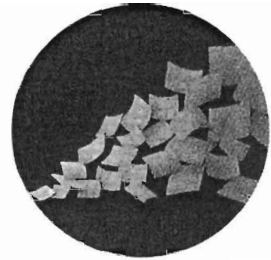
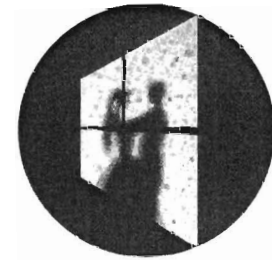
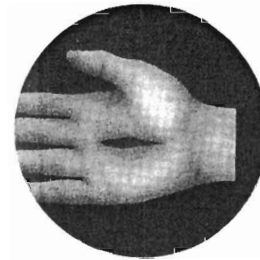


S A M U E L W E B E R

Theatricality as Medium



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Introduction: Theatricality as Medium

T H E E S S A Y S that compose this book seek to respond to two sets of questions.

First, how does it come about, and what does it signify, that, in an age increasingly dominated by electronic media, notions and practices that could be called “theatrical,” far from appearing merely obsolete, seem to gain in importance? In other words, given that the medium of theater and the effect of theatricality presuppose, as one of their indispensable preconditions, some sort of real, immediate, physical presence, and given that the status and significance of such presence has been rendered increasingly problematic by the advent of the “new media,” with their powerful “virtualizing” effects, one might expect to find that practices relating to theater and theatricality would tend to diminish progressively in scope and significance. Yet the contrary appears to be the case. Theatrical practices, attitudes, even organizations seem to proliferate, in conjunction with if not in response to the new media. Why is this happening, and what are its possible consequences?

The notions of “theater” and “theatricality” are anything but self-evident or unambiguous. They have a vexed and complex history, and only by articulating some of the major traits and tendencies of this history can we begin to investigate the renewed significance these terms are acquiring today. This brings me to the second set of questions to which I seek to respond.

Second, how has theater been conceptualized in the West? I limit myself here to the Western European tradition and its sequels, not because non-Western theater and theatrical practices lack importance, on the contrary. Non-Western theatrical practices have played a decisive and determining role throughout the long history of Western

theater. In the twentieth century, they have inspired a critical reevaluation of this history, most conspicuously in playwrights and theatrical thinkers such as Brecht, Artaud, Deleuze, Barthes, and Derrida. This rethinking has a much longer history, however. It emerges perhaps most significantly in the early part of the nineteenth century, in what might be called the “aftermath” of the Hegelian philosophical system and the culmination of thought it entails—in a writer-thinker such as Kierkegaard, for example—and it continues to mark the work of many of the most radical writer-thinkers of that century, such as Marx and Nietzsche, to name just the most obvious and influential. In the wake of the exhaustion of a conceptual tradition based on a certain notion of identity, reflexivity, and subjectivity, *theater* and *theatricality* emerge as names for an alternative that begins to articulate itself in the writings of these thinkers, although it certainly has far more complex a progeny than this limited list would seem to suggest. To understand just how a certain questioning of theater and theatricality could assume this function in the nineteenth century, we must first examine that *against* which such thinkers and dramaturges were reacting. In this emergence of theatrical language, figures, and concerns, it becomes clear that a battle is being fought to redefine the meaning and value of words such as *theater* and *theatricality*, and that this battle has a very long history. It reaches back at least as far as Plato and Aristotle, in whose work the question of theater as medium is posed, but only to be rapidly disposed of in a way that was to determine much of the history—the thought and practice—of theater in the West. This tendency continues, even and perhaps especially today, to extend its influence in the world dominated by electronic media that have developed out of these same traditions. It is thus crucial to elaborate, as precisely as possible, just what the determining characteristics of this systematic conception of theater are, in order to discern alternatives to it, alternatives that have their own “history,” which is quite distinct from that associated with “mainstream” versions. We will discover that an alternative approach to the dominant Western concept of theater is already at work *within the elaboration* of the mainstream concept. It is not something simply imposed upon it from without, but accompanies it from the start—which is to say, from the initial efforts of Western metaphysics to appropriate theater for its purposes.

To understand what is at stake in this effort of appropriation, one need only return to a well-known and often-discussed fact: The term

theater has the same etymology as the term *theory*, from the Greek word *thea*, designating a place from which to observe or to see. The fact that theater, like television today, has always involved much more than simply seeing only makes this privileging of sight all the more significant, and questionable.¹ The valorization of sight over the other senses, especially hearing, which is implied in the currency of words such as *theory* and *theater*, but also *television*, often results from the desire to secure a position, from a distance that ostensibly permits one to view the object in its entirety while remaining at a safe remove from it. This desire for exteriority and control has always felt both threatened by and attracted to a certain conception of theater. I will briefly discuss several instances of this ambivalent tendency, one quite old and the others relatively recent.

The Cave

The first is the famous scene of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. This scene, designed to illustrate the limitations of ordinary human existence insofar as it is not enlightened by a philosophical perspective, involves the staging of a scenario with strong, if negative, theatrical connotations:

“Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets.”

“All that I see,” he said.

“See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent.”

“A strange image you speak of,” he said, “and strange prisoners.”

"Like to us," I said. "For, to begin with, tell me, do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them?"

"How could they," he said, "if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life?"

"And again, would not the same be true of the objects carried past them?"

"Surely."

"If then they were able to talk to one another, do you not think that they would suppose that in naming the things that they saw they were naming the passing objects?"

"Necessarily."

"And if their prison had an echo from the wall opposite them, when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else than the passing shadow to be the speaker?"

"By Zeus, I do not," said he.

"Then in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects"

"Quite inevitably," he said. (514b–515c)²

The cave here is a particular kind of theater, it is true, or a particular interpretation of theater, but it is unmistakably a theater nonetheless. Two traits mark the setting as being *also* a theater. First, the reader is invited to "picture" a defined, limited place. This placement—the arrangement of the place, the positioning of the people and things in it—is constitutive of what is taking place there. This is the first characteristic of a theater: the events it depicts are not indifferent to their placement. The second trait is the no less constitutive role of spectators. A theatrical scene is one that plays to others, called variously "spectators" or, in this case, more properly "audience," since in the cave "vision" and "visibility" are by no means the only media of perception involved. They are not the only media, but they are placed in a dominant, if problematic, position.

What is characteristic of Plato's parable of the cave, however, is that the protagonists are above all *spectators*. And spectators of a very distinct kind: they are not merely fixed in place, but riveted to their posts. They are "prisoners," although—and this is what makes the

scene so modern in many ways—they are prisoners unaware of their imprisonment. They do not know where they are, and hence they do not know how and who they are.

But where, precisely, are they? They are in a particular kind of "home theater": dwelling in a subterranean cavern (*katageiōi oikēsei spēlaiōdei*): at home in a place defined by a certain vacuity, a hollow place under the earth. A place that is profound, interior, and yet precisely not self-contained. Indeed, the cave may be said to be a prison to the very extent that it is not self-contained. Just this lack of self-containment distinguishes the spatial character of the setting. The cave or cavern is described as having "a long entrance" that is "open to the light on its entire width." What is distinctive about this "prison" enclosure is that it is not entirely closed. Rather, it appears to be open to the outside. Indeed, its cavernous hollowness suggests that it itself is an outside that has been enclosed by a kind of container. Like every "place," however, it remains in contact with an outside that it excludes.

So much for the curious place, or *setting*, of the cave. What of its inhabitants? What is most pertinent for our concerns is that the much-celebrated blindness of the cave dwellers is bound up with their being bound into place. The cave dwellers do not understand what they see, not because they are blind or in any other way intrinsically deficient, but because they are bound—unable to get up and move about, and thereby to experience the *relativity* of their point of view. Their positions are fixed and stable, but the very stability of their point of view prevents them from seeing it *as situationally conditioned*. They have never known any other position, or situation, and therefore are not aware of the relations that frame the situation from which they see. Lack of alternative experience and force of habit make what they see and hear seem entirely natural, in the sense of being self-evident and self-contained.

Yet this cavern is by no means simply a natural setting: It conflates nature and culture. Deep in the earth, it is chthonic; but in its organization it is fabricated, technical, cultivated. The cavern is a theater in which the spectators observe a highly organized, "staged" spectacle, which, however, they take to be utterly self-contained. "Shadows" are apprehended as "reality." The lighting in this home theater is both natural and artificial. The space is illuminated by the glare of a fire, a "natural" phenomenon, but one that has been carefully set up and

thus is also the result of artifice. This natural-technical source of light is placed so that, given the immobility of the spectators, it remains invisible. As in a theater when the lights have been dimmed, the stage is lit by lights that themselves remain out of sight.

This carefully staged scene is explicitly compared to a "puppet" show. The comparison is significant, since—as we will see later on in this book³—even today puppets exemplify the aspect of theatricality which has caused it to be regarded with suspicion by a certain humanistic tradition: its heterogeneity. On one side, an audience of spectators is locked in place, indeed, chained to their positions (they cannot move their heads . . .) vis-à-vis "implements of all kinds . . . and human images and shapes of animals" being carried past the wall, upon which they cast shadows or silhouettes. This shadow play suggests certain Javanese puppets, which cast shadows on a screen, to the accompaniment of gamelan music. But in *Javanese puppet shows* the audience is free to move about, free to pass to the other side of the "screen," to experience the "reality" of theater as relativity and as surface, an experience that seems hardly compatible with the reductive dichotomy of "appearance" versus "reality."

Even in Plato's scenario, that dichotomy is not unequivocal. In the commentary that articulates and accompanies the scene, a third instance can be distinguished, though it remains in the shadows. Not all the inhabitants of the cave are passively fixed in their seats: there are also "men carrying past the wall" those "implements" and figures. Those "men," who are responsible for the movement of the silhouettes, exercise a function situated somewhere between artists and stagehands. What is their ontological or, for that matter, political status? How do they relate to that spellbound, enthralled audience of spectator-prisoners? How do they relate to the organization and significance of the "spectacle" itself?

Plato does not respond to these questions, though his own scenario stages, and thus implicitly raises, them. The question of theater and theatricality thereby remains unaddressed by the ontological condemnation Plato reserves for emphatically mimetic practices. But that condemnation sets the scene, as it were, for all successive attempts to determine the precise place—ontologically, epistemologically, ethically, politically—of theater and its "special" effects, including spectators and actors, stages and their "props," lighting, sound, and perhaps *effectiveness* in general. Insofar as one proceeds from a presumption of

self-identity and self-presence, all departures from their putative self-enclosure—and theater entails just such a departure—are to be vigilantly controlled, if not condemned. Theater marks the spot where the spot reveals itself to be an ineradicable macula, a stigma or stain that cannot be cleansed or otherwise rendered transparent, diaphanous.

