition goes to the encounter of a new exhibition policy where performing arts become devices not only of the exhibition but also of the aesthetic creation. Consequently, this condition requires rethinking and reconfiguring the contemporary exhibition space and exhibition conditions. Demarcation, circumscription, overlap, hybridization. Where does the stage begin?

From another point of view, it is also the performative movement of the dancers that allows recognizing the spectacular space. The apprehension of choreographed gestures gives the spectator the means to elaborate his position and to locate himself in a meta-space. In this sense, the individual, as a nomad, choreographs his position on the stage, by sharing and negotiating with the dancers' bodies a place where he has, at every moment, to position himself. However, when the viewer wanders in this meta-space, he choreographs not only his position in the scene but also the spectatorship gaze, thus questioning the modalities of vision, of experience and museographic reading. Finally, we should perhaps rethink and reformulate the notion of 'public' body, its relation to the artwork, and its aesthetic objectification. In a context which requires the restatement of the fundamental concepts, the exhibition seems thus to become a spectacular and instantaneous exercise of aesthetic encounters.

Remediated Spatiality. Performative and Medial Spaces in the Work of Imitating the Dog

Abstract: This essay investigates how digital media relate to scenic space and modify its prerequisites and tensions, redraws its boundaries and creates new spatial models. In particular we analyse the use of space by the British company Imitating the Dog, finding three models of space remediation experienced in various theatre performances: the cinematic dramaturgy and theatricalizing cinema of *Hotel Methuselah* and *Kellerman*; the emotional space of the Winter Garden experience; *Arrivals and Departures* at the Deep, where scenic space redefines the borders of the urban environment.

Key words: *cinematic-dramaturgy, digital performance, Imitating the Dog, medial space,*

Published at the end of the 1960s, Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* opens with these words: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged".¹ In turn, the British director created a necessary relationship between theatre (in terms of a system of knowledge, practice and spectacle) and space within which theatrical forms are produced. According to Brook, a space is the starting point for any theatrical form at the social level, as it represents the point of connection between the various subjects living on stage. A mediological approach to theatre requires an understanding of how the medial universe, particularly the one bound by digital media, relates to scenic space and modifies its prerequisites and tensions, while redrawing its boundaries. Indeed, in the last ten years, various studies have tried to understand the nature of scenic device changes, although many theatrical companies and directors have investigated the properties of this new spatial model, which implies what is meant by digital in terms of technology and thinking machines. In her essay *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, the German philosopher Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests thinking about scenic space in two different ways: the architectural-geometric space, in which the performance takes place, and the performative space through which the performance comes into being.² In other words, space must be seen, on the one hand, as a physical place that exists before the show and does not end with its conclusion, while, on the other hand, the performative space opens up possibilities, without defining the manner of their use and fulfilment.³

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London, Palgrave, 1968), 3.

² Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York and London: Routledge), 107.

³ Ibid.

In the 20th century, the concept of space tore down the walls of the theatre and

⁴ On the importance of the scenic space as an active dramaturgical element, see Marco De Marinis, *In Cerca dell'Attore* (Rome, Bulzoni, 2000), Marco De Marinis, *Il Teatro dopo l'Età dell'Oro* (Rome, Bulzoni, 2014), Lorenzo Mango, *La Scrittura Scenica* (Rome, Bulzoni, 2006).

⁵ On this topic, see Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), Richard Schechner, *Performance Imaginaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: AJ Publications, 1982), Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1986).

⁶ Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 336.

⁷ Birgit Wiens, "Spatiality", in Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, Robin Nelson, eds., *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U. P., 2010), 91.

⁸ Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi, *Performing Mixed Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 7.

⁹ Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-first Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 64.

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 67.

challenged the hegemony of the so-called Italian scene by introducing a truly active dramaturgical element,⁴ which opened up non-conventional spaces,⁵ while redefining the spatial relationship between spectator and actor. Within this context, digital media became part of this rebuilding process which started with the historical avant-garde. As Steve Dixon noted, in one of the very first contributions to the historical-theoretical reconstruction of the theatre-digital media relationship, particular hybrid models were created since then: "Through the integration of media screens within the mise-en-scène, artists experiment with techniques that at times fragment and dislocate bodies, time, and space, and at others unify physical, spatial, and temporal significations".⁶ Put another way, digital media did not only redefine stage boundaries, but also exposed bodies to relations with their image and their digital doubles, located in increasingly sensitive and intelligent settings. Digital technology allows for the construction of hybrid and hyperconnected spaces, where a scenic sphere forms a relation with a physically defined spatiality, which are interconnected by the alphanumerical nature of digital media.

In recent years, however, new spatial models have revised conceptions of theatrical space. At the turn of the 21st century, digital media and global communication networks heralded a new spatial turn. The exponential increase of interconnections and real-time contacts between individuals and societies that are spatially, even geographically, apart from each other leads to new concepts of, and experiences within, actual and virtual spaces.⁷

This paper starts from a theoretical basis in order to discuss some of the spatial models present in the work of the British company Imitating the Dog, which, since its foundation in 1998, has investigated how digital media can recreate the mise-en-scène. This research applies methodology related to theatre and performance mediology, as well as the sociology of media, with the aim of understanding space at its borders and through its interconnections. I mean to show how this hybridity, as Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi have suggested, embraces "the nature of mixed reality and of performance ... involving multiple spaces, shifting roles, and extended time scales, all of which are connected in multiple ways through diverse forms of interface".⁸ In other words, I try to discuss Andy Lavender's observation that "we are now so routinely in a domain where media interrelate that it may be better to talk simply of hybrid mediality: the work and effects of blended media, whatsoever they be, and howsoever (inter)related".⁹

On the remediation of space

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan describes media in terms of translators. For McLuhan, media comprise devices that translate "one kind of knowledge into another mode".¹⁰ To explain this operative mechanism, he refers to the metaphorizing power of media. For McLuhan, media represent 'active metaphors'

with the power to translate experiences into new forms and new metaphors. Medial, as well as active, metaphors are operative, that is, they facilitate the process of translation and rewriting from one medium into another. Medial space is, according to him, a space whose fundamental characteristic is concerned with reinterpreting experiences into new forms, always through a metaphoric logic. At a conference in Madrid in 1946, some years before the publication of *Understanding Media*, the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset explained that theatrical space, even before the birth of electrical and electronic media, needed to be considered as capable of metaphorizing.¹¹ Everything that happens on stage starts with a form of agreement among the actors (both performers and spectators) to interrupt everyday life. For Ortega, stage and actor are the embodied universal metaphor, theatre is namely this: visible metaphor.¹² Within theatrical space, everything that happens is always connected to some kind of translating power; but its peculiarity is that its mechanism, its being an ‘active metaphor’, is made visible. If, for McLuhan, the workings of media are founded on the presence of active metaphors, and for Ortega theatre works as an active and visible metaphorical machine, then we must conclude that theatrical space is medial because it shares its metaphorizing mechanism with media.¹³

¹¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Un'idea di teatro* (Milan: Medusa, 2006), 46.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Fabrizio Deriu, *Mediologia della Performance* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2014), Antonio Pizzo, *Neodrammatico Digitale* (Turin: Accademia U. P., 2013), Alfonso Amendola, Vincenzo Del Gaudio, eds., *Teatri e immaginari digitali* (Salerno: I Gechi, 2017).

¹⁴ Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Re-mediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 5.

In 1999, Bolter and Grusin reconsidered McLuhan's assumptions made in *Understanding Media* in light of new and expanding media, citing the concept of remediation. This concept is based on the idea that digital media work through the multiplication of devices and, above all, through representative models. As Bolter and Grusin explained: “contemporary culture wants to multiply its media and to eliminate any track of mediation: ideally it would like to cancel its media in the same time it multiplies them”.¹⁴ Remediation, then, works as a space where one medium is represented by another. In this sense, theatre, in its relationship with other media, not only plays with and suffers from remediation processes, but, being performative, tends to show the workings of its remediated phenomena. Scenic space is remediated because it highlights the double remediation logic, i.e., the logic according to which a new medium takes characteristics from an old one and rewrites it while erasing the process tracks. In turn, rather than erase the remediation tracks, theatre intensifies their meaning. In this sense, it is possible to talk about remediated space because those mechanisms of remediation are brought into the light; they are made visible.

From this perspective, the work of *Imitating the Dog* can be said to be built around this remediation; it aims to show not only the processes involved, but also how scenic space reconfigures its borders from physical and experiential points of view. Since its remediative models are not univocal, but involve different medial and scenic concepts, I have decided to analyse the British company's experiments focusing on space. This analysis centres on three different operational models of space moving across a multimedia horizon and dealing with a media operativeness determined by individual media forms. As a whole, the work of *Imitating the Dog*

can be considered as a place of possibilities, which grows or narrows according to how every single media form operates. We can interpret space as the condition that must be met for a scenic event to be possible. For Fischer-Lichte, the fact that a performative space determines the range of possibilities means that theatre is neither physical nor eventful, but procedural: “Spatiality is generated through the movements and perceptions of actors and spectators ... performative space does not represent an artefact for which one or more creators are responsible. By nature, the performative space pertains to events rather than works of art”.¹⁵

¹⁵ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 114.

Space and cinematic dramaturgy

[Imitating the Dog] represent not only my own shifting site but more crucially they represent a tension between theatrical and cinematic techniques in multimedia performance.

(Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre*)¹⁶

¹⁶ Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/ Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 101.

The first model of spatial remediation employed by Imitating the Dog reflected its approach to dramaturgy. As Jennifer Parker-Starbuck has observed, Imitating the Dog works across the border between theatre and cinema. Not by chance does the company use terms such as ‘cinematic dramaturgy’ and ‘theatricalizing cinema’ to describe its work.¹⁷ In the scenic space, cinema and theatre enter into conflict with, and influence, each other, as the use of video allows for the multiplication of the actor’s corporal levels. In fact, thanks to technology, live projections ‘split’ the actor so that they can engage in dialogue with their disembodied digital double.¹⁸ At the same time, the concepts of ‘cinematic dramaturgy’ and ‘theatricalizing cinema’ recall the real-time cinema experiments of companies such as the Big Art Group and the Builders Association, as well as cinema narrative models, where image editing, as well as actors’ movements and dialogue hybridize theatre and cinema techniques. Thus, the scenic space becomes synthetic, meaning that it is not possible to comprehend a division between the mediated and the immediate. This is because, as a performative space, it is produced in relation to a single media form:

¹⁷ Imitating the Dog, *Education Pack*, <http://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/2014-ITD-EDUCATION-PACK.pdf> (accessed 12 September 2017).

¹⁸ See Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Philip Auslander, “Digital Liveness: A Historico-philosophical Perspective”, *PAJ-A Journal of Performance and Art*, 102 (2012), 3-11; Laura Gemini, “Liveness: media logics in live communication”, *Sociologia della Comunicazione*, 51 (2016): 43-63.

Indeed, where video art, installation and multi-media theatre have presented a formal diversity that reflects their cross-disciplinary roots, these practices have been marked by a tendency toward a return or resurgence of specific notions of place, presence and media, while reflecting upon the experience of the body, the performing subject and subjectivity. In this context, Multi-media: video – installation – performance is concerned with that which persists across these practices: with the implications of the convergence of the live and the mediated; with the tensions between television and video’s multiplication of the times and spaces of performance in their claim to simultaneity and presentness; with the diversity of forms and processes in which specific effects return.¹⁹

¹⁹ Nick Kaye, *Multi-media Video – Installation – Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 10.

According to Kaye, the first spatial model that Imitating the Dog applied on stage was cinematic since narrative logics played a primary role in the construction of the *mise en scène*. Cinema becomes performative and dialogue takes place alongside visual language. In this light, the term ‘theatricalizing cinema’ could explain the double process in action in the company’s work: on the one hand, there is the use of the cinematographic code (cutting, close-ups, long shots etc.); on the other, there is the presence of actors and their dialogue with their own images. As such, it is possible to define the theatre of Imitating the Dog as performative cinema or, even better, cinema in progress.

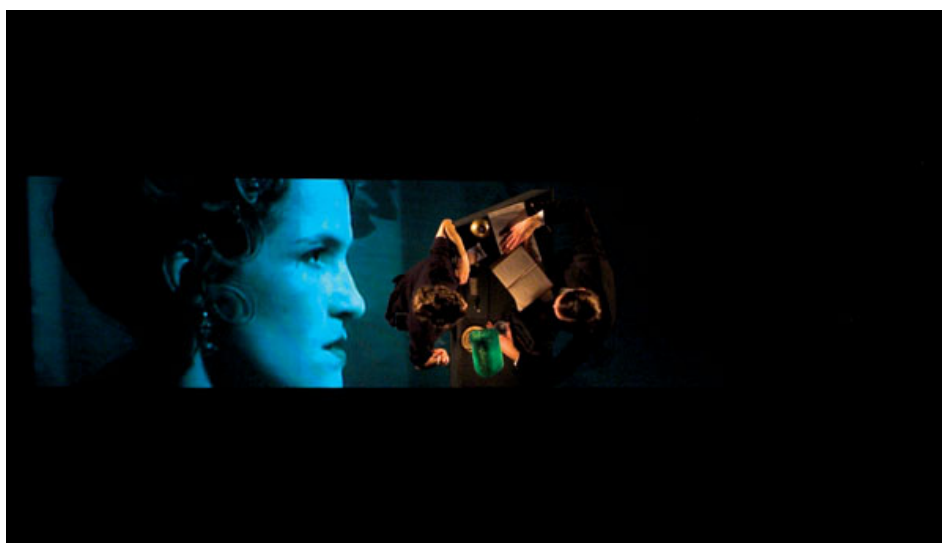


Fig. 1: *Hotel Methuselah* @Imitating the dog

We can observe this process in the 2005 show *Hotel Methuselah*, where the stage took on the shape of a 16:9 screen onto which images were projected.²⁰ The show started with an audio-visual projection, which followed the construction logic of cinematic space. At first, headlines appeared, then the space split: on one side, you could see a cinema image space, on the other a live voice-over gave way to a more complex splitting. Indeed, the company has made it clear that the show was created in the same way as “post-war British cinema and the French new wave”.²¹ By ‘cutting’ theatrical space in this way, the spectators were unable to see actors’ faces while they performed; only their bodies were visible. However, facial expressions were filmed live, using close-ups, and projected behind the actors. Cinema techniques replaced the theatre space in *Hotel Methuselah* via an interactive screen. For Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, “*Hotel Methuselah* unfolds like a film, although crucially constructed through an engagement with the theatrical bodies on stage”,²² that is, the show was constructed like a film, in which real bodies played a crucial

²⁰ Imitating the Dog, Pete Brooks, *Hotel Methuselah*, in Anna Furse, ed., *Theatre in Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

²¹ Imitating the Dog, “*Hotel Methuselah*”, <http://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/portfolio/hotel-methuselah/> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

²² Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg*, 136.

role. The actors' entered into dialogue with their own digital bodies until the latter broke into little pieces, thus becoming real fragments in the digital environment. The second show by *Imitating the Dog* under analysis is *Kellerman* (2008), which shared some of the cinematic construction principles of *Hotel Methuselah*. In this show, the space was split into two projectable parts, still recalling the cinema logic of 16:9; but, unlike the first show, this split created two places in intimate relation with each other. Actors performed live and 'entered' the images, so that they were almost flattened, with the scenic space becoming bi- and tri-dimensional at the same time. Entering the image, using it as scenery and, above all, as a sensitive ambience where the action happened, the British company tried to interrogate the difference in the enjoyment models employed in cinema and theatre. Stanley Cavell emphasized that this difference involves production and consumption: in cinema, production precedes consumption, while, in theatre, they coincide.²³ In the work of *Imitating the Dog*, even if some images are created in advance, they are actualized during the performance; for this reason, the gap between production and consumption is closed. In addition, during *Kellerman*, the lower space was further sectioned, which, in a theoretical sense, recalled the mobile panels, or screens, that Edward Gordon Craig projected onto during the 1908 Moscow staging of *Hamlet*, directed by Konstantin Stanislavsky.