This irreducible opacity defines the quality of theater as *medium*.⁴ When an event or series of events *takes place* without reducing the place it "taken" to a purely neutral site, then that place reveals itself to be a "stage," and those events become theatrical happenings. As the gerund here suggests—and this will be a recurrent topic of discussion throughout this book—such happenings never take place once and for all but are ongoing. This in turn suggests that they can neither be contained within the place where they unfold nor entirely separated from it. They can be said, then, in a quite literal sense, to *come to pass*. They take place, which means in a particular place, and yet simultaneously also *pass away*—not simply to disappear but to happen somewhere *else*. Out of the dislocations of its repetitions emerges nothing more or less than the *singularity of the theatrical event*. Such theatrical singularity haunts and taunts the Western dream of self-identity.⁵

In the Western tradition, here exemplified not so much by the scenario of the cavern as by its explicit interpretation, the desire for self-identity informs the condemnation of theater. It is the desire to occupy a place from which one can take everything in, first and foremost visually, but also orally and audibly, that renders the theater and theatricality so terribly suspect. For theatrical space, like the cavern, allows no simple extraterritoriality. Yet, to reside "in" it is to be most distant from it—from its "truth," its "reality." Which perhaps is why, following Plato's scenario at least, those who seek to address theater *as theater*, to explore its *theatricality*, must be prepared to suffer the most severe consequences. As the text of the *Republic* makes clear, the basis of most existing political communities, as distinct from those that would be desirable, involves confounding theater with nature or, more precisely, with things themselves. In the modern period, such "naturalness" is often attributed to or absorbed into "history." The shifting attribution changes little, so long as the attribute—that of self-contained meaningfulness, that is, of self-identity—remains essentially unchanged.

The alternative to theater and its shadows is portrayed by Plato as

the liberating if painful ascent into the open and natural light of the sun. In the world above, the world of ideas and of truth, space need no longer be localized, for what counts is never a particular place but rather the ubiquity of daylight itself. No shadows or obscurities, no echoes, projections, or simulacra: only light as it is and things as they are, in and of themselves: such is the dream of a liberation that would leave behind the cavernous nightmare of theater in which enslavement appears as freedom.

Plato thus dreams of exchanging the cave, its fire and shadows, for the bright sunlight and its direct, if dazzling illumination. But the example of Socrates remains as a stern reminder of what it can cost to defy, not just habit and custom, but the desire for stability from which they draw much of their force. The scenario of the cave dwellers displays the desire of those who have either never known or cannot admit the possibility of change. The formation and maintenance of communities, of polities, Socrates seems to suggest, may depend above all on the power of this desire: the desire to *remain*, to remain the *same*, to survive in the *same place*, if necessary until the end of time. It is this desire that makes the cave dwellers such willing spectators—and prisoners. To *stay* the same, the story seems to say, is to *see* the same, even while seeing others: that is, to see shadows as though they were real persons, stage props as though they were things in themselves, a stage as though it were a world. And thus to confound “reality” with self-identity and thereby to misconstrue the relationality of one’s own place and position in a world that cannot simply be surveyed by those who inhabit it.

Theater is thus, from the very beginnings of what, for convenience, we continue to call “Western” thought, considered to be a place not just of dissimulation and delusion but, worse, self-dissimulation and self-delusion. It is a place of fixity and unfreedom, but also of fascination and desire. A prison, to be sure, but one that confines through assent and consensus rather than through constraint and oppression. Theater, in short, is that which challenges the “self” of self-presence and self-identity by reduplicating it in a seductive movement that never seems to come full circle.

The Stage

Millennia after Plato, a resolutely modern philosopher introduces his most influential and perhaps most innovative thought by resorting to a familiar comparison:

A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in many ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.⁶

Examples are never chosen fortuitously, and the one that J. L. Austin invokes in order to illustrate the constitutive negative precondition of his notion of a “performative” speech act is exemplary in more ways than one. It also stands in a significant relationship to Plato’s cave scenario. In both texts, a certain theatricality serves as the quintessence of what is both most normal and most anomalous. In Austin’s language, theater is the epitome of the *extra-ordinary* “circumstances” that must be excluded if language is to be analyzed as a “performative” speech act. Such an argumentative strategy presupposes that language outside of theater is being or can be used seriously, whereas theatrical *acting* on a stage imposes itself as the most striking instance of nonserious, “parasitic” language use. The seriousness or integrity of an “act” or “action” is thus to be clearly demarcated from its “parasitical” cognate: from theatrical acting. Why?

For reasons and in terms that recall those of the Platonic cave. True, there is no “cave” here, but when it is recited on a stage, language creates a kind of “cave” or, more precisely, a “hollow or void.” The intentional meaning, which in “ordinary circumstances” is directed at a more or less self-contained object, is undercut on the stage, hollowed out by the ambivalent dynamics of repetition, which Derrida has analyzed, precisely in respect to this passage, as “iterability.”⁷ An actor on a stage simply repeats, recites, reproduces his “lines,” his “part,” which therefore must be seen in the context of a different network of relations from that which one would expect in “ordinary” language use. For Austin, the nonserious theatrical use of language is dependent—“parasitical”—upon what is considered to be its serious, nontheatrical use, just as for Plato the repetition (or mimesis) of an object is dependent upon the object in and of itself, prior to all such

repetition or mimesis. "Play-acting" is the quintessence of nonserious behavior and, once again, seems defined by a relationality that cannot be reduced to the dichotomous structure and self-enclosed trajectory usually associated with unambiguous "intention" and its undivided "goal." By contrast, the reciting of lines on stage involves a process of repetition that can never be entirely self-contained, insofar as its horizon is determined by an audience of spectators and not simply by the communication of a message. In short, the horizon of specifically theatrical performance can never be enclosed or comprehended by the kind of "act"—speech or other—to which Austin appeals. "Ordinary" English makes this distinction when it discriminates between *acting* and *act* or *action*. It should be noted, however, that even the word *act* is equivocal, often connoting—or infected by—the very lack of "seriousness" that Austin attributes to "parasitic" theatricality. ("It's all an act.")

But the fact that Austin, in his theatrical reference, resorts to the particular spatial figure "hollow or void" points to what is perhaps the most significant aspect of the theatrical with which we will be concerned. It entails the intrusion of spatiality within the process of localization: the fact that the process of being situated has to include (spatial) relationships that it cannot enclose or integrate. From the ontological and axiological position first systematized by Plato, such a situation can only be considered negative, as a lack or deficiency, as "parasitical." Can it be avoided? Austin has little doubt that it can, at least in principle. But when the parasitical and theatrical become the guiding principle of society as a whole, the critique takes on a very different tone. We turn now to another, very different but not unrelated formulation of this traditional, Platonic condemnation.

The Show

It is difficult to imagine a figure further removed—culturally, institutionally, linguistically—from Austin than his contemporary Guy Debord, whose major work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, was published in 1967. Debord, co-founder of the Situationist International, places his notion of "spectacle" (or "show") at the center of a comprehensive post-Marxist critique of bourgeois capitalist society. The spectacle, he argued, "asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance," whereas an authentic critique should "expose it

as a visible negation of life."⁸ Debord thus seeks to "expose" the "spectacle" or "show" as the consequence of a capitalist social system directed toward the production of "commodities." What distinguishes his critique from previous Marxist theory is its emphasis on seduction rather than on constraint. As we have seen, this is also a trait of the Platonic critique of theatricality: theater is dangerous because it induces assent. (This aspect also resonates in Austin's notion of the "parasitical.")

The major traits of Debord's critique can be stated in four assertions. (1) The spectacle is both *social* and *global* in scope.⁹ It does not merely "express" the capitalist system: it "justifies" it (§6). (2) The spectacle implies a spectator whose role is essentially passive and alienated (§30). (3) The medium of the spectacle is "the autonomous image" (§2). (4) Despite its "global" reach, the spectacle is based on the "separation" and "isolation" of the individual spectator (§13, §§25–28). "The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but . . . only in its separateness" (p. 22).

All of these features are inscribed in the conception of theatricality already encountered in Plato's description of the cavern. Above all, the spectacle "turns reality on its head" (§14, p. 14) by causing "a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen" (§18, p. 17), by transforming "mere images . . . into real beings" (*ibid.*). Images and representations usurp the role of "reality" and threaten "life." As a correlative, the role of the spectator is one of alienated passivity. Like Plato's cave dweller, the spectator is locked into place by a system that produces a high degree of acquiescence. Constraint imposes itself through consensus. Debord, in a formulation that is both resolutely contemporary and at the same time profoundly Platonic, asserts that "the spectacle is a permanent opium war," whose seductive power depends on the way it links the desire to survive with "deprivation":

The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival *must* increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. The reason there is nothing *beyond* augmented survival, and no end to its growth, is that survival itself belongs to the realm of dispossession: it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it. (§44, pp. 30–31)

Debord, in his critique of the spectacle, is thus condemning theater—but it is a certain kind of theater, one that, as already for Plato, presents itself as a nontheatrical “reality.” At the same time, this conception of theater leaves room for another kind of spectacle or, perhaps, another reading of spectacle, which would not regard it as a mere surrogate (for) reality. For Debord, this involves another kind of “game” (*jeu*), one that would build upon certain traits of the society of spectacle in a way Debord seems not to want to acknowledge. One of those traits has to do with the change in the sense of “place” brought about by commodity production and consecrated by the spectacle:¹⁰ “Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market inevitably shattered all regional and legal barriers . . . so too it was bound to dissipate the independence and quality of *places*. The power to homogenize is the heavy artillery that has battered down all Chinese walls” (§165, p. 120).

Commodity production undermines the integrity of place by submitting it to the universalizing, “homogenizing” law of value. But another development of this destabilizing of place is also conceivable:

The same history that threatens this twilight world is capable of subjecting space to a directly experienced time. The proletarian revolution is that *critique of human geography* whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic *journey* will be restored to us, although with authentic life understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself. (§178, p. 126)

Debord’s formulation here once again underscores his affinity with the Platonic critique of theatricality already discussed. “Subjecting space to a directly experienced time” raises the question of “place” as the dialectical result of the intrusion of time into space. But however “mobile” Debord wishes those places to be, their motion is still to be oriented by a goal: that of a “total history.” The “rules of the game” that preside over the “mobility of places” are informed by the ideal of a certain *self-containment*, as a “journey containing its whole mean-

ing within itself.” This ideal of containment, however, is ultimately incompatible with the theatrical dimension of the spectacle as Debord describes it: “The world the spectacle holds up to view is at once *here* and *elsewhere*” (§37, p. 26). This “at once” constitutes the challenge of theatricality to every system of thought based on the priority of identity and self-presence.