²³ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge and London: Harvard U. P., 1971), 31.

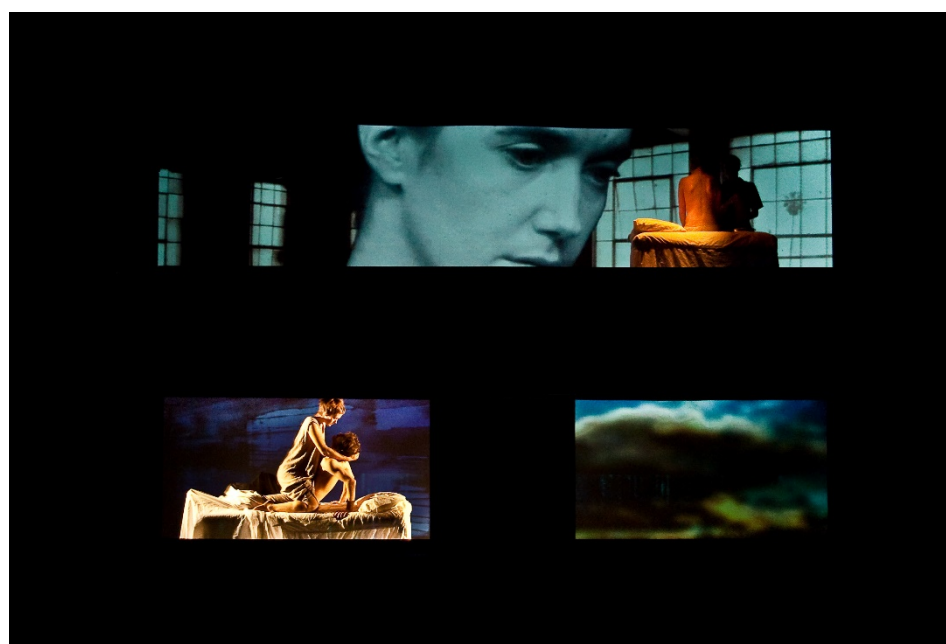


Fig. 2: *Kellerman* @Imitating the Dog

For *Imitating the Dog*, scenic space is no longer a simple container, which grows or narrows; nor is it possible to recognize any spatial differences between theatre and cinema. The suspension of cinema's narrative logic creates confusion: "These interruptions occur on many levels within the pieces: narratives and

character formation, visual composition of film and stage elements, desynchronicity and soundscape”.²⁴ Indeed, for the two shows described above, the scenic space evolved out of the confusion sown among the audience, who needed to reconsider their spatial perception and recalibrate it according to the diachronic and synchronic movements of the actors and images: “I would like to suggest [*Hotel Methuselah*] is not just about, or by, people, it is directly connected to the ways in which different modes of representation operate; how cinema and theatre work (and fail) to make their representations hold fast in the world”.²⁵

²⁴ Piotr Woycicki, *Post-cinematic Theatre and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 157.

²⁵ Andrew Quick, “The Space Between: Disorienting Landscape in the Photographic Works of Willie Doherty”, in Gabriela Giannachi, Nigel Stewart, eds., *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 147-64.

Operating space

In *Hotel Methuselah* and *Kellerman*, we face a sort of indistinction between scenic and cinematic space, where depth is lost due to the flattening of the film image, which, at the same time, facilitates a wider field of vision. The second spatial model employed by *Imitating the Dog* took a different turn. Starting from the ‘performative turning point’,²⁶ the company went beyond the division between the stage and the auditorium, viewing the entire theatre building as an operative space, which could be modified and moulded by the use of technology. In this second model, instead of envisaging a kind of theatre space, which is flattened into a cinematic image, we could observe a scenic space that was deflagrated and expanded.

²⁶ Besides Erika Fisher-Lichte, see also Simon Sheppard, Mick Wallis, *Drama/Theatre/Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

This sort of operative space expands thanks to the use of video technologies until it is no longer possible to trace its borders. It is not only the sum of the medial operations used to produce it; it is also about using media to change perceptions about what has appeared. For *Imitating the Dog*, the operative space has acquired completely different perceptual characteristics, which do not coincide with the geometric space that precedes it. In other words, the use of media implies a ‘plastic’ change at the geometric level, which shift shapes and, above all, changes the spectators’ perception of the space.

In this context, Erika Fischer-Lichte is clear that the performative space is not intended to be a simple relational space of possibilities; rather, it must possess an atmospheric function: “performative space is always, at the same time, an atmospheric space.... Space is not only formed by the use that actors and spectators make of it, but also by specific atmosphere that this space seems to irradiate”.²⁷ By atmospheric, we refer to a sort of place from where something irradiates and becomes a presence. According to the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, atmosphere is a perceptive model based on something that is irradiated from space. It is not exclusive to space; it is also inside the perceptive sphere of a subject: “atmosphere is something you cannot completely build a distance from, it does not vanish or narrow in a thing. Atmospheres have a subjective part, they are always codetermined”.²⁸ Atmospheric space is codetermined because, for Böhme, it is not only perceived on a cognitive intellectual level, but also needs to involve

²⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 201.

²⁸ Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre, Estasi, Messe in Scena* (Milan: Marinotti, 2010), 82. Translation is mine.

²⁹ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 82.

³⁰ Tonino Griffero, *Atmosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali* (Bari, Laterza, 2010), 17. Translation is mine.

³¹ Böhme, *Atmosphäre*, 83-84.

³² Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 202.

³³ About site-specific theatre see Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art Performance, Place and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

³⁴ Alfred Hickling, "Sea Breeze review. A phantasmagoric and unforgettable spectacle", *The Guardian*, 24/09/2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/24/sea-breeze-review-winter-gardens-morecambe> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

³⁵ Cit. in Jarka Burian, *The Scenography of Josef Svoboda* (Middletown: Wesleyan U.P., 1971, 2).

participation: we feel an atmosphere when we are emotionally involved.²⁹ For the Italian aesthetics scholar, Tonino Griffero, this involvement primarily means being involved with situations and not just 'things': "atmospheric perception is not seizing (alleged) elementary sensitive data and only afterwards ... states of things, but being involved with things, and even better, situations".³⁰ This means that the second spatial model employed by *Imitating the Dog* was mainly an emotional space, a space you were emotionally involved in, where you did not perceive borders, but continuous irradiations, albeit not in things and not in subjects. On this topic, Böhme remains clear:

You find out that atmosphere is a space you enter. Naturally this space is not a metric space, and it would have something to do with geometrically meant space in an abstract way, i.e., in topology. Still it is a space wherever possible you can enter, being inside it and being wrapped, and spatially the experience we make of it, as affective situation, is like the experience of a place. Atmosphere is now in a space with its own emotional shade ... it is a state of mind.³¹

Atmospheric space for Böhme works on an emotional level, as long as the user shares the emotional shade. In particular, it overtakes the user, thereby inhibiting their capacity to precisely know from where the emotional shade irradiates. Meanwhile, Fischer-Lichte emphasizes how "atmosphere in theatre is the first thing the spectator notices, which 'dyes' his perception, allowing him a particular experience of spatiality".³²

On this matter, the show that, maybe more than others, exemplified this second model of space was *Sea Breeze*, staged in collaboration with Raisin and Willow in 2013. *Sea Breeze* was a site-specific show, conceived for the Winter Gardens Theatre, a Victorian theatre in Morecambe, Lancashire, which originally closed in 1977.³³ In this project, *Imitating the Dog* was not concerned with the stage, which was designed by two Liverpool artists; however, the spatial construction process did use technology, although no cinematization was involved. For the show itself, the company built a wrapping space, where no cinematization was involved. Medial and geometric spaces were considered in the creation of a comfortable space. For this huge theatre. In turn, *Imitating the Dog* imagined a kind of architectural tone poem,³⁴ that is, a poem dedicated to the theatre. The architectural space became a uniquely phantasmagorical and projectable space, where physicality and mediality were interrelated. Changes to the mise en scène were continuously achieved by using videomapping: in other words, the theatre became a 'psychoplastic' space (a term used by Josef Svoboda),³⁵ which, at a certain point, was transformed into a real planetarium.



Fig. 3: *Sea Breeze* @Imitating the dog

The operative space designed for *Sea Breeze* sought to return the theatre to its former glory, as well as create moments of friction in which the atmosphere conflicted with the derelict state of the theatre building when spectators entered inside. The narrative contribution from Raisin and Willow, meanwhile, was focused on telling the stories of those who had worked or been entertained there from the 1930s until it closed. For its part, *Imitating the Dog* ‘played with’ an urban legend associated with the Winter Gardens, involving paranormal activity, by using old footage, which, like ghosts, brought the past into view. Projections entered into a dialogue with the entire space, from ceiling to floor, until the point at which the planetarium materialized. According to Raisin and Willow, *Sea Breeze* was about “searching for stories in the bones of [the Winter Gardens] beams and its rivets and its rafters”.³⁶ In other words, the show’s aim was to produce emotional memory, starting with the space, starting with a theatre, which “has been standing here, on the edge of the sea and the land, for a century and more”,³⁷ because “memory is everything, memory was everything”.³⁸

³⁶ Raisin and Willow, “*Sea Breeze*”, <http://raisinandwillow.co.uk/projects/sea-breeze/> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Raisin and Willow, *Sea Breeze* (video-document), <https://vimeo.com/223761370> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

Media space

Space, for *Imitating the Dog*, is plastic. It moves in parallel with geometric space, when it is cinematic, or it changes its borders, when it is operative. The models employed by the company are somehow medial because their construction was the consequence of geometric/medial spatial relations. The company’s third model, which we will now explore, also involved an operative space; but, instead of

³⁹ This is a clear reference to performance studies and, above all, to the use of non-conventional spaces.

⁴⁰ Lev Manovich, *The Language of the New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press), 18-55.

creating an atmospheric environment, the staging of the show in question was moved to an urban setting.³⁹

One of the pioneering essays about new media, written by Lev Manovich, claims that space, following the evolution of digital media and under certain conditions, can itself be a medium since it can be transmitted, stored and recovered in a snapshot. Space can be squeezed, re-formatted, changed into a flow, filtered, computerized, programmed and interactively managed.⁴⁰ Imitating the Dog's transportable, plastic space is itself a medium that can be moved and moulded. In this sense, the spectacle that, more than others, represents this idea of media space was *Arrivals and Departures*, staged in Hull on the occasion of its year as the UK City of Culture 2017. The focus of the show was the setting: namely, The Deep, an aquarium located in Hull Bay, as opposed to a purpose-built theatre, whose edifice was transformed into an enormous screen.



Fig. 3: *Arrivals and Departure* @Imitating the dog

According to the Catalan company Konic Thtr, theoretically, the use of mapping needs to follow three rules:

- The interrelationship between image, object and volumetric support communicates the notion that dramaturgy is focused on a “mapped” image of the object. This emphasizes that the augmented object has turned into an image-object hybrid.
- The concept of mapping: it is a ‘skin’ made from images and light covering the volumetric object. A dynamic and flexible skin, which fits like a dress on the object, from where it is projected or visualized.

- Technology, whereby mapping involves building a perceptive device made of light, image, sound, software, hardware, space and time, architecture, actors and spectators; with all these elements brought together, it creates an experiential and relational set.⁴¹

⁴¹ Anna Monteverdi, "Videomapping: dal monumentismo digitale al videomapping teatrale", <http://www.annamonteverdi.it/digital/videomapping-dal-monumentismo-digitale-al-videomapping-teatrale/> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

Arrival and Departures moved towards an architectural change of space, where scenic space became the real protagonist transforming and redefining the borders of the urban environment. The piece related the migration story of the city, but the urban space played a role other than to provide scenery, by interacting with actors and audience, thanks to the use of mapping. Describing the show, Simon Wainwright, its video designer and storyboarder, said: "A video and sound installation at The Deep which explores the role of migration in the shaping of the 'mosaic city' of Hull".⁴² His comment denotes how the company's idea was to create a live show based on a sort of transportable media space, which interacted with The Deep building:

⁴² Bethany Watson, "Introducing Simon Wainwright, co-creator of Arrivals and Departures", <https://www.hull2017.co.uk/discover/article/made-hull-artists-imitating-dog/> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

Our initial concept was a live show, but it soon became obvious that the piece would benefit from being sound and video-based. Once we had the building blocks of the piece – modes of transportation and the architecture of the building itself – it was really all about research into the history of Hull and migration that shaped the work.⁴³

⁴³ Ibid.

In these terms, then, *Imitating the Dog* envisages scenic space as plastic and synthetic, where digital technology, far from being mere decoration, is a fundamental actor in the process of defining scenic space. Clearly, the three models that we have analysed in this paper are often interrelated and never appear alone. Moreover, when the company reflects on a space, it is focused on finding a continuous theatrical replacement within the new media universe and, above all, on the possibility of creating a synthetic and digital theatre, where scenic space is a space of vision, in one word: *Théatron*.

A Strategy for a Different Stage Writing. Carlo Quartucci and Jannis Kounellis' Work in the '60s

Abstract: Since the late 1960s a tendency arose in the context of New Theatre with the aim of enlarging the boundaries of the stage and its material dimension. The target was to establish a closer relationship with the audience. People were no longer called to 'watch' the theatrical work, but to 'live' the spectacular features of the performance.

In the context of a constant process crossing the frontier between New Theatre and Arte Povera space is taken on as a semiotic element useful to 'write' the dramaturgical nature of the spectacle.

This article is strictly focused on the analysis of the creative dynamics and process experimented in two of Carlo Quartucci's spectacles: *I Testimoni* (1968) and *Il lavoro teatrale* (1969). In both works the director involved the artist Jannis Kounellis to 'write' the space transforming scene and hall like an enormous performative installation with animals, poor machineries and natural, organic and industrial materials. These two works can be considered fundamental examples for the investigation of a particular season of New Theatre in Italy: a moment in which the stage writing is completely articulated on the research for the living and the authentic, going beyond the notion of scenography.

Keywords: *new theatre, performative, scenography, space, environment,*

1. New Theatre in Italy

After the Second World War, Italian theatre was not famous for its innovations. Shows were usually centred on the critical analysis of theatre texts, as the Academy of Dramatic Arts taught. During the '50s there was very little concern for avant-garde in Italy. For example, Eugène Ionesco or Samuel Beckett were almost unknown. The same was true for Antonin Artaud. Beside Pirandello, Italian audiences started to get to know some other authors like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

The creation of the first state theatre was a considerable phenomenon: the Piccolo Teatro of Milan was founded by Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi in 1947. In addition to a concern for the Italian tradition, the Piccolo Teatro was oriented from the beginning toward a massive importation of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. This choice was very coherent with the two founders' philosophy and aesthetics, based on Marxist parameters and criticism.

Between the end of the '50s and the early years of 1960s the discovery of Ionesco, Beckett, Jean Genet and Fernando Arrabal had a strong impact on the cultural dimension of the scene, chocked within the narrow limits of bourgeois entertainment. Irrational, chaotic and grotesque elements imported from this avant-garde dramaturgy – together with the first translations of Artaud's

manifestos – allowed Italian theatre to be transformed into something new. Therefore a first wave of Italian avant-garde theatre arose: a phenomenon called New Theatre.¹

During the '60s the artists of New Theatre in Italy, including Carmelo Bene, Mario Ricci, Claudio Remondi, Carlo Quartucci and Leo and Perla, tackled the subject of the autonomy of theatre. They faced this question by creating relationships between different art forms.

The avant-garde of the 1960s – Dorota Semenowicz stated – drew from film, conceptual art, contemporary dance, happening and new trends in music in the vein of John Cage. Performances were shown in galleries, art houses, museums, and at exhibitions including the Biennale in Venice and Documenta in Kassel.²

Unlike the French avant-garde of the '50s that originated in playwriting, the Italian New Theatre did not arise from writers but directly from stage directors that thought about their function in terms of total authors.

This new generation of Italian theatre directors did not solicit new plays, nor did they necessarily concentrate on staging classic texts. Their target was to create a new standard of dramaturgy, including all the stage codes and elements. They worked on a meta-linguistic level reducing the performance to a kind of essay, “a demystification, an analysis and commentary about the original play and its sociological and political implications”.³ This way of thinking and creating theatre was defined by critics and performers as “stage writing”. Giuseppe Bartolucci introduced this critical label in the middle of the '60s when he published *La scrittura scenica*, an anthology of essays inspired by the experience of New Theatre artists.⁴ “Stage writing” is a category used to indicate a very specific way to create theatre starting from the elements of the scene: space, music, lights, acting, voice, gesture. It was no longer for the written text to establish the creative coordinates of the performance, but for theatrical language itself. Bartolucci's critical perspective was strongly connected to the group of Italian critics – Ettore Capriolo, Edoardo Fadini and Franco Quadri – who supported and promoted New Theatre and organised the “Convention for a New Theatre” in Ivrea in 1967. Their starting point was the desire to create a system of interpretation capable of critically representing, in the best possible way, the semiotic revolution of the new avant-garde artists. Suddenly, some of the Italian theatre artists shared the same vision of art expressed by the work of Jerzy Grotowski, Living Theatre, Open Theatre, Bread and Puppet, Kantor's Cricot 2, and the Odin Teatret.

2. The Performative Space

Every element of the stage was scrutinized by an anti-traditional perspective. In the context of the explosion of 1968 political protest, avant-garde directors worked on

¹ For an historical reconstruction of several Italian avant-garde waves I cross-refer to: Daniela Visone, *La nascita del Nuovo Teatro in Italia. 1959-1967* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2010); Salvatore Margiotta, *Il Nuovo Teatro in Italia. 1968-1975* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2013); Mimma Valentino, *Il Nuovo Teatro in Italia. 1976-1985* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2014).

² Dorota Semenowicz, *The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Raffaello Sanzio: From Icon to Iconoclasm, from Word to Image, from Symbol to Allegory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

³ Mario Prosperi, “Contemporary Italian Theatre”, *The Drama Review*, 22.1 (March 1978), 19.

⁴ Giuseppe Bartolucci, *La scrittura scenica* (Roma: Lerici editore, 1968).

theatrical space, erasing the boundaries between stage and audience, between the aesthetic dimension and the living one:

New Theatre – Valentina Valentini wrote – contested stale concepts of stage and spectacle with experiments centered on new concepts, including those around environment, event, performance, action, and installation.⁵

⁵ Valentina Valentini, *New Theatre in Italy, 1963-2013* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 19.

During the late '60s there is a tendency to enlarge the physical boundaries of the spectacle. Theatre is not longer done in exclusively conventional and institutional spaces. Traditional places are denied by directors and companies of the New Theatre in order to create a strongly authentic and strict relationship with the audience. Avant-garde artists want to immerge the spectators in an environmental experience but “as demonstrated by the avant-garde’s efforts to reform, this separation [between stage and audience] cannot simply be abolished by getting rid of the apron stage or the assigned seats”.⁶

⁶ Benjamin Wihstutz, “Introduction”, in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz, eds., *Performance and the Politics of Space. Theatre and Topology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 4.

In Italy Carlo Quartucci, Mario Ricci, Giancarlo Nanni, Remondi e Caporossi were among the main artists who conceived the theatrical work as a performative organic structure and no more like a well packaged product or a beautiful ‘picture’ to stare at. In this completely new structure audience had to be totally involved with its own physical and sensorial presence. Therefore we attend a process of overcoming the classic notion of stage direction, focusing on an experimental space configuration. New typologies of theatre and performance spaces were created “... questioning seating solutions, the mutual positioning of actors and seats and the resultant political implications of these spatial choices”.⁷

⁷ Ibid., 7.

The semiotic transformation of space from container to environment with dramatical and performative features breaks the physical and metaphorical frame of the scene, as emblemized by Arte Povera.

In 1967, the Italian art critic Germano Celant coined this term to describe the work of a generation of young Italian artists who used a simple ‘poverty’ of gestures and materials to explore the relation between art and life. The work of the artists belonging to Arte Povera – Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini and Gilberto Zorio – continued to be a major influence on contemporary international art. Arte Povera bridged the natural and the artificial, the urban and the rural, local tradition and global modernity.⁸

⁸ See: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (London: Pheidon Press, 2005).

Arte Povera, as Nick Kaye argues:

touches not only upon sculpture, installation and notions of ‘anti-form’, but land art, conceptual art and performance, drawing on an eclectic range of post-minimal and process-based activities which, in various ways, erode or break down the constraints of the object...⁹

⁹ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 141-142.

As the critic Renato Barilli writes, Arte Povera shows a different iconographic approach than the one of Pop Art trying to recover a level which lies on the other side of any closed definition:

In refusing iconography – He writes – it [Arte Povera] also refuses the painted surface, which is most habitual mode of expression; in a more general sense, it refuses to accept the concept of the ‘product’ of the ‘work’ and offers us instead not the result of a process but the process itself.¹⁰

¹⁰ Renato Barilli, Cit. in Frank Popper, *Art-Action and Participation* (New York: New York U. P., 1975), 233.

In this context, Arte Povera works challenge the conventional opposition between the physical and the abstract level of the work of art,

opening the sculpture to forces and events precipitated by the presence of materials, to ‘natural’ or organic process identified with particular locations as well as to exchanges between material processes, the environment and the body.¹¹

¹¹ Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, 142.

In the creation of the artistic act the gesture is erased and replaced by the presence of animals, plants, primary elements of nature, raw materials.¹² Everything seems to be ruled by a motion of suspension. Once entered this dramaturgical landscape, the audience unintentionally plays a role that is defined by the signs that the artist set up.¹³ Artist and audience are both protagonists of the work, dwelling in a relationship that bans the commodification of art, freeing the process of creation in a total conjunction of act and event. At this time the objective dimension of art is overcome:

¹² See Silvana Sinisi, “Avanguardia e postavanguardia in Italia”, in Roberto Alonge and Guido Davico Bonino, eds., *Storia del teatro moderno e contemporaneo. Avanguardie e utopie del teatro. Il Novecento*, vol. III (Torino: Einaudi editore, 2001), 716.

¹³ See Harold Rosenberg, “Arte-oggetto e arte evento”, *Sipario*, 251 (Marzo 1967), 17.

the artist – Filiberto Menna wrote – creates enveloping and involving environmental spaces with a multiplicity of linguistic media: cinema, photography, words, actions.¹⁴

¹⁴ Filiberto Menna, “L’arte, il teatro”, in *La macchina del tempo: dal teatro al teatro* (Perugia: Editrice Umbra Cooperativa, 1981), 85.

A similar phenomenon takes place in theatre. The interest of many directors and companies in going beyond the boundaries of the traditional theatre building foreground the centrality of space and environment as intrinsic to the experience of performance. As Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer underlined:

The origins of this shift can be traced back to the fertile interactions of performance and art that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and with the means to escape ‘theatrical disciplinary systems’ and to create radical and resistant work. In the site-specific work, and in the work where the relationship of the audience to the performance is not already pre-determined, scenography is often focused on shaping the interface between the performance and the audience, and the organization or curation of space is therefore a central feature.¹⁵

¹⁵ Joslin McKinney-Scott Palmer, “Introducing Expanded Scenography”, in Joslin McKinney-Scott Palmer, eds., *Scenography Expanded* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 5-6.

Scenography and representative matrix lose their central role in theatrical creation while the focus is moved on the performative quality of the scene: the purpose is to wipe out the diaphragm between stage and hall. Therefore, according

to this new code, theatre is thought to be staged all around audience and actors, and space changes its nature from physical to playable. This creative attitude is very close to the field of visual arts. In spite of this, We have to underline that this is a theme shared in a very similar way by Richard Schechner's¹⁶ notions about environmental performance and street theatre, or Erika Fischer-Lichte's¹⁷ essays and reflections. In Performing Studies, the relationship between the position of the audience and the place where the performance happens is always central. It is not important whether we are referring to rituals or avant-garde performances. Critical analysis is always focused on the temporary community created by the fusion of the aesthetic (performers) and the social (spectators). This kind of fusion is also most apparent in some of the New Theatre experiences staged in Italy.

¹⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

3. The Experience of Carlo Quartucci and Jannis Kounellis

In 1968-69s the Teatro Stabile of Turin offered to the avant-garde director Carlo Quartucci the chance to deepen his work.

Quartucci is one of the main artists of Italian experimental theatre, and one of the signatories of the collective manifesto titled *Per un convegno sul Nuovo Teatro* that anticipates the important meeting of the Ivrea Conference (1967). He is not only a very influential director, but also well known as an artist who produces striking visual theatre events with a subversive use of space, drawing from both classical texts and conceptual art. As a student, Quartucci staged *Act without Words* in 1962 and *Endgame* in 1963, two works written by Samuel Beckett. The director summoned some of the actors that will become iconic at the end of '60s: Leo de Berardinis, Rino Sudano, Anna D'Offizi and Cosimo Cinieri. In these shows, the style of stage direction was really new for Italian standards. The setting was totally anti-naturalistic: the space was empty and there were only few scenographic elements inspired by Vasilij Kandinskij's aesthetics and Quartucci's geometrical taste. After some encore performances of *Endgame* at the Teatro Ateneo in Rome with the name "Compagnia della Ripresa", Quartucci was invited by Luigi Squarzina, who was at the time artistic co-director of the Teatro Stabile of Genova with Ivo Chiesa, to lead a workshop and stage another text by Beckett. Here the director started to work on the creation of a strong relationship between performers and theatrical space inspired by *Waiting for Godot* (1965). Actors and objects were merged on the stage into shapeless figures. For example, characters were presented like Chaplinian figures that inhabit a white stage where the tree was made by a pole, slightly curved, with a sphere dangling from its end.

Unfortunately, tensions between experimental theatre research and the mainstream approach of the theatrical institution arose very soon. After only a few stagings of *Waiting for Godot*, Quartucci went back to his underground cultural roots.

At the end of 1965, he met Giuliano Scabia, a poet from Group '63 and professor in Bologna. With him, the director attempted to find an agreement between the strategy of radically transforming the stage and the involvement of the audience, in order for the theatre to penetrate society. They worked at an original project titled *Zip, Lap, Lip, Vap, Mam, Crep, Scap, Plip, Trip, Scrap e la grande Mam alle prese con la società contemporanea*. The show premiered in the fall of 1965 and appeared to be influenced not only by Commedia dell'Arte, because the characters in the show, like masks, were devoid of any psychological depth, but also by Futurism, Structuralism and Vesvolod Ėmil'evič Meyerhold (the Russian director working between the '20s and '30s), because of how the space of acting was conceived. Quartucci's goal was to multiply the focus points of the performance by immersing the spectator in the performing area. He decided to spread out the action in every direction around the audience, using the entire space.

The principle of the "open work" – Mario Prosperi wrote – was also applied: the form of the play was in the construction and deconstruction of ten masks, each of which represented multiple roles. The acting in *Zip* was impersonal (as the *übermarionette*), thus marginalizing the ego of the performer.¹⁸

¹⁸ Prosperi, *Contemporary Italian Theatre*, 24.

The research on an environmental space became central in the creation process when the director was called to work by the Teatro Stabile of Turin at the end of '60s.

Counting on a remarkable production, the director finally can go deeper in the research on space as the true element of his stage writing practise. The element "space" turns into something "that has to be continuously built and desecrated".¹⁹ In order to achieve this goal, Quartucci hired Jannis Kounellis, one of the most important visual artists belonging to the Arte Povera movement, whose creative aim was to eliminate the ideological boundaries between life and art, ethics and aesthetics, creation and production. He usually employed in his works materials including cotton, burlap sacks, coal, gas flames, which he used as signs. He mixed visual props with the presence of live humans or animals. The space of installation of several of Kounellis' works is conceived as a cavity with performative and theatrical qualities in which the spectator is projected into the centre of a suspended action. Most of his artistic interventions are widely open in meaning, allowing for multiple interpretations and readings. Even though Kounellis' work seems to enact a story of some kind, the narrative dimension is never clear or detailed. Even if violence, displacement, and loss are implied, these dramatic topics are all expressed in a really blurred way.

With a really similar attitude, Carlo Quartucci was interested in the introduction of non-scenographic elements intended to grant a new dimension to theatre production. On the basis of this fertile relation between art and theatre, Kounellis

¹⁹ See Carlo Quartucci and Giuliano Scabia, "Per un'avanguardia italiana", in Franco Quadri, ed., *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia*, vol. I (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), 167.

agreed and participated with a contribution which immediately developed into a total collaboration.

Surely, it is not the first time that a visual artist works for theatre. But usually a painter or a sculptor would create a sort of transposition of their plastic and figurative works in a scenographic context. Kounellis, instead, was not interested in transporting the gallery on stage.

The artist's idea is perfectly stated within these words:

From my perspective we can not talk about scenography while analysing my work. Firstly, I think about "disturbance". My work intends to disturb both traditional scenography and the new code of the bare scene: my materials do not integrate, they claim a proper space and create. At the same time they originate a total space where the theatre fiction is not pretended to be forgotten. Actually they put the fiction in discussion, provoking this "fiction space" to reveal its own constraints. Moreover, these materials deliberately give "annoyance" to the actor, obliging him to look around, to "defend himself", to abandon his belonging to the tradition of well acting.²⁰

²⁰ Jannis Kounellis, "Non per il teatro ma con il teatro", *Sipario*, 276 (Aprile 1969), 13.

The starting point of Kounellis' setting is summarized in these words: "you have to work 'with' theatre, more than 'for' theatre, with a certain type of theatre that carries out on its own a research on a new space, eliminating characters and literary situations".²¹

²¹ Ibid., 14.

Of course there is a continuity between critical discourses and political plannings in Kounellis' work in exhibition and scene, but the language used, the sensibility, the quality and the intentions are deeply different. According to their shared vision about art, Quartucci called the artist in order to create an 'alive scene' through which assimilating textual materials as well as provoking a physical and performative reaction of the actors.

4. *I Testimoni* and *Il lavoro teatrale*

The first example of their partnership is embodied by *I Testimoni*, inspired by three different plays written by Tadeusz Roszewicz: *Our Little Stabilisation*, *The Interrupted Act* and *The Card Index*. Quartucci connected them creating a texture of dense dialogues and monologues to represent the crisis context shared both by bourgeois couples and disappointed rebels.²² The premiere was in 1968, November 10th and the spectacle immediately appeared as something completely innovative for the traditional perspective of Italian audience.

²² See: Franco Quadri, "I testimoni", *Panorama*, 21 novembre 1968.

The scene created by Kounellis denied the function of a static and elegant framework offered to the audience view. It "became the main character of the theatrical event, in a space that never reaches a definitive set-up, but is continuously transformed under our eyes".²³ The stage was totally empty and

²³ Ettore Capriolo, "Un funerale per il vecchio teatro", *Sipario*, 73 (Gennaio 1969), 25.

enlightened by hot spot lights. Here Kounellis created an installation with more than one hundred cages occupied by multicoloured tweeting birds. There were randomly set-up some cacti, bowls of ostrich eggs, yarns of wool, mothballs, coal piles, burlap sacks. These natural and industrial elements – the same used in exhibitions and gallery works – were employed in their basic expressiveness and sensorial immediacy.