Presenting

One of the most powerful articulations of that challenge is to be found in the writings of Jacques Derrida. In “The Double Session,” a reading of Mallarmé elaborates an alternative to the more traditional—Platonic—subordination of mimesis to truth construed in terms of self-presence. This alternative is described as a peculiar type of “closure of Metaphysics,” peculiar because it does not simply “close” but also, in a repetitive re-marking, opens a different sort of space and place, a sort of “dis-location.”¹¹ This dislocated space “takes place” simultaneously as the written text of Mallarmé and as the theatricality of the performance it describes, comments upon, interprets, and quotes (the libretto). In his reading of the network of texts involved—not just the published text of Mallarmé, but its precursors, including the libretto of the Mime—Derrida provides an account of theatrical performance that in certain ways recalls that of Debord, but without succumbing to the nostalgia for a self-present “life” or “reality” that would both antedate and ground theatrical mimesis as its “authentic” origin and foundation. Drawing his key terms from the texts he reads, Derrida singles out Mallarmé’s use of “hymen” in the following passage:

in a hymen (from which the Dream proceeds), vice-ridden yet sacred, between desire and fulfillment, perpetration and its memory: here anticipating, there remembering, in the future, in the past, under a false appearance of the present. (p. 209)

Dans un hymen (d’où procède le Rêve), vicieux mais sacré, entre le désir et l’accomplissement, la perpétration et son souvenir: ici devant, là remémorant, au futur, au passé, sous une apparence fautive de présent. (p. 237)

Whereas Mallarmé's formulation at the end of this passage, "under a false appearance of the present," would seem to inscribe itself in the "illusionist" conception of theater we have found at work from Plato to Debord, Derrida argues that it is both possible and compelling to read Mallarmé's text as deconstructing the duality of appearance and reality to which this formulation seems to appeal: "The hymen, consummation of differences [*des différents*], . . . confounds itself with that from which it seems to be derived" (pp. 212/241), producing in Mallarmé what Derrida describes as "a simulacrum of Platonism or of Hegelianism . . . separated from what it simulates only by a barely perceptible veil, of which one could just as well say that it passes already-unnoticed—between Platonism and itself, between Hegelianism and itself. In between enter[s] [*Entre*] the text of Mallarmé and itself" (pp. 207/235).

The awkward expedient to which I have resorted to translate the single French word *entre* in this passage—"in between enter[s]"—has the virtue of calling attention to what is decisive in Derrida's reading, here and elsewhere. In Austinian terms, one might have said that his discourse moves from a constative to a performative mode, were not the notion of "performative" subject to the very logic here being put into question by being put into play. It is therefore more precise to say that, in repeating and remarking the ambiguity of the word *entre* in Mallarmé's text, a word that can be read as both adverb ("between") and verb ("enter"), Derrida moves from a purely "theoretical" discourse, describing an object independent of it, to a "theatrical" mode of (re)writing that *stages* (dislocates) what it also recites: the theatrical movement of Mallarmé's writing. It should also be noted that if *entre* is read as a verb here, its syntactical placement at the start of the phrase makes it into an injunction rather than a simple indicative: "Let Mallarmé's text enter." This indeed is what happens more and more explicitly from this moment on, both in this particular text of Derrida and in his writing in general. In the almost four decades since this essay was published, Derrida's writing has not ceased to demonstrate and explore, with increasing explicitness and variety, its own theatrical quality as a "staging" or *mise en scène*, rather than as an essentially constative reading of something held to exist independently of it.¹²

A text that does not merely "reproduce" and yet also does not simply "create" or "produce." Its object is situated in an unusual and

complicated relationship to its "pretext." It is involved in an operation that, like the "hymen," exposes the interval "between" texts and in so doing allows something else to "enter" the stage or scene: a certain theatricality, which has as its grammatical hallmark the *present participle*.

Why the present participle? For two interrelated reasons, at least. First, because its "presence" is suspended, as it were, in and as the interval linking and separating that which is presented from the presentation "itself." The "presence" of the present participle is thus bounded, or defined, by the convergence of its articulation with that which it articulates. But in thus being defined by its own redoubling—and this is the second reason—it is also constituted by and as a series of repetitions, each of which is separated from the others and yet is also bound to them in the sequence. Already in *Mimique* Mallarmé resorts to this tense where he must articulate that "false appearance of the present" as "ici devançant, là remémorant, au futur, au passé." In short, something is going on that is more than just a false appearance. The *appearing* of the present participle is the grammatical index of those disjunctive "goings-on" that make the "present" into a "tense" in the most intense sense: "coming before" (*devançant*) or anticipating (the future) by "remembering" (the past).

If theatrical performance does not simply reproduce or accomplish something that exists in and of itself or that is at least intrinsically self-contained, the reiterative openness of the present participle is always both ahead of and behind itself, an ambiguity that in English is condensed in the preposition "after." As present participle the present is "after" itself, in hopeless self-pursuit. From this point of view, it can be designated as "false" with respect to a notion of truth as self-presence. But at the same time it can be understood as being more truly "pre-sent," in the etymological sense of being placed *before* itself as well as before "spectators," who, from this standpoint, are anything but merely "passive," although they occupy a position that calls for impassiveness rather than for expressiveness.

What is curious about the present participle is the way it is both very close and yet irreducibly remote. Since it never adds up to a whole and always remains a part, the participation it entails follows a trajectory like that of the ballerina in another text of Mallarmé. Her pirouette, as Derrida shows, revolves incessantly around a center that is displaced with each turn, never coming full circle, never adding up

to a whole nor even to a simple step forward.¹³ If the ballerina's pirouette is eminently theatrical, it is because its complex movement winds up going nowhere, if going somewhere is understood in the sense of that "authentic journey" described by Debord.

Derrida is, of course, aware of the curious status of the present participle, to which he refers explicitly at various times in this text. Yet these references do not explicitly discuss or dwell on either its incidence in the texts of Mallarmé that he cites or his own use of it.¹⁴ In most cases, the present participle is assimilated to an oppositional pair that appears as part and parcel of the logic that has to be deconstructed:

As soon as a mirror is interposed in some way, the simple opposition of activity and passivity, like that of producing [*produire*] and product, or also all the present and past participles (imitating/imitated, signifying/signified, structuring/structured, etc.) become ineffective and formally too weak to dominate the graphics of the hymen, its spider web and the play of its eyelids. (pp. 224/253)

But can the significance of the present participle be contained or comprehended within a "simple opposition," which would place it in a certain symmetry with other participles? Or does something happen to "presence" when it is articulated as a *participle* that exceeds the bounds of such an opposition?

There is an earlier allusion to the present participle in this text, which could have been the occasion for a more prolonged reflection on its status, especially since it links this "tense" to one of the major figures of Derrida's reading of Mallarmé: the fold (*pli*). Derrida is arguing that the traditional notion of truth as self-presence undoes itself in the phenomenological insistence on truth as an appearing, "in the ambiguity or the duplicity of the presence of the present, of its *appearance*—that which appears *and* its appearing [*ce qui apparaît et son apparaître*]*—in the fold of the present participle* (pp. 192/219).

How this "fold" of the present participle might relate to all the other folds that Derrida remarks in his reading of Mallarmé is a question that remains in abeyance throughout this particular text, although it goes on to engender increasingly powerful and conspicuous effects in virtually all his subsequent writings.¹⁵ Heidegger himself, of course, has little patience with or interest in theater, a point to which I shall

return later.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in the essay to which Derrida here alludes, what he does elaborate about the fold or, rather, about the "twofold" quality of the present participle bears significant implications for its relation to theatricality.

Parting With

In his essay "Moira," Heidegger discusses a text by Parmenides, Fragment VIII, lines 34–41, which he reads as an elaboration of the more celebrated dictum, Fragment III, usually translated as "Thinking and Being are the same." Heidegger introduces his commentary on Fragment VIII by noting that, although it seems simply to repeat and amplify the more famous assertion in Fragment III, there is a significant shift in the manner in which Parmenides articulates the relation between thinking and being:

Above all else, we should observe that [Fragment VIII, lines 34ff], which thinks this relationship more profoundly, speaks of *ēon* and not of *einai* as does Fragment III. As a result the impression results, understandably, that what Fragment VIII addresses is not the to-be [*Sein*] but being [*Seienden*]. But in the noun *ēon* Parmenides in no way thinks being in itself [*das Seiende an sich*] wherein everything [*das Ganze*], including thinking, belongs, insofar as it is a being. Just as little does *ēon* mean *einai* in the sense of the to-be for itself, as though the thinker sought to demarcate the non-sensuous way of the to-be from the being as sensuous [entity]. The *ēon*, the being [*das Seiend*], is rather thought in the twofold split [*Zwiefalt*] of the to-be and being, and spoken participially, without the grammatical concept on its own being able to attain to the knowledge of language.¹⁷

Heidegger thus dismisses the ability of the "grammatical concept" of the "participle" "on its own" to "attain to the knowledge of language." Nevertheless, although mere grammar may not be enough, it seems hardly accidental that the problem that will occupy Heidegger throughout this essay and much of his philosophical work—the ontological difference and relationship between "the to-be" and "beings"—is linked here to the present participle, in the form of a gerund, *das Seiend*, which is both singular and general at once. This "at once," however, distinguishes the "two-fold" structure of the to-be and

being, *Sein* and *Seiendes*, from that of a mere duality or opposition, since what is decisive is the emergence of a third term, *das Seiend*, to designate the way-of-being as a *singular event*. The key distinction here is that between *Seiendes*, the entity in general, and *das Seiend*, the singularization of being as an event or happening.

In English, by contrast, the three terms employed by Heidegger—*Sein*, *Seiendes*, *Seiend*—tend to be rendered by the “same” word, *being*. There would thus seem to be a loss of differentiation in the inability of English to distinguish *Sein*, verbal infinitive noun, from *Seiendes*, participial noun, as well as from their singularization as *das Seiend*. But perhaps this linguistic impoverishment of English with respect to German can become a resource, a “chance,” insofar as it offers no other choice than to articulate this singularization of being through what appears to be a *repetition* of the same word, in which the ostensible tautology both dissimulates and deploys the difference at the heart of sameness—the *tautos*. If, however, the singularization of being were to turn out to be inseparable from just such a process of repetition, then the inability of English to “get its act together” by proffering the series of ostensibly self-contained nouns that German has at its disposal, far from being (!) merely a deficiency, could open a perspective that Heidegger’s native language, by dint of its very lexical and morphological richness, tends to obscure. Were this the case, the comparison between the respective linguistic resources of German and English would remain a helpful, if not indispensable condition of any such interpretation. The lexical paucity of English, in its limited ability to name “being” and its modes, would assume significance only through the comparison with (Heidegger’s) German.