What the artist had on his mind was to give a kind of body to the environment. The whole stage writing was totally inspired by the research for the living and the authentic. But “this authenticity had not to be understood as a search for the natural, but like ‘true’ and ‘alive’, in terms of leading elements to perform an action...”.²⁴ This search for living and truth created on scene a tension between “rebellious gesture”²⁵ and “encapsulation in the product”,²⁶ a dramatical relationship used by Quartucci to manage *I Testimoni* dramaturgy. The rebellious gestures embodied by the actors – as the same Kounellis stated – had not a representative function, but were used both as ‘materials’ and ‘expressiveness tools’, exactly like the scenographic elements that were used on stage:

²⁴ Jannis Kounellis, “Del corpo, del comportamento, del ‘naturale’, del ‘vivo’ come autenticità teatrale”, in Giuseppe Bartolucci, ed., *Mutations. L’esperienza del teatro immagine*, Roma: edizioni OOLP, 1975), 54.

²⁵ “Rebellious gesture” belongs to performative and physical reaction of actors.

²⁶ It is referred to the Italian traditional set-up for staging and its architectural configuration: *all’italiana*. It is defined like a product only involved in a commercialisation approach because connected to Court and political power from an historical point of view.

a rebellious gesture – ‘material’ and ‘expressive’ – has the function of a continuous disturbance forcing the actor to face the character he is playing at the same time in a physical and psychological dimension.. Also, that rebellious gesture is a continuous disturbance for audience to get into relationship with both the action of watching and the participation he is called to.²⁷

²⁷ Kounellis, *Del corpo*, 54.

Actions and lines were phrased and crumbled. The gesture and physical actions were totally separated from the meaning of the few dialogues in order to create a short-circuit between the visual level and the narrative one.

Furthermore compulsive actions embodied by characters were in a continuous relationship with the dissonance produced by living materials.

The stage – Blasich writes – is an open field where every character can place itself where pleased but however everyone is forced to hit rocks, topsoil, coal. The trajectories that actors cover are simultaneously opened and closed because they are braked by hurdles and expressive materials. Also the voice that could be free has to struggle with the caged birds tweeting on stage. So every theatrical element removes each other, even though all of them are interchangeable from a dissonant perspective.²⁸

²⁸ Gottardo Blasich, “I Testimoni”, *Letture*, 1 (Gennaio 1969), 51-52.

Many carriages were used to describe the trajectories of the actors as Quartucci and Kounellis wanted to crumble the play really hard. Performers actually acted on these basic machineries pushed from a scenery flat to the other, in a very violent way, experiencing a dangerous position too. In this way, dividing the space horizontally, actors gave their contribution in the figurative dynamics making the visual part of the spectacle completely asynchronous. Living materials finally made responsive the performer, politically and technically, who knew now that “he can

not play anymore according to the perspective designed by habits and bourgeois architecture”.²⁹ Completely estranged from the textual guidelines, intent “to use stones, coal or bags for actions recalling some manual works”,³⁰ the actor became himself a “real and living element in terms of first witness for the refusal of the product within the product itself”.³¹

²⁹ Kounellis, *Del corpo*, 55.

³⁰ Capriolo, *Un funerale per il vecchio teatro*, 26.

³¹ Kounellis, *Del corpo*, 55.

The dramaturgical climax was given by the collapse of this spectacular machinery created by Quartucci and Kounellis. Tweets, noises, screeches were suddenly turned into silence. It was the first moment where everything was motionless. Also the actors were idle on the carriages. Fifteen minutes of impressive silence ran. Only the “builders” moved again after a while.³² Through an extreme slowness and using gestures of daily habits, they took “bags and use[d] them to cover everything, from the actors to the bird cages, from the stage floor to the balconies and the audience”.³³ In this way the spectator was physically incorporated into the dilation of stage writing process becoming the accomplice of this moment of destruction of the show (and, more generally, of theatre itself):

³² These characters did not appear in any of the three Rosewicz texts. They have been invented by Quartucci who gave them with the function of moving, removing, composing, decomposing the scene trying to oppose a process of physical edification to the verbal dispersion.

³³ Capriolo, *Un funerale per il vecchio teatro*, 26.

This procedure – as Bartolucci stated – is worked by Quartucci, when the viewer is first “disturbed” by the vision of the “living” elements and the “poor” materials, and then enveloped by the increasing of the imagination. So, the relationship between stage and audience is expanded as the actors become performers and accomplices of that same vision, also going from a situation of “disturbance” to one of creativity.³⁴

³⁴ Giuseppe Bartolucci, “L’ ‘organismo’ de I Testimoni: sua composizione e scomposizione”, *Maratré*, 43-44-45 (Luglio-Agosto-Settembre 1968), 223.

Finally “the three ones [builders] wash their faces and bodies. Then they eat an apple with the satisfaction of the ones have done something feeling very proud”.³⁵ Quartucci’s direction worked to get stronger “the starting points of this spectacle: ‘What is art?’ ‘Which is the function of theatre?’ He seems to answer to these questions with other doubts connected to the banality of the communication between people and emptiness that every new day brings with”.³⁶

³⁵ Capriolo, *Un funerale per il vecchio teatro*, 26.

This kind of theatrical texture and staging will inspire the following *Il lavoro teatrale* wrote by Roberto Lerici. Quartucci and Kounellis wanted to deepen the research on “breaking off the space with the proposal of an unidentifiable or classifiable setting”.³⁷ They actually threw down a new challenge: to exhibit a spectacle that could describe the destruction of theatre inside the institutional setting of the Biennale of Venice. During the rehearsals of what is considered to be as the final act of some studies and experiences, the director wanted everyone (actors, author, space designer, etc.) to be totally involved in the creation because he believed that “space configuration and writing is no longer to be considered as an aesthetical matter, but as an ideological issue”.³⁸ It is a matter of attitude, he said:

³⁶ Giorgio Zampa, “Un frullato di Rozewicz”, *Il Dramma*, 3 (Dicembre 1968), 33.

³⁷ Giuseppe Bartolucci, “Del rapporto primario e non primario”, *La scrittura scenica*, 1 (Gennaio 1971), 70.

³⁸ Carlo Quartucci, “Il lavoro teatrale” in Carlo Quartucci and Edoardo Fadini, eds., *Viaggio nel camion dentro l'avanguardia* (Torino: Cooperativa Editoriale Studio Forma, 1976), 146.

By attitude we mean the critical, political, creative disposition. In other words, the aesthetic, social, technical problems faced by everyone who works on theatre today independently by the way it is involved.³⁹

³⁹ Carlo Quartucci and Roberto Lerici, “Il lavoro teatrale. Progetto-lettera dello spettacolo”, in Quadri, *L'avanguardia teatrale*, 174.

The play was not written but recorded on tape like a modern *scenario*. So the author was a kind of plural identity formed by a writer or poet (Lerici), a director, an artist and actors. Before staging Lerici led the poetical tension, while Quartucci worked with Kounellis and actors to turn the drama frame into theatrical code. The tape – as living materials – allowed to think about staging not like something to execute but as an extemporaneous or accidental fact to manage.

Spectacle – Quartucci stated – is “directed”, but “directing” is not a job. Also the tamer in circus is able to direct but in a very different way. His directing is useful to control unexpected events. So, I wish that the debut would be disturbed by something never happened during the rehearsals. And even more, as a director, I would like to disturb the work previously done and, at the same time, to create an action useful to give new directions to the sense of the spectacle.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Programma del XXVIII Festival internazionale del teatro di prosa di Venezia, 107.

It is a discourse more radical than the one faced in *I testimoni*. While there the action of disturbing was one of the elements for the performance, here it was the principle on which the whole work was focused. Now the disturbing element did not work to involve audience like an accomplice. “The real target was not to involve but to break action every time audience could have shown its acquiescence towards the play staged”.⁴¹

⁴¹ Quartucci, *Il lavoro teatrale*, 147.

During the rehearsals there was only a short guideline:

24 independent and changeable scenes.

Two characters: He and She.

There is a magnetic tape where the all words are spoken.

There are a director, the author and two actors that have the tape they created and performed with which they have to stage the spectacle.

There is a tape that is now independent from author, director or actors.⁴²

⁴² Quartucci and Lerici, *Il lavoro teatrale*, 174.

At the beginning the equipe worked on this unfixed text comparing comments, points of view, discussing and analysing the spectacle staging and its own creation. So the theme was not narrative or connected to a story but inspired by “how to do, where to do or not theatre today, trying to answer to these questions exactly when they arise, from the perspective of a group that is working on something”.⁴³ In this way writing was assumed like a direct trace of a scenic experience that produced both a pretext for a narrative dimension and a “final abandonment of theatre”.⁴⁴ Set on a metatheatrical frame Lerici’s work can be defined like a *scenario* inspired by Beckett’s world inhabited by characters carrying out senseless actions. The plot was completely absurd and nonsense. The main characters He and She were in a relationship totally played on doubleness connections and infinite multiplications finally presenting four different couples.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Quartucci, *Il lavoro teatrale*, 144.

The dramatical dimension was not obviously created by the relationship between characters, but arose from the connection that director, scenographer,

actors, author, audience had “with the theatrical society to which they would have to belong or would have to be its own expression”.⁴⁵ Indeed the stage writing was focused on political questions: “to have consciousness of the authenticity of the work that an artist does, that is to have a relationship of deep awareness of the society we live in”.⁴⁶ However, also in this spectacle there was a disturbing and overflowing scenic machinery, conceived by Jannis Kounellis.

⁴⁵ Programma del XXVIII Festival internazionale del teatro di prosa di Venezia, 108.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Unlike in *I testimoni* the space here was exhibited like a totality, overcoming the diaphragm between stage and audience, with the project to invade every part of the theatre through signs. Stage and hall were occupied by “dogs, chickens, a quartered ox, bags, beans, flour, a bicycle, a sewing machine, buckets of water, objects thrown against the audience in order to make it dirty”.⁴⁷ The action was structured like curtain raiser sketches and performed as dialogues simultaneously acted all over the theatre. It was a real invasion of Palazzo Grassi worked by the aggressive placing of living materials and the dislocation of actors. The performers’ presence was really annoying. Some examples: they went to lagoon to fetch water, they stopped at the entrance to hinder people coming in or out, they stopped audience who wanted to escape from the hall and so on. The main feature of this stage writing was not to perform the actions, but to break them every time people wanted to follow the plot or what was happening around. Inside this polyfunctional system all the artistic personalities – particularly actors – had the political and creative duty to clarify their attitude in relation to their work and their position. They had to be considered as poetical presences in society, even though not careless or just hedonistic. Their behaviour, language, style had to confirm the same value both up and down the stage.

⁴⁷ Paolo Puppa, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Novecento*, (Roma: Editori Laterza, 1990), 223.

In *Il lavoro teatrale* actors had to take off every character mask in favour to build an attitude, a new disposition towards creation, to make a political use of their qualities, even exposing themselves to the “risk of desperation or confessing powerlessness”.⁴⁸ But this aim was not understood by people who reacted disturbing the spectacle until its interruption.⁴⁹ In spite of the intentions, according to Franco Quadri, the work paid its lack of structure:

⁴⁸ Franco Quadri, “Il lavoro teatrale”, *Panorama*, 16 (ottobre 1969).

⁴⁹ Gottardo Blasich, “Il lavoro teatrale”, *Letture*, 11 (Novembre 1969), 776.

among the several elements composing the spectacle, one was not considered at all: the audience. Even though this time the spectators seemed to be very interested in interacting by playing or political contestations, the contact was denied. Quartucci refused the Happening, showing how close and theatrical his work is.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Quadri, *Il lavoro teatrale*.

As we stated, the dramatic structure was actually foreseen to break actions every time people would have been showing a recreational approach.⁵¹ Therefore the problem was cultural and not only political. Interrupting a spectacle and escaping from a theatre, should better be considered as an invitation for the audience to refuse a certain kind of communication, that was instead totally outdated if

⁵¹ Quartucci, *Il lavoro teatrale*, 147.

compared to the historical process of transformation that was constituting that period.

Audience who paid money to watch that spectacle belonged to middle class. So there was a really few political reaction to be expected. Moreover, Quartucci faced 'escaping' more as the failure of creating real connections among 'persons', rather than an artistic flop.

I Testimoni e Il lavoro teatrale were almost ignored by regular reviewers, while some of the critics close to New Theatre appreciated Quartucci and Kounellis' attempts in the context of the semiotic deflagration triggered by both spectacles. Although not directly cited, their contribution seems to be inevitably referred to in the critical debate about the difference between space and scenography as some issues on reviews like «Sipario», «Teatro», «La scrittura scenica» show.⁵²

From 1969 the director abandoned theatre and its cultural institutions. He began a new 'journey' with *Camion* – a modern Carro di Tespi – looking for a more authentic level of communication experiencing his work in the suburbs and in poor and degraded social context. With a white truck, driving through Italian peripheries, He experienced a kind of nomadic theatre in the form of an on-the-road show where traditional categories such as roles, locations, play, actors were totally rejected:

Camion – Quartucci states – lives with the people in a village outside Rome or with the people on Portobello Road in London. Tomorrow *Camion* is a puppet master, today it's a person who drives repairs hammers takes care of the truck.... And it is also the person who films and photographs it during our short or long trips.⁵³

Action, Happening and Land Art seem to be the new coordinates of Quartucci's renewed code to create theatre beyond the theatre. The white truck is used as a mobile stage where performers involved by the artist create actions to break the daily life of people by the perspective of a real cultural, social and political interchange. The same process of anarchic and radical change was performed in the final stage of Living Theatre *Paradise Now*, staged in 1968, when the company led by Julien Beck and Judith Malina rallied their audience to meet on the street because the revolution is outside theatre.

The Body and the Scene. Territories of the Aesthetic-cognitive Experience in the Artistic Practice of Dance¹

Abstract: The discussion about the subject of Sublimation is articulated, complex and rigorous. These pages deliberately address the issue indirectly in the attempt to add useful elements to the critical analysis from the point of view of who, as choreographer and performer, is devoted to the artistic practice of dance. My observations therefore concern the two constituent elements of the choreographic act: the body and the scene. The 'body' as territory of the creative and cognitive experience of the dancer-choreographer: here I try to render, from my personal experience, that which is intimate in the creative and generative process of the choreographic act. The 'scene' as territory of the aesthetic-cognitive experience of the spectator-witness: the attempt here is to provide, as careful observer of the performative act, reflections about the role of the spectator in the performative dialectics. Both perspectives investigate the relationship between dance and thought, and, incidentally, between the body and the mind.

Keywords: *aesthetic, art, body, choreography, dance, performance, scene, sublimation, symbolic, theatre*

I am completely body and nothing outside of it, 'soul' is only a word for something that is body.

Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there is a powerful emperor, an unknown sage – he is called Self. He dwells in your body, it is your body.
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

An introduction. Dance and Philosophy

First we need to define what dance we are talking about. The word 'dance' evokes its manifold manifestations related to culture, place and time. These pages take into consideration what is called 'new dance' (today also called 'research dance') as artistic practice. From the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, philosophy, literature and poetry rethink the body and its relationship with thought, and begin to turn their interest to dance. Dance also participates in this reflection on corporeity by rethinking itself and the place it occupies in the arts and in history. Choreographers and dancers find in the thought of some philosophers something that suits well the epistemological needs of dance while at the same time the references and contributions to dance of poets, thinkers and philosophers multiply.²

¹ This paper is the result of my participation to the International Conference *Sublimazione. Analisi critica dell'ultima frontiera del simbolico*, PAN Palazzo delle Arti di Napoli, 14-15 March 2017 and was first published as *Il corpo e la scena. Territori dell'esperienza estetico-conoscitiva nella pratica artistica della danza*, "Kaiak A Philosophical Journey" (2017), <http://www.kaiak-pj.it/images/PDF/rivista/kaiak-4-sublimazione/Riccio.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2017.