To sum up: *das Seiend*, Heidegger’s decisive “third” term in the discussion of Parmenides, names “being” as a singular event or happening. The contribution of English, lacking equivalent nouns, would be to foreground a certain *repetition* as that which splits or transfixes the twofold—the to-be and beings—into the always singular way of being, *das Seiend*, that is its effect. The two German turns of phrase usually used to describe this split—“*Sein des Seienden*” (the to-be of beings) and “*Seiendes im Sein*” (being in the to-be)—are, Heidegger notes, unsatisfactory makeshifts, since both the genitive “des” and the inclusive “in” tend to “hide” rather than disclose the way in which the two-fold *unfolds*. What thereby unfolds is a singularity that has the

attributes of a process (being) and at the same time is *localized* (*das Seiend*) without being identifiable as a substance or entity (a *Seiendes*).

Thus, despite the tendency of Heidegger to downplay the significance of the grammatical form “on its own” to accede to the meaning of to-be, his effort to articulate the “twofold” of being leads him to resort to the present participle and in particular to its nominal, gerundive forms. The fact that, perhaps even more insistently than Derrida, Heidegger again and again recurs to the present participle and the gerund when he has to formulate the event of being places his disclaimer in a singular light. To be sure, a purely grammatical category is “on its own”—*eigens*—insufficient to explain anything, much less the complex and ambivalent event of being with which Heidegger is concerned. Nevertheless, the present participle and gerund recur too regularly at decisive junctures in his texts not to be indicative of a problem that deserves further attention.

The fact that it is a form of the gerund, *das “Seiend,”* that, as Heidegger writes, “in its ambiguity names the twofold,” (38) tells us something, in return, about the significance of the gerund and the present participle. The notion of “participle,” etymologically, comes from *participium*, which in Latin signifies “a sharing, partaking.” The Latin word in turn is a translation of the Greek *metokhē*, derived from the verb *methexis*, used by Plato to describe the manner in which entities “partake” or “participate” in the absolutes, the “ideas” that determine their qualities. But already these discussions of *methexis* indicate the close and for Plato problematical link between *participation* and *partitioning*, which is why Parmenides criticizes the notion in the dialogue of that name (*Parmenides*, 130c–131a). The same problem will crop up with respect to *mimēsis*, of which Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics* (987b), declares *methexis* to be nothing more than a verbal variant.

In order to share and partake, there must, however, be a concomitant dividing or divesting, a *parting* or, perhaps more precisely, a departing, a taking leave, a *partitioning* in order to *im-part*. All of this is uncannily condensed in the English phrase *parting with*. The “with” suggests that parting entails a departure, not simply as the dissolving of a relationship, but rather as a singular way of (re)constituting one. To remain in relation *with* precisely *by parting* is, however, one of the distinctive traits of the “spectacle,” as Debord recognized, albeit

primarily from a critical-nostalgic point of view: "The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*" (§29).¹⁸ Heidegger would of course reject any such assimilation, positive or negative, of the twofold to theater or the theatrical, however strongly his conception of truth as *alētheia*, as self-dissimulation—concealing through revealing—seems to move in such a direction. As we shall see in Chapter 2, he will explicitly reject the related possibility of assimilating what he calls the clearing, *Lichtung*, to a theatrical stage, with "constantly raised curtain." And yet his image itself suggests there is more to the matter than a simple rejection (or acceptance) could account for. Why should a "curtain" in front of a stage be "constantly raised"—or constantly lowered, for that matter? Heidegger's effort to dismiss the stage by invoking a constant curtain suggests, by its very incommensurability with even the most rudimentary "ontic" experience of theater, that the simple *opposition* of raising and lowering will be no more appropriate to theater than to truth as *alētheia*. What if it were not the presence or absence of the curtain, no more than that of the to-be of beings, that was at stake in this negative figure, but rather its *folds*? Might not the ambivalent ambiguity of the present participle turn out to be a singularly powerful linguistic and theatrical medium for articulating such a self-dissimulating parting-with?

The split with which Heidegger is concerned here, in his reading of Parmenides, is that between "thinking" and "being"—in Greek, between *noein* and *ēon*, which he renders as "the twofold of oncoming and the ongoing [*Anwesen und Anwesendem*]" (p. 41). Like Derrida's *arrivant*, Heidegger's twofold has as its destiny never fully to arrive at its destination. Its *Geschick* is to suffer *Mißgeschick*.¹⁹ As the *Anwesen des Anwesenden*, the "oncoming of the ongoing," it is neither one nor the other but their singular duplicity. It is not *two* folds, but rather the crease of a *singularly single fold*, enfolding and exposing its constitutive difference from itself.

Such singular duplicity, however, requires a no less singular process of being received, "collected," discerned. It must, as Heidegger puts it, be *brought forward*.²⁰ The medium of such bringing forth Heidegger conceives to be the *muthos*, *Sage*: which is not just myth or legend, but at the same time also and perhaps above all a saying (*Sagen*), which in "calling" "brings-to-appearing."²¹ Such "calling" calls *forth* only by also calling *for* a receiving, perceiving, discerning instance. Yet any

such instantiation arrests the complex and conflicting movement of the twofold, which only discloses itself through self-concealment:

The destiny [*Geschick*] of the disclosing of the twofold hands over the oncoming (*ta ēonta*) to the everyday apprehension of the mortal.

How does this destined handing-over happen? Only through the way the twofold as such, together with its unfolding, remains concealed. Hence, self-concealment prevails in disclosure. (p. 51)

This kind of self-concealment affects not so much what appears as the way it appears. More precisely, what is concealed is precisely the *way*, in the double sense of trajectory and of manner. The "way" or trajectory is dissimulated by appearing as an event that seems simply to take *place*, in a single, self-identical place or, better, in a series of such places. Such a semblance, however, would reduce what Heidegger calls *saying* to a series of discrete statements, as in a narrative, for instance. It would construe *muthos*, not as a kind of saying, but rather as *plot*, in the sense of the word found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, namely, a sequence of events with beginning, middle, and end, adding up to an integrated, meaningful whole. Heidegger does not speak of this explicitly, to be sure, but it seems consonant with his description of the self-dissimulation of the twofold, which he identifies, on the one hand, with the reduction of language to *naming*, and on the other, with the locating of the named in an unequivocal *place*. Heidegger formulates this as follows:

The usual saying of mortals, insofar as they do not attend to the oncoming [*Anwesen*], becomes the saying of names in which the pronouncement [*Verlautbarung*] and the immediately graspable figure of the word . . . predominate.

And where the usual . . . mode of discerning [*Vernehmen*], speaking out of the words, comes upon rising and falling, it recurs to the "this as well as that" of emerging and passing-away. The place, *topos*, is never attended to as placement [*Ortschaft*], as which the twofold offers a home to the oncoming of the ongoing [*dem Anwesen des Anwesenden*]. The meaning of mortals, in preferring the this-as-well-as-that, follows only the each-and-always-distinctness of places [*Plätze*]. (pp. 50–51)

Heidegger's language suggests why he would be so little at home—or perhaps, so uncannily at home—with theater or theatrical-

ity. However riven he construes the twofold of being and beings to be, he still envisages the possibility of being “at home” in it or with it, of giving it a *Heimat*. But what becomes of such an “offer” in a world where, as Debord observes, “the spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere” (§30)? In being everywhere, the spectacle transforms each everywhere into *somewhere else*, into another scene. Heidegger attempts to dismiss this other scene by reducing it to the neutral simultaneity of the “this-as-well-as-that,” which is to say, to a constant stream of places that are “always different” from one another—and yet, in their in-difference, always the same. Debord’s position is not so very removed from that of Heidegger, since he too suggests that the capitalist commodity-spectacle always amounts to, returns to, the same. But he insists that in so doing it remains split, never simply taking place here and now.

The divided character of such taking place constitutes the quintessence of the theatrical scene, which is never just a place or series of places, making room for the orderly sequence of a narrative plot leading to a meaningful conclusion. Since no narrative sequence succeeds in framing or enclosing such places it traverses, it winds up being partitioned by them; in concluding, it gestures toward other scenes, which remain inconclusive, even and especially where the sequence ends or stops. With respect to such a sequence, it is not always easy to get one’s bearings or to take a stand.

Linking Pearls

Taking a stand, having or finding firm ground under one’s feet, has surely constituted one of the oldest concerns of Western modernity.²² It is not surprising, therefore, that at its very beginnings Western theater should have staged precisely this concern and explored its vicissitudes in the fate of a king whose very name, far from concealing the complex and conflictual folding discussed by Heidegger, flaunts it. Oedipus, “swollen foot,” made his name a public word by finding the word or noun that “solved” the riddle of the Sphinx and liberated Thebes from its scourge, only to reveal that the greatest dangers do not always come from without. Having supplied the name of a species that seemed to subsume the paradoxes of the Sphinx—paradoxes that describe a creature who has “two, three, and four legs,” who speaks with a “single voice” and yet moves most rapidly on two feet and

most slowly on four—Oedipus suffered a fate that demonstrates what can happen when the Heideggerian twofold deploys itself under feet that are trying to move.

We will have occasion to explore certain effects of this deployment later in this book.²³ For now, however, it is time to bring this introduction to a provisional conclusion by taking a very brief look at another sort of theatrical performance, one that sheds light on the ambivalent attitude that has dominated the Western approach to theater almost from its very beginnings, although never without being contested and challenged. In contrast to what I will have occasion to designate a “mythological” approach to theater, epitomized in the *Poetics* of Aristotle—a theater that is understood to be essentially a vehicle for the presentation of a coherent, meaningful story—the theatrical performance I wish to discuss, although it includes a narrative element, is not essentially dependent on a story to produce its effects. To quote Heidegger’s “Moira” one last time, such theater is concerned with “the manner in which the Word speaks, rather than the words’ individual pronouncements” (p. 51).

I refer to a performance of Peking Opera, given in Beijing in August 1999, a few weeks before the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the successful culmination of the Communist Revolution in China. Some sixty years earlier, Bertolt Brecht, in an article entitled “On Chinese Drama and the Alienation Effect,” provided the following account of a similar scene performed by a Peking Opera company in Moscow:

A young woman, the daughter of a fisherman, is shown standing and rowing in an imaginary boat. To steer it, she uses an oar that barely reaches to her knees. The current becomes faster; she finds it more difficult to keep her balance. . . . Each of the girl’s movements is as familiar as a picture; each bend of the river is known before the boat comes to it. This feeling is produced in the audience by the manner in which the actress plays the scene; it is she who makes the occasion seem so memorable.²⁴

The contrast described here by Brecht, between “standing and rowing” and hence between land and water, is one of the recurring situations of Peking Opera, part of its scenic repertoire. Since the movements performed by the actress are “as familiar as a picture,” Brecht emphasizes that it is “the manner in which the actress plays

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the scene” that “makes the occasion seem so memorable.” Elsewhere, he discusses how Chinese theater (and this could be extended to other Asiatic theaters as well) operates with a defined repertoire of gestures and situations, which are presented in infinitely varied and singular ways.²⁵ What therefore “happens” on the stage is not the communication of something new, in the sense of content, but the variation of something familiar through its repetition. Repetition thus emerges as a visible, audible, and constitutive element of the theatrical medium. To vary Heidegger’s observation, it is not so much *what* is said or shown as the *way* that showing takes place. Or rather, since the stage of the Peking Opera is largely empty, the way that place is constituted as a scene.

The scene is set, as it were, through the contrast of water and land that recurs so often in Peking Opera. Where there is land, one can hope to take a stand, to acquire and maintain a certain stability. The joy and relief of sighting land is inseparable from the conception of the “voyage of life” that we find in Debord, who invokes it as a contrast to the spectacle. As a “journey,” rather than a spectacle, life can be seen as “containing its whole meaning within itself,” he writes.²⁶ By contrast, the theatricality of the scene described by Brecht does not derive from the desire for such a journey, but rather from the ability to cope with the water’s current. The oar “that barely reaches to her knees” forces the body of the woman to bend as she rows. Bending to channel one’s movements while rowing is very different from trying to take a stand, or trying to conduct the journey to its successful conclusion, where it can display its “whole meaning within itself.” If such meaning is truly “within itself,” that is, within the narrative sequence that makes it “whole,” then the movements of the body on (or off) the stage can at best be means toward attaining that end or, as Aristotle insists, to presenting the whole story, the *muthos*, and through it the meaningful action upon which all tragedy is based, its *praxis*.

Western audiences have been encouraged to expect the display of such meaning and to demand it from theater and from art in general. This is why theatrical writers from Brecht to Artaud to Genet have all recognized the need to change, not just the habits of stagecraft, but those of spectatorship as well. As Brecht put it, once again with respect to Chinese theater: “What appears particularly important for us in Chinese theater is its efforts to produce a true art of beholding [*eine*

wahre Zuschaukunst].” This “art” presupposes an awareness of the rules and repertoire, since this alone permits each performance to be evaluated in its singularity.²⁷

Although such knowledge is, as Brecht writes, required for a “full appreciation” of the “art” of Chinese theater, a more general kind of comparison can be no less illuminating for those whose theatrical experience is primarily “Western.” One obvious point of departure for such a cross-cultural comparison would be the respective function of “plot” in mainstream Western theater and Peking Opera. In the latter, and presumably in Chinese and Asian theater generally, the importance of plot is closer to that assumed by “myth” in the practice of the Attic tragedians than to that first systematized by Aristotle’s theoretical reflections on that practice in his *Poetics*, even though the latter has continued to dominate, not just theater in the West, but also the newer media of film and television. The primary interest of Peking Opera is not to present a meaningful action through a coherent plot, but rather to use both action and plot to foreground the significance of the performance. This alters the function of both narrative and its staging. In the program of a contemporary Peking Opera company, the Liyuan Theater,²⁸ this is described as follows: “The plot structure of Beijing Opera is often characterized as ‘linking pearls with a thread.’ Here the ‘thread’ refers to the general plot of the play, while the ‘pearls’ are the specific scenes of the play. Each scene is an integral part of the play. On the other hand, it has its own sub-plot and can be staged separately” (p. 21).

This suggests that the scenic “pearls” can be separated from, and are therefore not entirely dependent upon, the “thread.” Judging from the performance I saw, such independence could well be described as “situational”—with the proviso that “situation” here includes not merely the actions represented on stage but their presentation as well. The latter deploys its own significance, one that is neither separable from nor reducible to an extra-theatrical, referential “plot.”

The scene I want to discuss is taken from a sequence entitled “Autumn River.” The story thread tells of a student, Pan Bizheng, who has failed his examination, falls in love with a beautiful young nun, Chen Miaochang, who lives in a convent directed by Pan’s aunt. When the aunt learns about their relationship, she forces Pan to leave without saying goodbye to Chen. Chen finds the courage to forsake

the convent in pursuit of Pan. Reaching the banks of the Autumn River, she desperately searches for a means of crossing it. Here is how the program of the Liyuan Theater sums up this scene: "She happens to meet an elderly boatman, who turns out to be a jocular person. Having understood thoroughly why the girl is in such a hurry, the old boatman takes it easy and enjoys teasing the girl. Having had enough fun [with] her, the kind-hearted old man helps the girl catch up with the big ship Pan Bizheng has boarded" (pp. 47–48).

So much for the "story." In its deliberately stereotypical manner, it is hardly the kind of *muthos* that Aristotle recommended as suitable for tragedy. But of course this is no tragedy, and that is part of the point: the Peking Opera and Asian theater generally are neither *tragic* nor even "dramatic" in the sense these terms have acquired in Western theater. The decision to privilege "tragedy" as exemplary of theater in general is a distinctively Western one, even if, as we shall see, the actual tragedies to which Aristotle refers in the *Poetics*, above all those of Sophocles, do not necessarily conform to his interpretation of them. One of the ways in which "Autumn River" is not "tragic" is in its refusal to focus upon the fate of one or two noble individuals. Not that its "characters" are not "noble": they belong to the aristocracy, even if not necessarily to its ruling class. But already at the level of the plot they do not function primarily as "individuals," even though the story is a love story. These lovers make no claim to be interesting or autonomous "individuals," for the same reason that the "plot" does not provide the performance with its necessary coherence or meaning. Meaning is not separable from the way in which it is staged; indeed, it can be said to inhere in the staging of a certain type of performance, even if the latter is not unrelated to the story that frames it. But this story is no more equivalent to the scenic "situation" that is staged than a paraphrase is equivalent to the poem it paraphrases. To demonstrate the difference between the two, it is first necessary to describe the situation more closely.

It is that of a journey undertaken by Chen in the hopes of finding Pan. But the fascination of the scene—in which Chen finds the boatman, boards the ferry, and makes her way across the river to its distant shore—derives, not from the notion of a journey that might be completed, for instance, with the reuniting of the lovers, but rather from the deployment of a different kind of *desire*, involving separation rather than fulfillment. "Autumn River" stages one of the ways

in which separation is experienced, traversed, negotiated—but never simply overcome or forgotten. It is separation, then, that sets the scene for an unforgettable exhibition of theatricality.

The scene begins with a brief musical prelude, in which the timbre of the instruments—wood blocks and cymbals being struck in rhythmic patterns—almost seems to "embody" the separation itself, in the very "hollowness" of the sounds. As with Plato's cave, "hollowness" is a hallmark of theater, which itself is a "hollow" space—"shallow," "void," Austin calls in. Such hollowness marks separation as a kind of inner space rather than an interval in-between. Theater takes place in the hollow of this separation, which it deploys and to which it responds.²⁹

Scenically, such a response is not restricted to its most explicit manifestations, as in the cries of Chen and the boatman's answer: It is already at work in the gliding movement with which she first "enters" the scene. Taking tiny but regular steps, she appears to glide onto the stage rather than to walk across it. This gliding motion has a double effect: First, it does not appear as the *act* of an individual but rather *bears* her along in a movement that has its origin elsewhere.³⁰ Of course, this impression presupposes the consummate training and athletic skill required of such performers. But if the aim of such art is self-dissimulation, that is perhaps because its effectiveness cannot be measured in terms of individual prowess, even if Brecht seems to formulate his admiration for this theater in such terms. For the performers in this scene do not appear primarily as individuals. Neither passive nor active in the Western sense, they demonstrate, quite literally, a *way of being-moved* that confounds such oppositions. The skill of the performer allows a movement to be deployed that can never be reduced to the property or product of an individual *qua individual*.

How different seem the movements alluded to by the riddle of the Sphinx, or by Oedipus's not so proper name "swollen feet." Just as that name consists not of "proper" but of "common nouns," so too Oedipus finds his way blocked at that fatal crossroads. Lethal violence alone allows him to remove the obstacle and resume his way to Thebes, making his way to power and glory, but also toward destitution and death. In contrast to Chen and the boatman, Oedipus does not allow himself to *be moved*—and in the process is driven all the more ineluctably toward his destructive destiny.

On the stage of the Liyuan Theater, by contrast, Chen is soon

joined by another gliding figure, that of the boatman. With one long oar as his sole prop, this rustic figure glides onto the stage in his (invisible) boat, suggested by the way he holds and moves the oar, as well as by the parallel, lateral movement of his feet, while his upper body remains rigid and unbending. With the suggested movement of the boat, there is inevitably that of the water itself, "visible" only in its effects: the rhythmic swaying of the man's body, rigid as it leans against the pole. The boatman seems to sway in the water, going nowhere, yet constantly moving. Such going-nowhere-while-moving constitutes much of the magic of this scene, making it an exemplary allegory of theatricality as the staging of separation. It is, in a way that Heidegger perhaps would not have endorsed, a "sway of being," one that is not compelled to try to take a stand but is content to *respond* rather than to impose and resist.

With the boatman's swaying, water invisibly enters the scene, taking (its) place less "on" than *as* the stage. A bantering dialogue follows, in which the boatman urges a hesitant, timorous Chen to take the leap, give up the security of the land and entrust herself to the boat, the water, and his skill. He holds the sole prop, the oar, and extends it to her so that she can hold onto it and use it to steady herself while timorously trying to climb into the boat. What ensues is a remarkable "ballet" of standing, swaying, and almost falling, in which the relation of land and sea, stability and precariousness, is demonstrated through bodily gestures indicating the fear of losing one's balance. At the same time, the fear of falling (into the water) compels Chen to seek a different sort of equilibrium, one that no longer looks to *terra firma* but rather responds to the never entirely predictable rise and fall of the waves.

This is the true and memorable "drama" of this scene: not the search to be reunited with one's beloved, but the fearful dependence upon the support of the "land" and the courage to search for another kind of balance, a balance and movement that is defined in terms of responsiveness, rather than in those of stability and security, much less of spontaneity.

It is this ballet of balance, expressed, not just in Chen's movements, but above all in the way they interact with those of the boatman, that constitutes the exquisite theatricality of this scene, which, in our context at least, can be read, witnessed, seen, and heard as an allegory of theatricality as *medium*—not as a medium of representation, but as

a medium that redefines activity as reactivity, and that makes its peace, if ever provisionally, with separation.

The choreography of that balancing act is the result, not of the doings of a single performer, simply, but of the remarkable interaction of the two: boatman and noblewoman, separated by gender, age, class, costume, habit, and culture, and yet *in their separation linked* through the reciprocity of their movements. That reciprocity here has little to do with synergy is perhaps clearest when Chen barely avoids falling into the water by bouncing and balancing up and down to the same rhythm as the boatman, responding to the current of the river. Reciprocity has more to do with the interplay of distinct rhythms than with the identity of the persons involved. After her near-fall, Chen recovers her balance and reaches the boat, where she and the boatman bob up and down together, but always inversely, in the shared but separate movements that constitute their common rhythm—and situation.