² See Caterina Di Rienzo, *Pensare il corpo in movimento come tensione etica all'oltre* (Le reti di Dedalus, 2011), http://www.retidedalus.it/archivi/2011/dicembre/filosofie_presente/2_filosofia.htm, accessed 20 January 2017; and Gaia Clotilde Chernetich, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty e la danza. Un accenno* (Teatro e Critica) <http://www.teatroecritica.net/2016/06/maurice-merleau-ponty-e-la-danza-un-accenno>, accessed 20 January 2017.

Dance – as Paul Valéry already observed – is thought at work. And just like all contemporary art, dance itself is something that makes us think. It makes us think not only on something, but on the modality of thought itself. Dance then manifests at the same time as art and as meta-art of art.³ Among the authors that more directly and more widely dealt with the relationship between philosophy and the different artistic practices, Deleuze extends the territory of philosophy to the territory of creation, assuming philosophy as the practice of creating concepts⁴ and highlighting that “the encounter between two disciplines does not happen when one begins to reflect on the other, but when one realizes that it has to solve on its own and with its own means a problem similar to that which arises in another”.⁵ Instead of ‘solve’ here I would rather say ‘interrogate’: to resolve is precisely the task of science; to question, to undermine, is the territory of the arts. The matter that the artist touches coincides with that object of philosophical or scientific thought, but he or she does so in a different way: by eliminating the safety distance, the artist confronts the matter in a hand-to-hand and becomes invested in the process in first person. In this sense I cannot recognize a primacy to dance with respect to other artistic or thought practices. The dynamics of the relationship between body, movement and thought in the creative and sensitive experience are present in all forms of art and writing: I can clearly see the strong presence of an author’s body in the ‘gesture’ of those who write, sculpt, paint or play, a gesture that in its movement leaves a trace. In the same way, dance is strongly nourished by thought, yet arriving in a certain way to overcome it in its own practice. This work ‘beyond thought’ should not be misunderstood: choreographers and dancers are well aware of the aesthetic choices they make – the subtle work of the dancer on instant, instinct and intuition should not be confused with spontaneity. For the dancer there is rather a ‘failing of thought’, a ‘de-thinking’ in the sense to which Carmelo Bene referred.⁶ When Vaslav Nijinsky writes in his Diaries, “I am a philosopher who does not think. I am a philosopher with sentiment”,⁷ what he actually means is that dance is philosophy articulated in the material of the sensible.

This dance, which actively participates in the dialogue among the arts, provides a glimpse of a possible path for the renewal of the entire contemporary scene, furnishing material for reflection on a theatre that takes distance from the centrality of text and begins to move towards a centrality of the body and a dramaturgy made by signs on stage: from Antonin Artaud up to Romeo Castellucci (thinking of his edition of the Venice Biennale in 2005 *Pompeii. Il romanzo della cenere* – often defined as a biennial of bodies – with a relevant presence of choreographers and dancers).⁸ As theatre has been moving away from text, so over the years dance has been freeing itself from the image of the technical-virtuoso dancer, taking more and more possession of ordinary bodies with all the ethical, aesthetic and political implications that may follow. Today we are aware that the boundaries between dance, theater and performance are mobile, blurred, increasingly difficult to outline.

³ See Barbara Elia, “Foreword” to Paul Valéry et al., *Filosofia della danza* (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2004).

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L’image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985).

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Qu’est-ce qui l’acte de création?* [1987] ed. by Antonella Moscatti, *Che cos’è l’atto di creazione* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2013), 29.

⁶ See Vincenzo Cuomo, Maurizio Zanardi et al., eds., *Sulla Danza*, (Napoli: Cronopio 2017); <http://www.kaiak-pj.it/images/pdf/teatro/recensionedanza.pdf>, accessed on 3 July 2017.

⁷ Vaslav Nijinsky, *Cahiers* (Paris: Actes Sud 1995), *Diari. Versione integrale* (Milano: Adelphi, 2003), 54.

⁸ On the relationship between dance and theatre based on Antonin Artaud, see Maurizio Zanardi, *Dal regno dei morti*, in Maurizio Zanardi et al., eds., *Sulla danza*, (Napoli: Cronopio, 2017) and Alain Badiou, *Inestetica* (Milano: Mimesis, 2007).

2. The Body

The process of research and creation proper of dance is realized as a complex practice of relationship and exchange between several subjects: the dancer-choreographer, the other co-creators (dancers; video, light, scene and sound artists; dramaturges) and the viewer, who I deliberately insert as a participant in the process of the performative act. The creation is generated by the relationship between different unconsciousnesses, by an open attitude to the encounter with the Other, welcoming the possibility to be modified by it. Dance is body in act, in movement, and it involves the relationship of the body with time and space. Therefore three are the founding elements of dance: body, time, space.⁹

⁹ Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce qui l'acte de création?*, 12.

A peculiar trait of dance is that its 'matter' is the same for the maker as for the observer: the body, conceived of as inseparable corporeal (with its mechanical, physical and biological laws) and psychic. Dance is the art of anti-dualism.¹⁰ However there is a difference: talking about 'the body' is not equivalent to talking about 'the body that dances'. The body that dances is a powerful instrument, a bearer and keeper of sense.

¹⁰ Di Rienzo, *op cit.*

The performative act is an autonomous language that can not be translated in any other way. I prefer to use the term 'act' instead of 'gesture' or 'movement': to the 'act' I recognize the proximity to action as generator of the event; to the 'gesture' a greater proximity to the sign; while 'movement' emphasizes its relationship with time and space. I am interested in a non-affirmative dance, a dance with no defined boundaries, permeable to perception and the power of space,¹¹ that can, to the extent possible, conquer a distance from language. The work of the dancer moves away from an affirmative and didactic gesture. Notwithstanding, we are spoken by language: we are born and grow up in a context that generates conditionings. This is even more evident when a dancer learns one or more techniques that in themselves carry a given of culture, history and aesthetics. The dancer's task is to work to overcome these conditionings in a constant attempt to let go of the strong patterns dwelling in us, so to listen to what is revealed, to what manifests in an ever-present tension towards the authenticity of the act. The body – every body – carries a huge amount of information. For this reason I try to work in the most objective and elementary way with respect to its physical qualities and its reference to space and time.

¹¹ See my choreographic notes to *K.i.s.s.#1—about fragility*, <https://gabriellariccio.it/k-i-s-s-1-about-fragility-en/>, accessed 1 February 2017.

The starting point is a 'question' that is generally formed before starting work in the studio. The question condenses and manifests itself autonomously: there is something that – given an articulated series of conditions, coincidences and chances – presents itself as 'more urgent'¹² and asks to be investigated. At this stage the work is completely open: sometimes what rationally seems a foothold fails and the work in the studio takes a direction to which I can only surrender. Much of the dancer's work has to do with this surrender: not a defeat, but an

¹² On the urge see below note 41.

¹³ Massimo Recalcati, discussion at the International Conference “Sublimazione. Analisi critica dell’ultima frontiera del simbolico”, Palazzo delle Arti di Napoli, 15-16 March 2017.

ability to listen beyond what the mind rationally tries to impose. This way “to give form to a force is a process of sublimation that is realized when we establish a relationship of friendship with emptiness and nothingness”.¹³

The dancer develops and constantly practices two attitudes: the one is an intuition, understood as the ability to react in the most immediate (non-mediated) way to a need that arises in the succession of the events generated by the body in time and space; the other is a peculiar form of attention, that the dancer and pedagogue Dominique Dupuy defines a ‘de-concentrated concentration’, a delicate and very fragile threshold. The mind contributes to the creative process, it is not excluded from it. Yet it is present with different degrees of intensity and modalities: at certain moments it is more present and aware; in other moments – when it is more distant – it ‘notices’ something that emerges through the body by chance, error, or an accident. In the initial phase of the research the mind is left behind, in the background, far and distant: the work in the studio makes room for chaos, for the irrational, for the involuntary. At times the mind contributes: it observes, analyzes, coordinates, identifies connections, associations, juxtapositions, fragments. In developing the work, the mind is gradually more present, it is more of a rational creative activity. The composition tends in some way to condense, to find relevance among multiple plans that interact with each other.

The mind helps – to select, to order, to put in sequence – but it can also be an obstacle. The mind tends to be reasonable: it is afraid of not being able to understand. This fear pushes the mind to continuously try to intervene, even before having had the experience: in this attempt it blocks the flow. The dancer trains him or herself to work suspending this form of interference of the mind equivalent to a form of *epoche*, of suspension of judgment: everything is allowed, anything can happen. The attention to the present moment, to the unavoidable here and now of dance, corresponds to an order of sensitivity, to a form of care that seeks to objectify as much as possible, to see what is really there, what is revealed beyond thought, or perhaps in thought beyond judgment. This form of attention does not require not thinking at all, it requires not thinking too much: to try not to anticipate judgment, otherwise it is impossible to listen, because I put many other questions between me and ‘the thing’. To achieve this form of attention, which is a form of sensitivity, I start from the real data of ‘perceptions’, the evidence of acts that occur in the studio (events). I focus on the real sensations because these are always in the continuous flow of the present moment. I pay attention to every little clue that concerns me, my body and my perceptions: breath, forms, sounds, smells, colors, lights, temperatures, sensations, associations, visions. The dance and the scene are played continuously in the present, this is a plan that can never be betrayed: even when the writing (the choreography) is defined, it is always crossed by a present that is never the same and the quality of the dance depends on how we let vibrate in us that present moment in that specific writing.

The work of creation is a process. It takes time and it is formed by stratifications. Every element and every detail can become writing. The context in which the work is born, the place, a meeting, a book, a sentence, the people I have chosen and who have chosen to participate in the creation, the coincidences that randomly strike me at a certain moment, all these elements take on meaning and I let them interfere with the process. It is not about being autobiographical, yet the personal experience is present with its echoes, resonances, memory. In this sense Rancière referring to Novalis's 'everything speaks' recalls "the Freudian rule that there are no insignificant 'details'..... There is no episode, description, sentence that does not carry within itself the power of the work. Because there is nothing that does not carry the power of language. All things being equal, equally important, equally significant".¹⁴ Dance is not about representing or communicating: the gesture is undefined, a silent language that does not represent, yet manifests a specific sensitivity.¹⁵ In the studio I try to bring out evidence through the knowledge I have of the instrument, the body, using systems of composition that generate events: sets of rules that cannot be but at the emergence of exceptions. This attention recognizes connections, focus points among some events. Emerging evidence connects in a structure, a form that becomes the creation. If there is a rational work, it is never in the direction of an idea of what the creation should be or say.

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, *L'inconscient esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2011).

¹⁵ Cfr. Massimo Villani, *Politica: il risaltire dell'osceno*, in Jacques Rancière, ed., *L'inconscio estetico*, 17.

Paradoxically, by forcing attention to a maximum effort, focusing on perceptions and on complex rules within the systems, the mind is freed in disorientation: the mind is too busy observing and managing the flow of events to be able to interfere with judgment. This way the real can arise and manifest. This is the lesson that Western dance learns from the East, the study of the relationship between mind and body: to tame one's reason by a work of observation of the body and of reality. For me, the creation is condensed into a structure based on an articulation of micro systems that generate events articulated in qualities, spaces and durations. Within this structure where I have found firm points, the work largely maintains a degree of non-definition that is necessary for me so that the play is always in the present moment. The present moment relates to 'presence'. Presence on stage appears when the dancer becomes thoroughly permeable to perceptions, to the point of being able to reach a maximum exposure on the threshold of fragility and authentic vulnerability. I therefore keep a dose of risk within the work that the dancer must be able to take on and support on stage. I have a deep interest in improvisation and instant composition since they are connected to that form of intuition and attention mentioned above. Amid improvisation, instant composition and choreography (the creation) there is an infinite range of possibilities, different degrees and levels of definition: their boundaries are extremely blurred. When I get to the creation, its structure of qualities, spaces and durations is defined in a very articulated way. Yet the single steps are not defined: I work by outbreaks, intensities, rhythms, rules and

exceptions, to allow sense to manifest.

The question of sense is closely linked to the cognitive, thought, language and symbolic. Frederick Nietzsche recognizes dance as a metaphor of thought in the becoming, in its active power, its intensity. At the same time he defines ‘vulgarity’ as the fact of being forced to react and obey every impulse, unable to resist an stimulus. Alain Badiou observes how dance for Nietzsche is not vulgar because it is “the bodily manifestation of the disobedience to an impulse”.¹⁶ Badiou in his careful analysis of Mallarmé’s essay provocatively states that:

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *La danse comme métaphore de la pensée*, in *Danse et pensée: Une autre scène pour la danse* (Sammeron: Germs, 1993), 14.

Dance is not an art, since it is the sign of the possibility of art inscribed in the body.... Spinoza said we try to know what thought is, when we do not even know what a body is capable of. I would say that dance is exactly what shows the body is capable of art and the exact measure in which, at a given moment, it is capable of it. But to say that a body is capable of art does not mean making ‘an art of the body’. Dance indicates this artistic ability of the body, without therefore defining a specific art. To say that the body, as body, is capable of art, is to show it as thought-body. Not so much as thought imprisoned in a body, but as body that is thought. This is the task of dance: the thought-body showing itself under the evanescent sign of the capacity of art. Our sensitivity to dance comes from the way dance responds to Spinoza’s question in its own way. What a body as such is capable of? It is capable of art, that is to say that it shows itself as native thought.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

In this direction also moves Jacques Rancière: for the author, “the things of the art are things of the thought”.¹⁸ Recalling Baumgarten’s Aesthetic and his idea of ‘confused knowledge’, Rancière states that “it is about the identity of a knowing and a not-knowing, a sensitive knowledge as the confused intelligible opposed to the clear and distinct knowledge of logic.... Not at all an inferior knowledge, but more precisely a thought of what does not think”.¹⁹ This is the revolution of the symbolic order Rancière refers to, which allows us “thought outside of itself”.²⁰ Thought manifesting itself as such in the dimension of the sensible, in which it does not think. In this sense also Merleau-Ponty on non-philosophy.²¹ Rancière puts in relation analytic thought and aesthetic thinking. For the author, the figures of the works of art serve to prove that:

¹⁸ Rancière, *L’inconsio estetico*, 51.

¹⁹ Ibid., 52.

²⁰ Villani, *Politica: il risalire dell’osceno*, 13.

²¹ On the theme of non-philosophy as a state of crisis of thought but also as its overcoming in art, literature and psychoanalysis see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *È possibile oggi la filosofia? Lezioni al Collège de France 1958-1959 e 1960-1961*.

There is some sense in what seems to have none, there is enigma in what seems to go by itself, a load of thought in what appears to be an anodyne detail. These figures are not the materials on which analytical interpretation proves its ability to interpret the formations of culture. They are the evidence of the existence of a certain relationship between thought and non-thought, of a certain mode of presence of thought in the materiality of the sensible, of the involuntary in conscious thought and of meaning in the insignificant. Briefly, if the physician Freud interprets the ‘anodine’ facts neglected by his positivist colleagues, if he can make these ‘examples’ serve his proof, it is because they themselves

testimony the evidence of a certain unconscious.²²

²² Rancière, *L'inconscio estetico*, 50.