Having thus finally boarded the boat, their next problem is to launch it by freeing it from its moorings, in which it is presumably all the more deeply mired due to the added weight of its new passenger. Although launching the boat is, of course, the task of the boatman, his effort, which is at first unsuccessful, evokes frantic responses in his passenger. The rocking of the two figures shakes the boat precariously before it finally becomes unstuck and is launched. Fear of falling is never absent, no more than is desire itself; both are orchestrated by the skilful interplay of the two performers.

This ability to *respond* to the fear of falling by a complex meshing of movements defines, not just the actions of the individual figures, but the very theater that stages them. The gestures here suggest a response to the twofold that assumes its duplicity rather than seeking to arrest or control it by assigning it a name, as Oedipus does in responding to the riddle of the Sphinx. As we shall have occasion to see, Sophocles' Theban plays show how this response resolves the riddle only by displacing the secret it signifies and thereby setting the stage for a series of new and destructive events. The staging of "Autumn River" demonstrates how theater can be the medium of a displacement or dislocation that opens other *ways*, not bound to arrive at a final destination—or at least, not too soon. Theater thus emerges as a powerful medium of the *arrivant*.

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This mediality of theater as *arrivant* will be in question, from various vantage points, in the following chapters. Theater is a medium that, from Plato and Aristotle to the present, has been regarded with suspicion, fear, and contempt—but also with fascination and desire—by a tradition seeking at all costs to keep the ground from slipping out from under its feet. The twists and turns of this medium, in its theory as well as its practice, are perhaps even more acute today, when the notion of “media” has become more ubiquitous and more elusive than ever before.

What we call “theater” and, even more, “theatricality” provides an instructive arena for the examination of those “twists and turns.” “Multimedia” long before the word became a cliché, Western theater has long occupied an uneasy position between “art” and “entertainment,” between discovery and manipulation, and this situation has not changed. The following chapters seek to examine a few strands in that history, without making the slightest claim at completeness, whose very possibility the history of theater calls into question. Some of the forms in which this question recurs, throughout the different readings that constitute the individual chapters, are: How does the consideration of theater as a representational genre, a form of art, relate to the understanding of it as a *medium*? Can a medium be a genre? Is theater primarily or predominantly an “art”? Is a “play” a “work”? Is “theater” synonymous, as is often supposed, with “dramatic”? Does it depend upon plot and character? And, above all, what does attention to the old medium of theater tell us about the “new media”? Is theater as medium an end, a beginning, or both at once?³¹

Theatrocracy; or, Surviving the Break

T H E R E L A T I O N between theater and politics has a long and vexed history. Of all the “arts,” theater most directly resembles politics insofar as traditionally it has been understood to involve the assemblage of people in a shared space. But the audience in the theater differs from the members of a political grouping: its existence is limited in time, whereas a polity generally aspires to greater duration. Theater acknowledges artificiality and artifice, whereas political communities are often construed in terms of a certain naturalness, an association underscored by the etymology of the word *nation*—deriving from Latin *nasci*, to be born.¹ Political entities have historically derived their legitimacy from their ability to promote what is shared and common—a “commonwealth”—whereas theater tends frequently to the extreme and to the exceptional.² Politics is supposed to involve an appeal to reason, whereas theater frequently appeals unabashedly to desire and emotion. Finally, perhaps most important of all, politics as generally practiced claims to be the most effective means of regulating or at least controlling conflict, whereas theater flourishes by exacerbating it. Yet both the thinkers of politics and its practitioners have recognized a need to come to terms with theater, lest it wind up dictating its terms to them.

One of the earliest and most illuminating articulations of this strained relation between politics and theatricality is to be found in book 3 of Plato’s *Laws*. As has often been noted, not the least significant of the paradoxes that mark Plato’s work is that such an eminently theatrical writer should have so profoundly mistrusted the political effects of theatricality. In the passage I am referring to from the *Laws*, the main speaker, called simply “The Athenian,” discusses the reasons for the decline of his city. He identifies as a major issue the way in which political communities respond to *fear*. Formerly, he recalls, his

countrymen had been able to resist the onslaught of the Persians only because of two interrelated factors, both involving fear: fear of the enemy and of the consequences of defeat, and “that other fear instilled by subjection to preexisting law,” which allowed them to turn mere fear into disciplined resistance (699c).³ The Athenian concludes his historical review, however, with an ominous, if at first enigmatic, observation. Noting the obvious differences in the respective political histories of the Athenians and the Persians—how the latter “reduced the commonality to utter subjection, whereas we encouraged the multitude toward unqualified liberty”—the Athenian asserts that such differences notwithstanding, “our fate has, in a way, been the same as that of the Persians” (699e). Megillus, one of his interlocutors, is understandably puzzled and asks for clarification. In response, the Athenian, somewhat surprisingly, invokes the history of *music* as an exemplary illustration of how liberty can degenerate into license and bring about the collapse of a state of law. In times gone by, he remembers,

our music was divided into several kinds and patterns. . . . These and other types were definitely fixed, and it was not permissible to misuse one kind of melody for another. The competence to take cognizance of these rules, to pass verdicts in accord with them, and, in case of need, to penalize their infraction was not left, as it is today, to the catcalls and discordant outcries of the crowd, nor yet to the clapping of applauders; the educated made it their rule to hear the performances through in silence and for the boys, their attendants, and the rabble at large, there was the discipline of the official’s rod to enforce order. Thus, the bulk of the populace was content to submit to this strict control in such matters without venturing to pronounce judgment by its clamors.

Afterward, in the course of time, an unmusical license set in with the appearance of poets who were men of native genius, but ignorant of what is right and legitimate in the realm of the Muses. Possessed by a frantic and unhallowed lust for pleasure, they contaminated laments with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs, actually imitated the strains of the flute on the harp, and created a universal confusion of forms. . . . By compositions of such a kind and discourse to the same effect, they naturally in-

spired the multitude with contempt of musical law, and a conceit of their own competence as judges. Thus our once silent audiences have found a voice, in the persuasion that they understand what is good and bad in art; the old sovereignty of the best, aristocracy, has given way to an evil “sovereignty of the audience,” a teatrocracy [*theatrokratia*]. (700–701a)⁴

“Theatrocracy” as the rule of the audience, which is to say, of a more or less contingent, more or less temporary assemblage, is, for the Athenian, worse even than democracy, which is far from his favorite form of government:

If the consequences had been even a democracy, no great harm would have been done, so long as the democracy was confined to art, and composed of free men. But, as things are with us, music has given occasion to a general conceit of universal knowledge and contempt for law, and liberty has followed in their train. . . .

So the next stage of the journey toward liberty will be refusal to submit to the magistrates, and on this will follow emancipation from the authority and correction of parents and elders; then . . . comes the effort to escape obedience to the law, and when that goal is all but reached, contempt for oaths, for the plighted word, and all religion. The spectacle of the Titanic nature of which our old legends speak is reenacted; man returns to the old condition of a hell of unending misery. (701a–c)

A democracy, although obviously not the political form of choice for the Athenian, would at least have respected certain “confines”: it would have been “confined to art,” and it would have confined its *demos* to “free men,” thus excluding (but also presupposing, for its freedom) women and slaves. What is so frightening and fearful about teatrocracy, by contrast, is that it appears to respect no such limits. And how, after all, can there be a *polis*, or anything political, without limits and confinement?⁵ It is the established system of such demarcations, epitomized here by the organization of music into fixed genres and types, that is progressively dissolved by a practice that mixes genres and finally leaves no delimitation untouched or unquestioned. The driving force of such a development seems at first glance to be hedonistic, and so it is usually read. But the mere fact that the “lust

for pleasure” is qualified as being “frantic and unhallowed” suggests that here, no less than in their military struggles, the Athenians are driven as much by fear as by desire: or, rather, that fear and desire may turn out to be very difficult to separate. As Socrates observes in the *Philebus*: “In laments and tragedies and comedies—and not only in those of the stage but in the whole tragicomedy of life—as well as on countless other occasions, pains are mixed with pleasures” (50b).⁶ The mixing of pleasures has as its privileged site the stage, the place and medium of theater, but the danger, here and elsewhere, is that such mixing will not confine itself to a single place but rather will be driven, almost by nature, to transgress all places, limits, and laws.⁷ Like theater itself, the theatrocratic usurpation of the rule of law is driven as much by fear as by pleasure. At the same time, this drive appears to be associated with an acoustical rather than simply a visual medium: song, dance, and music break down most effectively the sense of propriety and the barriers that are its condition, giving the “silent” majority a voice and producing a hybrid music bordering on noise.⁸

The emergence of theatrocracy thus necessarily and essentially involves what today we would call “multimedia.” The reference to *theater* acquires special significance against this background. The theater that is being referred to—indirectly, via the notion of “theatrocracy”—is clearly not that of tragedy or comedy, which will furnish Aristotle with his canonical instances, and yet it is still designated as theater. As already noted, the Greek word *theatron* designates the place from which one sees. The notion of theatrocracy retains this reference to a specific place or site, but it is disrupted, disorganized by the different media that converge upon it. Curiously, the “rule” of the *theatron* seems to entail the absence of all stable rules. The theater emerges as an open-air version of the Platonic cave. It is a place where one comes and goes, and yet where one is not free in one’s movements.

What results, then, is described by the Athenian in a judgment that has lost little of its resonance in the thousands of years since Plato: “Everybody knows everything, and is ready to say anything; the age of reverence is gone, and the age of irreverence and licentiousness has begun.”⁹ From Plato to the present, this verdict has served to condemn “the media.”

Even Walter Benjamin, who, in contrast to his colleagues of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, did not have a predominantly

negative view of the media, did not hesitate to designate “theatrocracy” as the enemy of all innovation and change. But, in a characteristic departure from traditional moralistic critiques, he added the decisive nuance that theatrocracy is especially dangerous when it becomes the alibi of a “criticism” that invokes the “false, dissimulating totality” of the “audience” (*Publikum*) as the ultimate and unquestioned criterion. Benjamin’s condemnation of “theatrocracy,” while ostensibly echoing the Platonic critique, is diametrically opposed to it. What Benjamin finds dangerous is not the appeal to the “audience” but the pretense that the addressee of that appeal is one and the same, monolithic, unchangeable, natural. Such fetishization—in the Marxian (and perhaps also Freudian) sense—of the audience justifies a criticism that is in fact an apology for existing power relations. By treating the audience as monolithic and immutable, such criticism tends to universalize and perpetuate a relation of forces whose relativity it denies and obscures. For Benjamin, the potentiality of theatrical spectators is not to be found in their staying the same, but in their possibility for change.