Therefore “if the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious is formulated, it is because outside the properly clinical terrain already exists a certain identification of an unconscious mode of thought, and because the scope of the works of art and literature is defined as the privileged domain of this unconscious”.²³ At the same time, however, he points out that Freud “seeks the matrix phantom of artistic creation, not the unconscious figural order of art”.²⁴ In his discourse Freud wants to make triumph a hermeneutic vocation, he wants “to intervene on the idea of the unconscious thought regulating the production of the aesthetic regime of art, (he wants) to bring order into the matter where art and thought about art articulate the relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge, sense and non-sense, logos and pathos, real and fantastic”.²⁵ In this way – for Badiou – Freud “is asking art to testify in favor of a profound rationality of ‘fantasy’, to support a science that somehow aims at bringing imagination, poetry and mythology inside the heart of scientific rationality”.²⁶ This discourse partly takes us away from a psychoanalytic interpretation of art, especially when categorizing a psychotic or neurotic art, which at times seems too artificial. Certainly there is an activity of the unconscious in all the manifestations of our lives, to which art is no exception. Therefore an activity of sublimation exists, to which even art is no exception. At this point it would be necessary to articulate these observations in the light of recent discoveries and studies in the field of neurophysiology and neuroscience. Whoever carries out a certain artistic practice is endowed with or develops the analogical associative mind: lateral rather than linear thinking.

²³ Ibid., 51.

²⁴ Ibid., 93.

²⁵ Ibid., 85.

²⁶ Ibid., 81.

Often what seems more interesting is what can affect us because it intervenes as a rupture of a given order of the aesthetic and cultural terms. Every time this cut or laceration occurs, it presents itself as a gesture by its nature insane, since it contradicts and puts in crisis the norm – doing so as a refined protest instead of being an act out of control. This madness, that we associate with the genius of the artist, is a conscious rupture – as critical as it is incisive and precise – of what is the discourse of the Law.²⁷ Coming back to Nijinsky, the dancer – in his genius – is perfectly aware that the gesture of his Faun is an intentional rupture with all previous tradition of ballet. Michel Foucault states:

²⁷ For an analysis of the relationship between dance and politics see Pierre Legendre, *La passione di essere un altro. Studio per la danza* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1979).

There is no madness but the supreme instant of the work, and the latter rejects it indefinitely at its borders. Where there is the work there is no madness. Yet madness is contemporary with the work, since it inaugurates the time of its truth. The instant in which the work and madness are born and accomplished together marks the beginning of a time in which the world finds itself cited in judgment by this work and is responsible for what is before it.²⁸

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “La folie, l’absence d’oeuvre”, appendix to *Historie de la Folie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); “La follia, l’assenza di opera”, appendix to *Storia della follia nell’età classica* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2015).

3. The Scene

For what concerns the relationship between the scene and the spectator – as De Marinis points out – it is necessary to reverse perspective: “from the show as product-work to watch-analyze-read, etc., to the scene as set of processes and practices – productive and receptive – to experience-investigate-understand”.²⁹ For the dancer-choreographer, the work of research and creation through the body involves the mind in a total cognitive process through thought, the senses and experience. In the same way, for the spectator the scene operates on these three levels in a dynamic relationship with his or her mind. The strength of the performative act – as a “designed transit of impermanence”³⁰ – lies in its being undefined. In this sense the scene opens up, from sense to non-sense, to the “fertile power of the misunderstanding”.³¹ The diaphragm between what manifests on scene and the viewer works like the joints of our body keeping bones connected yet allowing them to articulate in multiple directions. I conceive of the scene as a perceptive device that has to do with the cognitive and that does not let itself be tamed by language and the symbolic, thus breaking the protective barriers of shame, good and beauty to approach the place of incandescence that is the real, “that meaningless and senseless real that terrifies us”.³² Here dance can enter the territory of the unspeakable, trespassing on lands to which one is otherwise not allowed to enter. Human, all too human, the body that dances challenges the limits of matter in an unreachable tension to the beyond, to be understood not as an elevation but as a trespassing of the ultimate border of the real, a limit that constantly shifts and eludes. My beginning as choreographer – passing from the dancing body to the challenge of creation – was fortuitous. Until then, my work as dancer – feeling a certain discomfort I was not really aware of – was at the service of the idea of the choreographer. When asked to create my own work, I discovered that this position – asking to take on more responsibility for the scene – was more congenial to me. I felt the need to establish a strong relationship with the viewer by involving him or her directly in the performance device, demanding a spatial proximity, asking to act in the first person within the device. These early works are a search for new formats experimenting with different ideas of space and of the performative relationship. This is the case of *Watch/Touch* (2003) and *Körpersprache* (2004). Then the tension with the viewer moves from space to time through research on systems of composition with *K.i.s.s.#1 – about fragility* (2005) and *Mensch – über Schönheit* (2006) – this last work conceived as a triptych, was more often on stage in its *solo* form. I could define these first experiments most markedly conceptual works.

*Watch/Touch*³³ is a series of *solo* performances for a *solo* spectator. Here the spectator is invited to enter an aluminum box of 4x4 metres where the performer is waiting and where he or she is guaranteed not to be seen from the outside. The

²⁹ Marco De Marinis, *Il corpo dello spettatore. Performance Studies e nuova teatrologia*, Report at the conference *Le scienze cognitive in Italia. Bilanci e prospettive* (University of Messina, 28-30 November 2013).

³⁰ Silvia Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto nella pratica performativa di Habillé d'eau* (Roma: Editoria & Spettacolo, 2012), 23.

³¹ See my choreographic notes to *La follia*, 2016, <https://gabriellariccio.it/la-follia-en>.

³² Massimo Recalcati, *Lavoro del lutto, melanconia e creazione artistica* (Bari: Poiesis, 2013), 23.

³³ See my choreographic notes to *Watch|Touch*, 2003, <https://gabriellariccio.it/watchtouch-en>.

structure has only two entries, one to watch and the other to touch, yet the spectator will be allowed in only once, being forced to choose only one of the two modalities. The performance questions the usual way dance performance is accessible: the most bodily of the arts, usually enjoyed only from a distance and only through the sense of sight. *Watch/Touch* is an investigation into perceptions, touch and sight, and the role these play in our personal experience. At the same time it is a work on risk, courage, vulnerability, challenge, intimacy, authenticity. The duration of each *solo* is about 7 minutes for a total duration of the performance of up to 180 minutes: usually the *solo* ends when the viewer starts to lose spontaneity, putting forward a game he or she already knows. This first work allowed me to directly meet a large number of bodies, largely non-dancers with their authentic gestures. Those encounters left traces inside of me: rich material that emerged in the works that followed. *Watch/Touch* is an invisible work in the sense that there are very few captured images, and those that do exist are thanks to a consenting viewer and therefore obviously not truly representative of the performance. A more authentic track of the spectators' experience remains in the guestbook where they were invited to leave a comment at the exit of the performance: strong, intense comments, in a mix of emotion and transformation: entering the box meant to come out touched and transformed. They made me notice how in *Watch/Touch* the performance already begins before entering the box when in the *foyer* the spectator has to choose whether to enter the box to watch or to touch. Aware of the role it plays in the performance, I have attentively taken care of the waiting area, carefully instructing a performer who acted as a membrane between the people outside and me inside the box. To be inside the box is at the same time – both for the performer and for the spectator – a dimension of protection and of total vulnerability and exposure (Fig. 1). In this regard Silvia Rampelli is very lucid and precise about the onset of the phenomenon that takes place on the scene and its effects on the perception/attention of the spectator:

The performative relationship is an open experiment on the modality of the experience. Seeing, feeling, being there is an occurrence that the spectator – the locus of the experiment – acts, suffers, dismissing the grammatical opposition. That which can be directly experienced in theatre, its entirely sensorial matter, gifts evidence: the expansion of perception is expansion of consciousness.³⁴

³⁴ Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto*, 104.

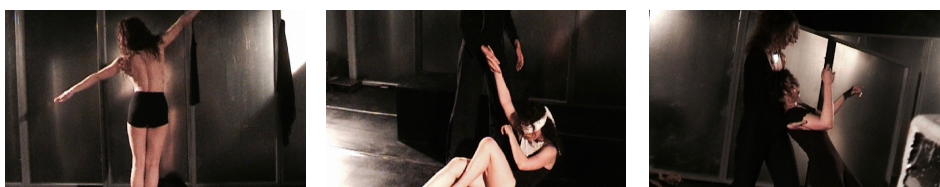


Fig. 1: Gabriella Riccio, *Watch/Touch*, 2003. *Première* Parco Viviani, Maggio dei Monumenti, Napoli. Stills. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

³⁵ See my choreographic notes to *Körpersprache*, 2004, <https://gabriellariccio.it/korpersprache-en>.

*Körpersprache*³⁵ also explicitly requests the spectator to assume an active role in the performance: to take the microphone and give directions to dancers. Without this necessary input the performance would not take place or could stop. Apparently simple, the system is conceived in such a way to first install a mode where dancers meekly follow the given instructions. As time passes, the spectator gets used to this agreement with the dancers: the implicit rule “I say, they do”. Once this system is established, the dancers gradually start to break the agreement by more and more evident acts of disobedience. In some cases, the spectators have gotten to the point where they were screaming into the microphone, convinced that the sound amplification did not work or that the dancers could not understand the command. This is the moment when the performance reveals its true nature: *Körpersprache* is only apparently a research project on the possibilities of the choreographic composition through the translation of words into movement. Actually it is a work about power and loss of power, obedience and disobedience, freedom and constraint, responsibility and respect, risk and trust, action and reaction, opposition of the individual and of the group. At first, a form with some indications leads the spectator into the system to help him or her provide neutral indications related to the body, time and space. Then he or she is given the chance to freely suggest words. For the company, the work involves great risk and high exposure. The audience shows a certain timidity as it perceives a limit that cannot be exceeded. Nevertheless, in every performance we have been challenged by the boldest spectators: some commands given could be offensive or obscene. Each dancer was left with the utmost freedom whether to seize the challenge – if he or she wanted to – or to stop in a clear way as an explicit sign of rejection or protest, to show that the limit beyond which he or she was no longer willing to cooperate had been crossed (Fig. 2). In Lacanian terms: the device of the performance – through the dancers’ avoidance – arises in the spectator a question that remains unanswered by the Other that is missing; however, only when the possibility of the encounter with the Other is missing, the possibility of the act emerges, permitting the name of the Subject to be regained. Referring to the sensitive cognitive dimension of the performance, Rampelli observes:

The spectator is the apex of the cognitive passage: perceiving – in fact – he subjects the flow of multiple impressions to unity, naming the entity-event in the unity of the name. The moment of perception reveals the spectator to himself – who perceives that he is perceiving – and reveals him as the constitutive polarity of the performative relation.... To know is to recognize: actualize the form, bring the multiple to the one. In this sense the theatrical relationship carries the exemplarity of the cognitive experience *tout court* and of the mythological representation of the cognitive experience itself: the logical transit from chaos to order as principle, category, law, language.... The immersion in the fact – not in the code – actualizes primary pre-linguistic responses.³⁶

³⁶ Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto*, 92, 103, 104.



Fig. 2: Gabriella Riccio, *Körpersprache*, 2005. Nuovo Teatro Nuovo, Napoli. Photo credit Piero Cremonese. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

K.i.s.s.#1 – about fragility,³⁷ *Mensch – über Schönheit*,³⁸ *Echo Resonance and Memory*,³⁹ are works that respectively interrogate the concepts of fragility, beauty, memory. The first two works question again the dimension of the ‘danced dance’: the first juxtaposes the gesture of the dancers to that of six blindfolded non-dancers who move in space on the basis of a random system made of quotidian movements that continuously interfere with the choreography (Fig. 3); the second presents three performance environments through which the viewer can transit. Here the composition systems are the same but the qualities of the movement are different: a very technical dancer, another presenting a poetic gesture, two dancers working on the extreme limit of the body. Being allowed to transit from one to the other, the spectator experiences how he or she resonates with the three modalities (Fig. 4).

³⁷ See my choreographic notes to *K.I.S.S.#1-about fragility*, 2005, <https://gabriellariccio.it/k-i-s-s-1-about-fragility-en>.

³⁸ See my choreographic notes to *Mensch - über Schönheit*, 2005, <https://gabriellariccio.it/mensch-uber-schonheit-solo-en>.

³⁹ See my choreographic notes to *Echo Resonance and Memory*, 2008, <https://gabriellariccio.it/echo-resonance-and-memory-en>.



Fig. 3: Gabriella Riccio, *K.I.S.S.#1 - about fragility* 2004. Rehearsals and performances at Goethe Institut Neapel and Nuovo Teatro Nuovo, Napoli. Photo credit Piero Cremonese. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.



Fig. 4: Gabriella Riccio, *Mensch - über Schönheit*, 2005. Première at Goethe Institut Neapel. Photo credit Piero Cremonese. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

These works abandon the direct interaction with the spectator: there is still an interest in formats and space, yet the research focuses on time perception. They more directly investigate the duration in relation to the mechanism of the attention of the spectator. In this sense Rampelli:

The degree of opacity of something happening generates a potential question. The viewer responds with an increase in level of attention, which reflects the need for information on the indeterminate to which he or she is assisting... Attention is a state of activity in which senses and intellect are directed around the event or the task that polarizes them.... Attention is proportional to the degree of activity necessary to decipher the information.... Perception is an economic mechanism that proceeds by hypothesis: it is activated when faced with the event that disregards the prediction, it becomes inertialised when faced with the stabilization of the event in habit or norm.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Rampelli, *Il corpo insorto*, 91, 100, 103.

Since 2008 – with *Echo Resonance and Memory* and *Noli me tangere* (creation 2008, re-enactment 2015) – this research on systems of composition, time and space has become more complex with respect both to technical aspects that experiment with technologies (video interaction or sound-sensitive environment) and to stage writing (moving towards a dramaturgy of bodies and signs on stage). In these works the scene is a complex system that writes through bodies, text, words, lights, sound and objects, where symbolic elements coexist alongside immersive environments.

Echo Resonance and Memory explores remembrance. A real-time video composition system captures recently danced gestures, more time-distant ones or anticipates future ones, interacting with the instant composition of the dancer. It is a poetic and evocative work (Fig. 5).

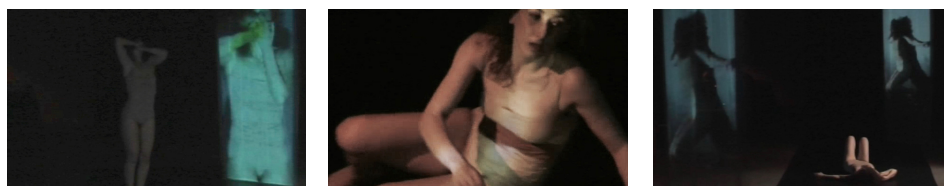


Fig. 5: Gabriella Riccio, *Echo Resonance and Memory*, 2008. *Première* at Il Torchio Somma Vesuviana. Stills. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

Noli me tangere represents an important stage of my choreographic journey and I remain particularly attached to this work. My choreographic notes about the idea seem to me today as an unconscious artistic manifesto:

we start from a gap / separating time / unbridgeable space between human beings / time-space discrepancy / distance between the phases of being / lapse / void / interruption / tending to / suggesting a / continuum / noli me tangere / do not touch me / do not hold me back / transfigured Christ

pronounces to Mary Magdalene / impatience / urgency / tearing sometimes / as in the creative act / the performative act / do not hold me back from what I have to accomplish now / because it is ethical for art to be / perhaps even scandalous urgency of this ethics / of discovering / of showing / showing oneself exposed / going towards / an unavoidable action / yet also a taboo / of the contact / of allowing oneself to be penetrated / of allowing breaking in / and contaminating our sphere as individuals / attempt not to change status / renounce the ego / to go beyond / as the renunciation of corruption is sterile / a non-fertile act / the warning becomes therefore lacerating / reminder to follow a path of transfiguration / towards contact with / the impalpable knowledge of oneself / one's duty to accomplish oneself.⁴¹

⁴¹ See my choreographic notes to *Noli me tangere*, 2008, <https://gabriellariccio.it/noli-me-tangere-en>.