This possibility, however, is precisely what concerned Plato. His concern indicates that he recognizes a similar potential in theater, although he valorizes it negatively: the potential of disturbing and transforming the established order, traditional authority, and the hierarchies it entails. It is this potential that leads Plato, through the figure of the Athenian, to forge the word *theatrocracy*.

Having thus designated the danger, the question now becomes: Wherein does its power lie? We can already surmise that the answer will have something to do with the nature of the theatrical site and the way it influences the perceptions and behavior of those who fall under its sway. As we will see, for Plato the fascinating power of the theatrocracy is marked by a resurgence of *thauma*, the wonder that draws and holds one’s gaze, and whose powerful fascination is therefore very difficult to control.

The consequences of this “thaumatic” aspect of theatrocracy emerge more clearly in book 7 of the *Laws* that I want to discuss briefly, from book 7. In it, the Athenian sketches another nightmare scenario, this time drawn not from the history of Athens but from its contemporary life, thereby illustrating the depths of political degradation into which his city has descended:

A magistrate has just offered sacrifice in the name of the public when a choir, or rather a number of choirs, turn up, plant themselves not at a remote distance from the altar, but, often enough, in actual contact with it, and drown the solemn ceremony with sheer blasphemy, harrowing the feelings of their audience with their language, rhythms, and lugubrious strains, and the choir which is most successful in plunging the city which has just offered sacrifice into sudden tears is adjudged the victor. Surely, our vote will be cast against such a practice. (800c-d)¹⁰

Public rites are disturbed by itinerant choirs, who lack all respect for constituted authority and who show this lack of respect through their very movement, refusing to stay “at a remote distance from the altar but often enough” entering “in actual contact with it.”¹¹ Through such proximity, the voices of these moving masses can “drown” out the “solemn ceremony,” just as the noise of the audience overwhelms the voices of reason and competence in teatrocracy.

If we reflect on just what elicits condemnation in these two passages, we come to two conclusions. First, teatrocracy, which replaces aristocracy and is not even democratic, is associated with the dissolution of universally valid laws and consequently with the destabilization of the social space that those laws both presuppose and help maintain. The rise of teatrocracy subverts and perverts the unity of the *theatron* as a social and political site by introducing an irreducible and unpredictable *heterogeneity*, a multiplicity of perspectives and a cacophony of voices. This disruption of the *theatron* goes together, it seems, with a concomitant disruption of *theory*, which is to say, of the ability of *knowledge* and *competence* to localize things, keep them in their proper place and thus to contribute to social stability.

It should be remembered, however, that teatrocracy does not originate in the audience but rather in those poets and composers “of native genius” whose experimentation sets the fateful precedent of undermining the authority of established rules and laws. There is something in the “nature” of poets and musicians, then, that encourages or at least allows the flouting of established law and convention. Thus the exclusion of the poets and artists from the polis finds powerful support in the responsibility for the rise of teatrocracy attributed to them here.

But it is only in the *second* passage, or scene—since, as the Athenian himself notes ironically, his own arguments are themselves often quite theatrical, despite (or because of?) his aversion to theatrical spectacle—that the subversive force of teatrocracy reveals its true resource. This consists in the power to *move* and disrupt the consecrated and institutionalized boundaries that structure political space: those, for instance, that separate the sacred from the profane, the “altar” from the public. Theatricality demonstrates its subversive power when it forsakes the confines of the *theatron* and begins to wander: when, in short, it separates itself from *theater*. For in so doing it begins to escape control by the prevailing rules of representation, whether aesthetic, social, or political. Its vehicle is irreducibly plural and, even more, heterogeneous: not just “a choir” but rather “a number of choirs,” which “turn up” in the most unexpected places, disorganizing official sacrifices, not so much through brute force as through the seductive fascination of their chants, “harrowing the feelings of their audience with their language, rhythms, and lugubrious strains” and thereby subverting the success of the sacrificial ceremony. Such wandering groups or choruses do not attempt to take the altar by storm, from without, as it were. They simply sidle up *next* to it, in “actual contact with it,” brushing up against it without overrunning it; *touching* it and touching all those who cannot resist the insidious force of their “lugubrious strains.” The power of such choruses is seductive, contagious, hypnotic. It breaks down the borders of propriety and restraint in others while itself remaining difficult to control or even to identify. What makes these “choirs” all the more wondrous is that they seem to be composed neither of simple amateurs nor of pure professionals. And yet, since the need to which they respond appears undeniable, the Athenian is led to make the following, exasperated suggestion:

If there is really any need for our citizens to listen to such doleful strains on some day which stands accursed in the calendar, surely it would be more proper that a hired set of performers should be imported from abroad for the occasion to render them, like the hired minstrels who escort funerals with Carian music. The arrangement, I take it, would be equally in place in performances of the sort we are discussing. (800d-e)

If the “arrangement . . . would be equally in place in performances of the sort we are discussing,” it is for the simple reason that the relation of employer to employee, the “hiring” of professional musicians, would impose upon the performers a relatively recognizable social role and respect for the rules. Salaried musicians can be expected to know their place, at least if they want to keep their salaries. Conversely, it is precisely the absence of such knowledge and discipline in teatrocracy that so alarms Plato. When theater rules, people forget their proper place. And places become so unstable that they can hardly become familiar, much less forgotten.

It is the stability of place and the durability of placing that teatrocracy profoundly disturbs. In this respect, its perverse effects are the culmination of Plato’s worst fears concerning mimesis in general: “The mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favor with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the less, but *calls the same thing now one, now the other*” (*Republic*, 10.605b–c, my emphasis).

Imitation destroys the self-identity of the “same” and the fixity of values by implanting “in each individual soul” a propensity that leads it to confuse phantoms with reality and to “call the same thing now one, now the other.” The exemplary space in which such a “vicious constitution” can unfold to the extreme is none other than the theater, in which mimesis comes, as it were, to be (dis)embodied in the audience: “And does not the fretful part of us present many and varied occasions for imitation, while the intelligent and temperate disposition, always remaining approximately the same, is easy neither to imitate nor to be understood when imitated, *especially by a nondescript mob assembled in the theater*” (604e, my emphasis).

Assembly in a theater is, for Plato, the sinister parody of the assemblage of citizens in the forum. In the theater, everyone tends to forget his or her proper place. And as already suggested, the fascinating power of theatrical mimesis cannot be explained simply by an appeal to “pleasure,” not, at least, in any univocal sense of the term. As the words of Socrates just cited make clear, it is “the fretful part of us,” rather than the “intelligent and temperate disposition,” that presents the most “varied occasions for mimesis.” The power of those errant choirs, we recall, was displayed in the irresistible appeal of their “lugubrious strains,” which defied and defiled the official ceremonies of

sacrifice. Teatrocracy establishes its rule by appealing to fear, care, and mourning as much as to simple “pleasure.”

In the example of the vagrant choirs, the result was an audience moved to tears. But there is another aspect of mimesis gone wild that Plato, himself the consummate dramaturge, knew only too well: the power of laughter.

There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet on the comic stage, or indeed in private, when you hear them, you are greatly amused by them and are not all disgusted at their unseemliness . . . there is a principle in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this which you once restrained by reason, because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again; and having stimulated the risible faculty at the theatre, you are betrayed unconsciously to yourself into playing the comic poet at home. (*Republic*, 10.606)

Laughter breaks out and breaks down the barriers of propriety, shifting the stage from theater to home, undermining the division of public and private space, disturbing domestic as well as civil tranquility. In the outbreak of laughter, articulate, reasonable discourse is progressively drowned out by the reiterative amplification of gesticulations that can, upon occasion, suggest a body out of control.

Precisely this link between theatricality and laughter distinguishes the reemergence of a certain theatrical paradigm in theory and criticism over the past two centuries. This reemergence passes by way of texts such as Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning Play* and his essays on Brecht and Kafka, and reaches a certain culmination, perhaps, in the writings of Artaud, Genet, Deleuze, and Derrida. The list could obviously be extended. Here, however, I will limit myself to citing and summarily commenting upon several passages from a few of the authors mentioned, in order to indicate how they begin to rethink the relationship between the theatrical, the theoretical, and the media, as well as some of the political consequences such rethinking can have.

First, from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*:

At bottom the esthetic phenomenon is simple; one need only have the ability to see continually a living play and to live per-

petually surrounded by hosts of spirits, and one is a poet; one need only feel the drive to alter oneself [*sich selbst zu verwandeln*] and to speak out of alien bodies and souls, and one is a dramatist.

Dionysian excitation is capable of communicating to a whole multitude this artistic power of feeling oneself surrounded by such a host of spirits, with whom one knows oneself to be inwardly one. This process [*Prozeß*: also, trial] of the tragic chorus is the originary dramatic phenomenon: seeing oneself altered right in front of oneself [*sich selbst vor sich verwandelt zu sehen*] and now acting as though one had really entered another body, another character. This process, this trial marks the beginning of the unfolding of drama. . . . Here already there is an abandonment of the individual by entering into an alien nature. Moreover, this phenomenon arises as an epidemic: a whole throng feels itself enthralled in this way.¹²

Nietzsche's account of the tragic chorus as dramatic *Urphänomen* both repeats and transforms the Platonic nightmare vision of the wandering choirs. Contrary both to certain other statements of Nietzsche himself, in *The Birth of Tragedy* and elsewhere, and, even more, contrary to a certain reception of this text, the "dramatic phenomenon" described by Nietzsche never relinquishes its distinctively theatrical dimension, which is to say, it never simply results in a mystical, ecstatic union with "the Lord and Master, Dionysus."¹³ The chorus, Nietzsche insists, does not cease to "look at" this God, even if what is visible is not a figure but a phenomenon caught in a process of *Verwandlung*: metamorphosis and trial at once, involving both change of place and change of identity. But the German word used here by Nietzsche, *Verwandlung*, goes further than this duality of meaning. The root of the word is *wandeln*, which comes from the verb for turning: *wenden*, in turn related to *winden*, to *wind*, in the sense of twist, coil, or twine. This accords with Nietzsche's allusion to the St. Vitus's Dance as a medieval manifestation of the Dionysian, for the movement implied in Nietzsche's account of the theatrical is more of a twisting and turning, a spasm or tick, than a continuous progression toward a goal. At the same time, throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche never ceases to insist on the inseparability of the Dionysian from the Apollonian, which is why *The Birth of Tragedy* is concerned ultimately more with theater than with religion or, rather, with theater as a possible substitute

for religion. The "visionary" dimension of the *theatron* is conserved, and those who are in it are as little free to come and go as Plato's cave dwellers. But with Nietzsche the theatrical site loses what ever since Plato and Aristotle has been the predominant feature of all sites, including that of theater: a certain stability and, indeed, immobility. Instead of functioning as the unmovable container of bodies that are, in principle at least, movable—a principle presupposed even and especially by the Platonic cave, precisely in its negation¹⁴—the theatrical site itself splits and stretches, twists and turns into a space of alteration and oscillation, of *Verwandlung*. The twin principles of containment and constancy are thus dislodged: just as the site does not contain the body, the body is not informed by the soul. Rather, it is, in a literal sense, beside itself.