This work stems from an in-depth reading of *Corpus* by Nancy.⁴² When first presented as *Noli me tangere – study in progress* (running time 20', 2008), the dramaturgical structure was already well defined in its general outlines. Only later during the second phase of my research I met the homonymous essay by Nancy.⁴³ Given the strong adherence of this text to the idea already developed in the work, it could not but become part of it and this was developed in the central *duo*. The work presents deep research on touch in relation to a sensitive sound environment that reacts through feedback to the movement of the two dancers, feeding the choreographic composition. Two performers – a man and a woman – dance immersed in a sound box. A complex score marking the duration and nature of the scenes. Piles of books appear on stage: my personal library. The books chosen and ordered according to well-defined criteria are read randomly by the two performers: alongside a 'sound environment', the structure of the performance presents an actual 'literary environment' where philosophical, literary and poetic thought intersect around body, relationship, intimacy, psyche, death, human and divine, everlasting tension between *eros* and *thanatos*, setting the atmosphere for what will follow.

⁴² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2004).

⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere. Saggio sul levarsi del corpo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).

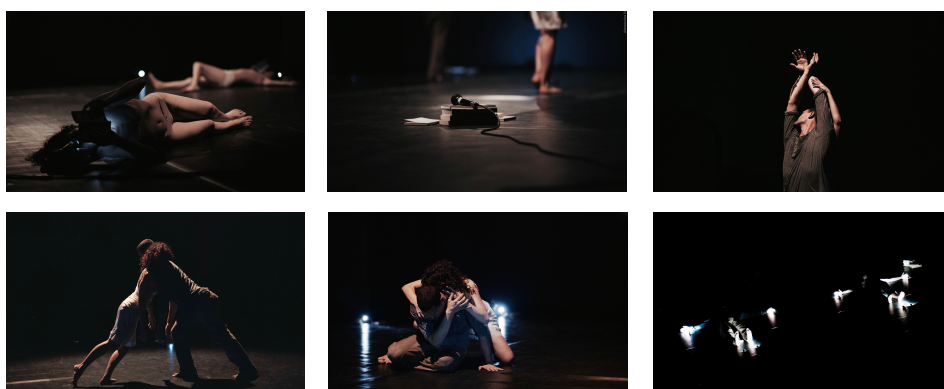


Fig. 6: Gabriella Riccio, *Noli me tangere*, 2015. L'asilo - Ex Asilo Filangieri, Napoli. Photo credit Alessandra Finelli. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

This opening of the *pièce* has for the performers the value of an epiphany: it gives the books the power to indicate a direction. Surprising coincidences have happened during the performances: I remember the Berlin *première* when I found myself lying half naked reading Nijinsky's invective against Nazism (Fig. 6).

This new phase is more distant from purely conceptual works: this dance needs to challenge reality in a more direct way. This aspect also remains in *Magnificat – first study for a better world* (2015) and in *La Follia* (2016): there is a deeper awareness of the political dimension of the body and dance which coincides with my interest – since 2011 – in the Italian artists movement of self-governed cultural spaces such as *L'Asilo* in Naples.⁴⁴ *Magnificat – first study for a better world* is the result of a workshop that began a few days after the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris: facing what the world was presenting it was unavoidable to think about what role dance and the scene can have in our time (Fig 7 and 8).

⁴⁴ *L'asilo - comunità aperta di lavoratrici e lavoratori di arte, cultura e spettacolo in autogoverno all'Ex Asilo Filangieri di Napoli*, www.exasilofilangieri.it.

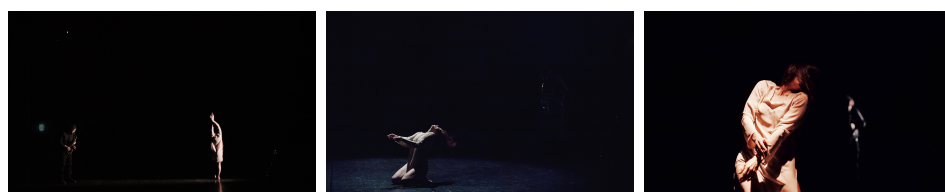


Fig. 7: Gabriella Riccio, *La Follia*, 2016. *Première* Teatro Piccolo Bellini, Napoli. Photo credit Alessandra Finelli. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

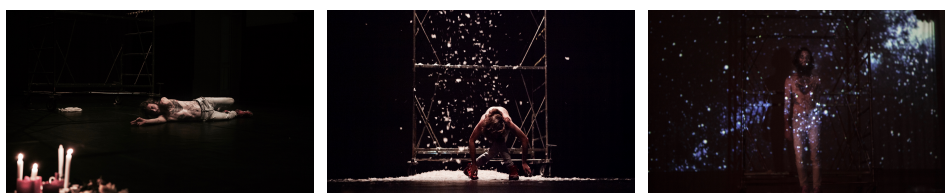


Fig. 8: Gabriella Riccio, *Magnificat - primo studio per un mondo migliore*, 2016. *L'asilo – Ex Asilo Filangieri*, Napoli. Photo credit Claudia Nuzzo. Courtesy of Gabriella Riccio.

The gaze of the spectator on dance is constantly confronted with contradiction: the visible refers to the invisible, the finite to infinity, the moment to eternity, bodies to the immaterial. But there is more: it is about a properly political dimension of dance and the question of sense with respect to the body that dances in its relationship with the ideas of consensus and dissent. Rancière tells us that:

there is consensus when there are established relationships between images and their signification ... there is dissent when the relationship between sensible perception and signification is transformed, when times no longer have the same effect ... There is art and creation every time this shift of relationships between the sensible and its meaning takes place.⁴⁵

The ethical and political value of dance lies in its ability to rethink and re-signify

⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dissenso, Emancipazione, Estetica*, (Opervaviva, 2017), <http://operaviva.info/dissenso-emancipazione-estetica>, accessed 7 March 2017.

relationships concerning body, time and space in the 'common sensible'. Therefore the question of Sublimation remains open: is dance a metaphor of thought, therefore closer to the order of the symbolic, or is it the manifestation of being, an ontological manifestation exposed and commonly shared, therefore closer to the order of the real? Perhaps dance exists precisely within this unsolvable contradiction, ultimate vertigo on the subtle threshold dividing the symbolic from the real.

Brian T. Edwards, *After the American Century: The Ends of U. S. Culture in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2017), xv+268 pp., ISBN: 978-0-231-17400-8

Reviewed by **Lisa Marchi**

What if all of a sudden Alfred Hitchcock appeared on the screen wearing a traditional Moroccan cloak (*djellaba*)? What if the Disney hero Shrek started to sing a very popular Moroccan folk song (*rai*) or to express himself using a local Iranian dialect? What if Paul Bowles were recognized globally as an authentic Moroccan writer?

In his fascinating new book *After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East*, Brian T. Edwards explores the multiple and often curious paths that American icons and cultural products travel when they circulate from the U.S. to North Africa and the Middle East. In the new context, they also take on surprising shapes and gather an unusual set of meanings.

A professor of English, comparative literary studies and American studies, and founding director of the Middle East and North African Studies Program at Northwestern University, Edwards employs in his work a variety of materials (personal memories and photographs, excerpts from his field journals, graphic novels, cyberpunk fiction, video clips, commercial and art films, TV series, but also academic conversations and informal exchanges with local people), which he collected in more than ten years of fieldwork between Casablanca, Cairo and Tehran.

After the American Century has indeed not only the merit of decentering U.S. culture and American literary studies by embracing a viewpoint that represents the Other *par excellence*, but has also the advantage of considering three regional/global metropolises that are very different from each other. According to Edwards, rather than merely appropriating and replicating U.S. culture, individuals in Casablanca, Cairo, and Tehran produce very creative and most of the time unexpected responses to U.S. culture that “disorient” the American reader, viewer, and/or traveler. To quote the author: “These three cities not only bridge a huge region but stand for three different ways of responding to American culture and its forms, as different as these societies and their local histories are from one another. They orient in different directions and have different colonial and postcolonial histories that affect the directions in which cultural products travel in and out of them” (29).

In addition to its clear and rigorous style, there are many qualities that make this book a compelling and indispensable reading for anyone interested in studying U.S. culture from a transnational perspective or in deepening their knowledge of the MENA region. With considerable expertise, the author touches on a wide array of contentious topics such as the so-called “Arab Spring” and the often misleading translation made by U.S. mainstream media for the American public, the attitude of the Moroccan society in matters of identity, gender and sexuality, the

relationship between individual creativity and state censorship in Iran, but also the influence of Hollywood and U.S. politics on the American film industry.

In this regard, Edwards convincingly demonstrates, for instance, that the film *Argo* (2013), directed by Ben Affleck, is in fact a very local film in the negative sense of the term, namely a narrow-minded, provincial movie employing familiar, easily translatable formulas to explain the 1979 Iranian revolution to an American/global audience. On the contrary, *A Separation* (2011) by the Iranian film director Asghar Farhadi raises a multitude of issues and provides the viewer with a plurality of meanings, thus offering a much more acute, because nuanced, reading of the complexity of the contemporary Iranian situation and indirectly also of its global implications.

The audacious thesis that makes Edwards's book particularly intriguing is the idea that the digital twenty-first century represents a watershed in U.S. history, marking the end of U.S. cultural domination in North Africa and the Middle East. The author further contends that it is precisely in those decentered places and new political environments that it is possible to find valuable cultural means to understand the complexity of the contemporary age. The examples provided by the author clearly show that the circulation of U.S. cultural products often "ends" in unexpected local contexts and that North African and Middle Eastern users produce very original deployments and readaptations of U.S. culture, thereby confirming the variety, creativity, and dynamism that characterize the MENA region. According to the author, this area would be a first-rate receptacle of U.S. culture, yet its manifold responses are often highly unpredictable. As he notes: "Fueled by digital piracy, translation websites, and the Internet porous boundaries, cultural products move quickly into locations their producers rarely imagined and are picked up by multiple new publics" (89).

In *After the American Century*, Edwards extends the boundaries of postcolonial studies, moving beyond its typical binarism, and showing for instance that global culture rather than being safely positioned in a hegemonic center may in fact travel outside it and reach some terminal ends, where it undergoes a radical transformation. This representation of local, indigenous places as new nodal points and as laboratories for exceptionally innovative and independent cultural products is one of the most interesting aspects of Edwards's work, since it shows that circulation in the globalized, digital age is not merely a "two-way street, *aller-retour*" and that "[t]here are many endpoints from which cultural forms do not return" (40). For example, the comic books by Magdy El Ahmed or the cyberpunk novel by Alaidy Shafee – two young artists based in Cairo – clearly deviate from the U.S. cultural products that were among their main sources of inspiration. These artists do not only refuse to adhere and respond to the expectations of U.S./global audiences but even "jump publics," that is to say, they openly refuse to take them seriously into consideration.

Edwards convincingly demonstrates throughout his book that Farhadi's movies, the Disney videos dubbed in farsi and the cyberpunk novels of a new generation of Egyptian authors, but also the revolution in Tahrir square itself, do not aspire to go back, nor desire to get some kind of recognition from a global public that most of the time, partly or completely ignores the context in which they

developed. As the author poignantly asserts: “Though many have assumed that globalization in the cultural realm brings endless circulation, these new products are end points, perhaps even dead ends, and they do not return easily. But neither do they particularly want to, and that is what makes them perhaps crucial to understand in grasping what the world after the American century looks like” (xv). It is precisely in their capacity to be so self-reliant and fierce and in their ability to dodge a global audience pretentiously convinced that it can do without them, that their irreverent strength becomes manifest.

The very personal and to a certain extent very local way through which the Moroccan gay writer Abdellah Taïa appropriates and deploys Hitchcock’s masterpiece *Rear Window* in twenty-first century Casablanca is another exemplary case. As the writer explains in an interview included in the book, he turned to this American classic movie of the 1950s and used it retrospectively as a source of inspiration to illustrate his very personal role as a *voyeur* writer, one who observes closely and bears witness to the unique ways in which Moroccan society understands and practices (homo)sexuality.

While U.S. and global audiences continue to buy and consume cultural products that tend to reproduce stereotypical versions of an “Orient” cast as opposite to an innocent and democratic West, very original and creative works that synthesize, alter, and dis-orient U.S. cultural models are continuously being produced in the streets of Cairo, Casablanca, and Tehran by new generations of artists. As Edwards demonstrates, however, these works hardly circulate back to the U.S., and on the rare occasions when they do so, they receive scant attention from audiences and critics who are unable to catch the innovative power of their narratives.

The widespread desire for “native informants” and for simple, univocal representations of the MENA region would explain, according to Edwards, the great success of Tv series such as *The Tyrant* (2014-) and *Homeland* (2011-), of a graphic novel like *Habibi* (2011) by Craig Thompson, and of neo-Orientalist novels such as *The Yellow Birds* (2013) by Kevin Powers and *A Hologram for the King* (2012) by Dave Eggers – both finalists of the National Book Award, which all tend to reproduce prevailing and debilitating neo-Orientalist stereotypes.

As the author makes clear, despite the uncontestable lure of these familiar representations, readers should rather plunge into the multilayered archive of local, resisting, and ultimately disorienting adaptations of U.S. culture by Middle Eastern and North African users, if they hope to find useful means to make some sense of the complexity of the present. It is indeed only by listening carefully to the unpredictability, the fragmentary nature, and to the dissonance through which the local expresses itself that we may be able to formulate a more subtle and perhaps also less catastrophic judgement of our time.

Samuele F. S. Pardini, *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2017), 263 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5126-0019-3

Reviewed by **Sabrina Vellucci**

Samuele Pardini's *In the Name of the Mother* invites us to radically change our perspective on how we usually think about issues such as migratory phenomena – in particular, Italian emigration to North America; the processes of racialization and the resulting discrimination that have affected certain sections of the U.S. population, such as Italian Americans and African Americans, which constitute the main focus of Pardini's analysis; the relations of power between minority groups and between these groups and the ruling classes, and, ultimately, the economic structures of the country. The notion of whiteness with regard to Italian Americans (or their non-whiteness – a concept that Pardini identifies with the formula of “invisible blackness”) has received sustained critical attention in seminal studies like *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (2003) edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno. In the previous decade, the complicated relationships between Italian Americans and African Americans had been the subject of famous films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Jungle Fever* (1991) – inspired by the Bensonhurst killing of Yusuf Hawkins in 1989; or, of the less well-known documentary *fuori/outside* (1997) by Kym Ragusa, who, in the film and subsequent memoir, *The Skin Between Us* (2006), recounts her experience as an Italian African American.

In Pardini's book the history of the relationships between these two groups is addressed, for the first time in such an extensive and in-depth approach, referring to an important body of literary, filmic, and musical texts and to characters that have become part of a transnational collective imagination, such as Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., and Bruce Springsteen. What concerns the author, as he explains in the introduction, is not so much the study of race or ethnicity, nor the study of Italian American or African American identity. Rather, *In the Name of the Mother* is based on a rethinking of the concept of modernity in the twentieth century from different perspectives. In so doing, Pardini offers up a new and timely reconceptualization of Italian American studies.

In the Name of the Mother is a book that, to some extent, disorients the reader, starting from the title, itself rather disruptive in the feminine inflection of the well-known formula of the Catholic liturgy, and to which a subtitle is added, which joins two figures – both male – that are quite different from each other, if not antithetical.

What happens, the author asks in the introduction, when the “others” by definition in the American culture, namely African Americans, look at Italian Americans? What do they see in them and how do they see them? What does this tell us about Italian Americans and America? How can this approach deepen our knowledge of African American culture? Finally, what form(s) might the “otherness” of Italian Americans assume when observed through the eyes of African Americans? These are some of the questions around which the book builds its specific discourse.

In the first chapter, “New World, Old Woman: Or, Modernity Upside Down”, the thorough examination of the Madonna in southern culture – her omnipresence and her central role in the material life of the peasant class – is followed by the paradoxical observation of how this figure is actually linked to a rural past that cannot find a place in the modernity represented by emigration and contact with the New World (which is also the title of the film by Emanuele Crialese, *Nuovomondo*, of which Pardini offers a perceptive analysis). The woman, therefore, and specifically the female Italian American proletariat, which fuses concepts considered mutually exclusive, such as motherhood and sexuality, assumes a particularly subversive role in U.S. culture, becoming a figure of absence or negation. These Italian emigrants, bearers of customs and ancestral beliefs founded in a cosmic vision of the world and of life, and rooted as well in a deep sense of community and of sharing, once in contact with the American soil, immediately became an anachronism, a model that members of the subsequent generation would feel compelled to abandon in order to feel as modern “Americans”. Yet, Pardini emphasizes how, concurrently, this representation of the mother is configured as a symbol of a “Mediterranean humanism”, which contrasts the exploitative utilitarianism of a puritan style, represented paradoxically by a figure such as Booker T. Washington, author of *Up From Slavery* (1901) and advocate of the education, although still strictly professional, of African Americans.

Pardini then focuses on Jerre Mangione’s memoir *Mont’Allegro* (1943), reading it as a convergence of the ancient democratic traditions of the Mediterranean world, the political economy of immigrants in Rochester, NY, and the African roots that the author discovers in his parents’ village during the celebrations of San Calogero, a black saint whom Mangione connects to the racial “otherness” of Italian Americans and to the jazz music his family loved. This confluence, according to Pardini, offers Mangione the opportunity to show the incompatibility of white culture with the political economy of Italian immigrants in the U.S., which is based on the notion of “respect”, especially widespread in southern Italy, and privileges cooperation, reciprocity, and recognition of the other over the logic of profit. Such a vision, however, as Donatella Izzo has noted, runs the risk of endorsing “an essentialist or idealized version of the Mediterranean identity”, notwithstanding the latter’s undeniable potential for challenging the dominant culture’s ideologies of exclusion and discrimination, and for questioning “U.S. exceptionalism based on

the notion of *melting pot* as *whitewashing*” (“Italian American Studies: territori, percorsi, proposte”, *Ácoma*, XXV [autunno-inverno 2017], 21).

In the chapter “Structures of Invisible Blackness: Racial Difference, (Homo)sexuality and Italian American Identity in African American Literature during Jim Crow”, Pardini addresses a group of writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Bruce Nugent, Sterling Brown, and James Baldwin, whose works feature Italian immigrants and Italian Americans in order to renegotiate the relationship between the notions of norm and difference in the age of racial segregation. Given the presence of Italian American themes and characters in the African American literature of the period, Pardini ponders the reason behind this “investment” by such authors. Namely, he examines the centrality of the Italian American presence as an authorial strategy to deal with the issue of the relationship between race and the processes of modernization in the twentieth century. The thesis that Pardini develops in this chapter is that, through Italian American male characters, these writers reinvent blackness as something not exclusively linked to skin color. Thus, the function of Italian Americans in the texts is to “signify” blackness. They act as a screen on which aspects of a complex humanity are projected, and from which they are reflected, precisely because the stereotype of the “black” as “Uncle Tom” has been reduced to a formula – a cliché against which an intellectual like Alain Locke wrote the most convincing pages of his anthology, *The New Negro* (1925). The Italian Americans, therefore, reflected the African American difference; they made it visible, but in a different light.

The chapter “In The Name of the Mother: The Other Italian American Modernity” focuses on different female characters named Maria in novels such as *Wait until Spring*, *Bandini* by John Fante, *Like Lesser Gods* by Mary Tomasi, *Maria* by Michael DeCapite, *Ghost Dance* by Carole Maso, and in some songs by Bruce Springsteen. Characters named Maria are recurrent and “ineludible” in Italian American literature, writes Pardini: “Her repeated manifestations recuperate and adapt the Mediterranean, popular Catholic sense of the communal reality of men and women, their shared destiny, and their mutual responsibility and reciprocity”, what Robert Orsi effectively defined as “the Italian Americans’ ‘abiding respect for things as they are, a humility before the givenness of reality’” (170). Far from being the symptom of a lack of agency in the face of facts, this position, Pardini argues, “entails participation in the form of an active faith in the possibilities of human life and the recognition of the opportunities and limitations of such a life in the modern world” (170). For this reason “the Maria trope ... recalls the personal and collective history of the poor and dispossessed in the form of places, cultural traditions, and fictional characters, as well as of an evolving self-realization of a working-class, specifically Italian American female identity that resists cultural and class oppression” (170-71). In this way, the protean character of Mary crosses the color line and embraces the “other” as a possible version of herself, giving voice to a heterogeneous class of people and creating a bridge that unites the individual

differences related to social condition and historical context without denying them. The figure of Maria, Pardini affirms, builds the house that “the (Italian) American modern man” (and, I would add, woman) continues to desire and seek (171).

“Home” is, in fact, a fundamental concept in Italian American and women’s literature. It is a key notion that assumes ambivalent connotations, as the desire to have a place and hence feel at home coexists with the need not to feel at home anywhere: for the third and fourth generation authors, in particular, a safe house is always – and only – a process, never a point of arrival. In this regard, Pardini quotes Janet Zandy, who defines the idea of home as “an inner geography, where the ache to belong finally quits, where there is no sense of ‘otherness’ and where there is, at last, a community” (171). Writing is also, of course, a way of locating oneself. Pardini endorses this notion of “home” as “internal geography”, adding that he considers both the concept of “belonging” as well as that of “otherness” as two instruments necessary to achieve and maintain it. Only in this way, he argues, can one avoid the risk of any ahistorical and homogenizing definition of community.

Pardini also points out how the American novel has been a particularly difficult terrain for women and mothers, especially for issues related to both ethnic/racial and gender identity. A less investigated aspect is the religious and class component of such hostility towards the feminine (an element that Leslie Fiedler identified in his famous volume *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960]). Developing this idea in the analysis of Fante’s *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938), Pardini demonstrates how the character of Maria is the bearer of yet another modernity: Maria is a figure who resists assimilation; she excoriates and subverts the conceptual foundations of twentieth century U.S. culture. Repeated manifestations of this character in literary texts retrieve and adapt the non-doctrinal meaning, typical of Mediterranean Catholicism, of the idea of a reality common to both men and women, of a shared destiny and of mutual responsibility.

The study concludes with a reflection on how the characteristic body language of performances executed by duos composed of an African American and an Italian American trigger an imaginative process that subverts the symbolic domination of U.S. racial policies. The case studies are those of Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, in the 1958 television performance titled “Me and My Shadow”, and the photo of Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons on the cover of the famous album *Born to Run*, as well as the kiss the two artists exchanged in their live performances.

In the Name of the Mother is characterized by a comparative approach that defeats any claim of cultural insularity. As the author states in the introduction, taking up the lesson of another founding text of African American literature, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, “We are never what and who we think we are. Our identity depends just as much on how others see and think of us as it depends on how we

see ourselves” (2). I believe Pardini succeeds in showing that “the value of studying how different people choose to represent each other and what defines them as human beings is to help us to better understand ourselves and, consequently, gain a deeper understanding of the country we inhabit and the world around us” (19).

Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava, eds., *Indian Literature and the World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 288 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-54549-7

Reviewed by Giuliana Regnoli

Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava's *Indian Literature and the World: Multilingualism, Translation and the Public Sphere* offers a cross-sectional and interdisciplinary perspective on contemporary Indian literary production. In bringing together research by scholars who have been working in traditionally bisected fields of expertise (namely, South Asian/Oriental studies and Post-Colonial studies), this volume provides a fresh working model of contemporary Indian literature characterised by a polyvocal and comparative dimension.

The volume explicitly positions itself as the counterargument to Rushdie's statement according to which "‘Indo-Anglian literature’ represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (x).¹ Undermining the hegemony of Indian literature produced in English and the nationalistic rhetoric of a monolithic literature as a symbol of state unity, the volume aims to construct a pan-Indian literary canon which may enable readers to approach India's linguistic and cultural complexity. In order to do so, the volume analyses a variety of Indian texts written in the *bhashas* (indigenous languages), in English, and in their English translations from the vernacular languages, positing that by juxtaposing a close reading of both indigenous and Anglophone literatures, distinctive (but at times, juxtaposed) perspectives of major historical events can be gained. Moreover, the studies in this volume are not restricted to one literary genre, but span from the novel to the subaltern autobiography, from the folk tale to the long essay, from the short story to poetry as to capture and emphasise the multiplicity and complexity of voices and forms of the Indian literary canon. Due to the abundance of languages and literatures across the subcontinent and due to the difficulty of using a single paradigm for their categorisation, these works address theoretical and methodological questions concerning the definition of literature in the Indian context. Moreover, they contextualise their interpretation of Indian literatures in relation to the European understandings of literary culture, ultimately feeding into wider theoretical questions in the study of World Literature, Multilingualism and Comparative Literature.

The volume is divided in three interlaced sections corresponding to the subthemes of the title, Multilingualism, Translation and the Publish Sphere, in which the categories of transcreation, non-translation and untranslatability, and the relationship between literature and sociopolitics are respectively investigated. The regional areas covered by the present set of studies ranges from the Northern State

¹ Salman Rushdie, "Introduction", in Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (London: Vintage, 1997), ix-xxii.

² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Vintage, 2010), 13.

of Punjab, via Uttar Pradesh, the North East and West Bengal, to central Maharashtra and Southern Tamil Nadu and Kerala — also envisaging the transnational dimension of the diasporic experience in the UK and back home. Here, the narrative of an Indian country completely rooted in its soil and its languages is interwoven with the narrative of India as an ‘imaginary homeland’ and a ‘rhetoric of exile’, in which ‘chutnified’ English is the only possible space for identity retrieval after loosing one’s past history and languages. Yet, “description is itself a political act”,² and all the works presented in the volume show how both narratives have actively participated in the elaboration of a new literature imbued in the political and public sphere by dealing with major Indian historical events (from Partition to Emergency, from tribal and peasant insurgencies to the spread of guerrilla warfare, from the sectarian religious upheavals of the 1990s to ecological and environmental disasters). Diverse narratives, however, may address the same issue differently: Stefania Cavaliere, for instance, provides a case study on the works of the Hindi novelist Krishna Sobti, who approaches Partition as a collective tragedy rather than a ‘mere’ political event, thus registering its direct and traumatic impact on civil society. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, on the other hand, offers a comparative reading of Qurratulain Hyder and Salman Rushdie’s major works and provides an enticing representation of two diverse narratives sharing, however, an identical commitment to nationalist ideals of secularism, cosmopolitanism and syncretism. By investigating issues of gender, caste and Hindi-Muslim coexistence in the rural and village life of Awadh, Francesca Orsini offered a comparative analysis of three pre- and post-Partition novels aiming at giving *all* Indians a common past to identify with. In order to do so, the immense body of Indian writings has to be addressed in the plural form —Indian *literatures*— as to highlight the polyvocal, multilingual and multi-authored contemporary Indian literary production.

All the texts examined by the volume contributors show a *fil rouge* between the ‘Indo-Anglian’ and the vernacular narratives for both their guiding the reader in the understanding of and in the debate around societal and cultural issues and for their polyphonic and multi-perspectival approach in the narration of the private and the public. Mara Matta’s examination of an heterogeneous corpus of literary writings dealing with India’s north-east nationalist movements in the aftermath of Partition focuses on the communal intent of diverse authors to reconceptualise identity formation in the borderlands and the performance of indigeneity. By focusing on the transformation of post-independence luminous Bombay to present-day sombre Mumbai, Rossella Ciocca’s in-depth analysis of the Bombay/Mumbai novel as a distinctive literary genre shed light on the way in which the city’s shift from a modernist capital to a dystopian megalopolis is reflected in its highly iconic but yet problematic identity epitomised by the 1992-1993 bloody trail of terror. Refocusing the debate around tradition and modernity, the private and the public and the individual and the collective, Maryam Mirza provides a case study on Manju

Kapur's family novels, ultimately revealing the complex position of the individual today, placed in a tradition-modernity continuum. By linking female subjectivities to issues of displacement and (un)belonging, Clelia Clini aims at challenging and subverting any easy celebration of the diaspora as the nomadic and post-modern condition, finally reminding that the diaspora is an uneasy place, even more so for woman.

³ Lawrence Venuti, "Introduction, Special Issue on Translation and Minority", *The Translator*, 4.2 (1998), 135-144.

Following the *mantra* 'the personal is political', and with the rise of nationalism in the 20th century, Indian writings became more prominently connected to social activism. For this reason, the brutal realities of village life and the concealed stories of modern slavery had to be narrated using the language of the oppressed. Alessandra Marino, for instance, reports on the case of Mahasweta Devi's prose, in which diverse registers of Bengali are interlaced with the languages of the tribes, thus reflecting on the linguistic multiplicity of India.

Bilingual creativity and literary bilingualism are closely examined throughout all the volume contributions. Udaya Kumar's compelling reflections upon the compositional choices made in Kamala Das' early work, for instance, shed new light on the very essence of being bilingual in India. By presenting the author's personal narratives as expressed both in English and in Malayalam according to the literary genre, Kumar posits that active bilingualism points to "be housed in languages in diverse ways" (88). The question of translation often recurs due to the many interconnections between translational and multilingual practices in literary texts, exemplified, for instance, by cases of code-switching and linguistic borrowings both from the *bhashas* and from English and between *bhashas*. On the one hand some volume contributions demand attention to the phenomenon of translation as an increasingly cohesive factor in the definition of an Indian-specific contribution to the theorisations of World Literature and as a means of fostering international development and visibility of subaltern writings. Lakshmi Holström, for instance, reports on the major role translation has acquired in the modern Tamil novel, and similarly, Neelam Srivastava examines the case of subaltern Dalit literature positing that it is in the context of translation that Dalit emerges as a politically resistant Pan-Indian category. On the other hand, some works point to the importance of non-translation and untranslatability from the *bhashas* into English since "the multitude of native voices [...] cannot be encompassed in the homogenizing representativeness of the English language" (155). Both translation and untranslatability, thus, acquire a political function in the Indian literary production. Most interestingly, Rossella Ciocca and Neelam Srivastava place translation at the centre of the theorisation of Indian literature, due to the centrality that multilingualism acquires both in the literary production and in everyday life. In a country in which many writers and readers are bilingual, the translating process becomes a necessity rather than an option. For this reason, the works presented in the volume do not privilege English as *the* language of translation to the detriment of the *bhashas*, but rather approach translation as a way to 'vary the language' (137).³

The volume's reclamation of linguistic expertise is not meant, however, to exclude English from the pan-Indian literary canon, but rather to assess its relative importance in the Indian multilingual scenario.

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Gabriella Riccio – artist, activist, researcher – as choreographer and performer is active on the contemporary scene with *caosmos | cie gabriellariccio* (2001) with 14 creations. As artist, curator, cultural operator her practical and theoretical research focuses on the body in contemporary cultural practices and on the relationship between practice and thought, dance and philosophy. With a multidisciplinary background in dance as well as in political studies, alongside her creative activity she is interested in art in its political dimension at the intersection with activism, in the movement of the commons and of self-governed cultural spaces. As resident member of L'Asilo - exasilofilangieri.it and founding member of the *Institute for Radical Imagination* she focuses on models of cultural production and processes of social transformation. She is also member of CID, the International Dance Council within UNESCO.

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