A significant consequence of this repositioning of place and body is that the relation of life and death is no longer construed according to a logic of simple opposition. When Nietzsche writes that the "individual" gives itself up to this movement of *Verwandlung* both by entering into alien bodies and souls and at the same time by seeing itself splitting apart in the process, he describes a recursive movement that does not come full circle. In the gap opened by such noncircular recursivity, the scope of life and death is altered. To be alive cannot be understood in terms of spatial identity: being "here" as opposed to being "there" or "gone," since the individual caught up in the movement of *Verwandlung* is no longer simply here, but here and there at once. This "at," however, splits the oneness of the once by rendering (and rending) it repeatable. What results is not just a plurality of individuals, each different and yet each self-contained, but rather the fracturing of the individual as such. In the elusive space-time of this irreducible "dividuality," unity cannot be restored through any sort of reassembled "collective" that would surmount the limitations and isolation of the individual.

The theatrical collective—for instance, a "cast" of "characters"—remains marked by a certain disunity: it is "cast" not in stone, as it were, but in "parts" that bear the trace of such *Verwandlung*.¹⁵ This transforms the relation of the living to the dead by disrupting the place of each. The "lively play" to which Nietzsche refers in the passage just cited includes an observer "surrounded by a host of ghosts [*Geisterschar*]." The perspective from which this spectacle must be seen is thus not just that of an irreducible plurality, of a "host," but that of an

irreducible spectrality. As a “host of spirits,” individuals do not merely cease to exist: they persist, but as *dividuals*, divided between life and death, spectator and actor, strange and familiar, entering an alien body and soul on the one hand, while on the other remaining sufficiently detached to *see* themselves taking leave of their selves (rather than of their “senses”). The individual thus altered is here and there at once, and consequently can be neither exclusively here nor there, neither simply itself nor simply other. This impossible “situation” splits the site itself, rendering it something like a *ghost of itself*, lacking an authentic place or a proper body.

Such traits begin to indicate just how and why a certain theatricality could be compatible with the spread of contemporary, electronic media. As Marshall McLuhan has observed, “Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than ‘a place for everything and everything in its place.’” This phrase served as a motto for an influential book published in 1985 that bore the telling title *No Sense of Place*. In it, Joshua Meyrowitz sought to interpret “the impact of electronic media on social behavior” in terms of the changing sense of place. Since then, it has become more or less accepted to speak of the “de-localizing” effects of electronic media. But the notion of “de-localization” tells only part of the story and, taken in isolation, can be highly misleading. What is at stake in the changes being brought about by the spread of the new media, in particular by their electronic varieties, involves not just a “de-localization” of “physical settings: places, rooms, buildings and so forth,” as Meyrowitz wrote in the preface to his book,¹⁶ but rather a change in the structure and function of such settings, in their relation to the “physical,” including bodies. The passages we have been reading, from Plato and Nietzsche, remind us of what is not any less decisive for being evident: namely, that there can be no movement of de-localization without an accompanying re-localization. However, the two need not be construed as being simply symmetrical. What results from the self-abandonment of the individual as described by Nietzsche is not simply another individual, in the sense of an *alter ego*, but a spectacle that offers itself to sight while at the same time eluding any purely perceptual grasp. This is why Nietzsche stresses the traversing of limits and frontiers rather than the emergence of a new figure, albeit an alien one: the individual sees itself “as though it had entered into a foreign body and character.” This “as though,” which recalls Kant’s Third Critique, indicates the decisive

shift that is taking place here: that from a notion of aesthetics as the realm of an irreducible “as if” to a notion of theatricality as its medium. A *medium*, however, is not a *realm*, because its distinctively spatial quality—its status “in between”—indicates that it can never be construed as self-contained or self-regulating. Rather, it is relational and situational, depending decisively on alien or extraneous instances that, in the case of theater, are generally identified with the spectators or audiences. This identification is by no means exhaustive, but it can be a first step in rethinking place as something other than a condition of identity. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche speculates that the Greeks invented the Gods to serve as spectators to their suffering, thereby endowing it with meaning.¹⁷ Similarly, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche’s description of *Verwandlung* as the *Urphänomen* of all drama comes in the context of his insistence upon the chorus as the origin of Attic tragedy. But he explicitly distinguishes his conception of the chorus from that of Schelling, who holds it to be the “ideal spectator.” Here his theory of theater, despite certain formulations, begins to part company with traditional aesthetics, both extending and transforming the Kantian third *Critique*. For the position of the other in the theater is no longer that of a simple spectator, but rather of a participant who is not a protagonist. The chorus participates as the decisive element in Nietzsche’s conception of theater precisely in and through its alterity: it becomes other than itself, changing its place, irreducibly dispersed into a host of ghosts without hearth or home. This itinerant host defines the space of theater, theater as space or, rather, as irreducibly *problematic re-localization*. This ongoing and never conclusively settled setting of the scene distinguishes the theatrical play from the artistic work, at least insofar as the latter is considered to be sufficiently meaningful and self-contained to serve as the object of and support for a detached and comprehensive perception. The spectator, audience, or addressee is never an essential component of the classical work of art, considered to be constituted independently of its reception, circulation, interpretation. A *staging*, however, never adds up to a *work*, not even to the “setting to work of truth,” as Heidegger defines the work of art.¹⁸ The irreducibility of the addressee is the mark of this difference.

But the function of the other in theater cannot be understood as that of simply another subject or an *alter ego*. Theatrical staging is not just a work in action. Rather, it has a structure and dynamics that are radically different from those of the work, or of its associated category,

form, at least as both have traditionally been conceived. Walter Benjamin seeks to highlight this difference, in his discussion of Brecht's Epic Theater, through the notion of *interruption*. Interruption, as Benjamin elaborates the term, involves the disruption of a temporal process or progression, associated with narrative-based drama, by spatial factors associated with theater as medium and, above all, with the stage. Benjamin begins the first version of his essay on Brecht by insisting on this very point:

What is at stake in theater today can be more precisely defined in relation to the stage than to the drama. It concerns the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss that separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, this abyss, which among all the elements of the stage most indelibly bears the traces of its sacred origins, has lost its function. The stage is still elevated but it no longer rises out of fathomless depths; it has become a podium. On this podium theatergoers must find their place [*sich einzurichten*].¹⁹

What begins with the ostensibly familiar gesture of defining theater in terms of what today would be called a "level playing field"—one in which the aesthetic sublimity of fiction is brought down to earth—reveals itself situated in the Nietzschean tradition: not that of Dionysian ecstasy as *unio mystica*, but that which confounds the living with the dead. The level playing field ostensibly established by the "filling in" of the orchestra pit does not simply place the living on the same level as the dead, but rather complicates their relationship, which can no longer be thought under the aegis of a logic of identity or of mutually exclusive oppositionality. To reduce the bottomless pit separating players from audience, stage from orchestra, was for Benjamin (if not for Brecht) to create not so much a "Living Theater" as what Tadeusz Kantor years later was to call a "Theater of the Dead."²⁰

The primary interest of Benjamin's text, in our context, is that it begins to "flesh out" just how theatrical spectrality can be concretely construed. Benjamin's response to the question "What is Epic Theater?" has two parts, both "borrowed" from Brecht and yet both transformed in the process. First, there is gesture. Epic theater, Benjamin asserts, is above all gestural theater. But this determination is not sufficient. Epic theater is not just gestural: it is also citational. It renders gestures *actable*. This is not quite the same as "quotable," which is how

it has been rendered in English. Even in English, however, to "cite" is not simply to "quote." This is all the more true in German, where even today the verb *zitieren* still carries with it etymological resonances from its Latin root, *citare*, to set in movement. In English, this resonance is buried in verbs such as "incite" and "excite." And yet setting-into-movement is only half the story here. In both German and English "to cite" has another meaning that is decisive for Benjamin. To cite means not simply to set something in movement, but also—as American drivers know only too well—to arrest movement by diverting it, as in the sense, of course, of receiving a traffic citation, a summons to appear before a tribunal in order to account for an excess of speed.

In short, for Benjamin the "stage" in respect to which epic theater, and theater in general today, must be situated, is determined as a site and as a sight, but also and above as a scene of citability. Why, however, this emphasis on citability and why, precisely, gesture?

Concerning the first part of this question, Benjamin's response brings together the two dimensions of citation, inciting and arresting, by retracing their common origin to the fact that "the basis of citation" in general is "interruption." Citation, which in English might suggest an appeal to authority, also involves disruption, detachment, dislocation, and relocation, all moves from which the violence of a legal order is never entirely absent; "citational index," on the one hand, and "traffic citation," on the other. Both are involved in Benjamin's notion of "citability of gesture" as a decisive aspect of epic theater. "Interruption," he reminds his readers, "is one of the fundamental procedures through which form is given."²¹ In other words, if we have reason to regard "form" as the constitutive category of modern aesthetics, then Benjamin indicates here that the origin of the work of art, its very "formation," is based less on a model of creativity or construction—much less on one of expressivity—than on a process of *separation*, by which an intentional, teleological movement—call it a "plot"—is arrested, dislocated, and reconfigured. Reconfigured as what? As a gesture rendered citable. Benjamin's insistence on the notion of citability, as distinct from citation, heightens the sense of interruption, but as a rendering-possible rather than actual or real. The actuality of the stage, as a site of citable gestures, is defined with respect to a potentiality rather than a reality. Whatever is cited, is cited simultaneously as the possibility of its being re-cited, moved else-

where, transformed. This is why the stage is a place where potentialities are tried out, rather than realities enacted or performed. When a gesture is deployed so as to be citable, it does not merely harken back to what has been: it appeals to possible future transformation and transposition. Citability means recalling the past as the possibility of a future that would be different from the present. To the extent that theater involves the citability of gesture, it cannot be assimilated to the aesthetic work. Construed from the perspective of aesthetics as the individual instantiation of a more general set of characteristics and principles collected under the concept of genre, the work is here no longer self-contained, but determined through interruption and fragmentation, and also by the possibility of becoming other than itself, being moved elsewhere. An intuition of this situation is perhaps reflected in the use, in certain languages, of words that suggest fragmentation to designate what in English is called “play,” for instance, *pièce* or *Stück*. As a place of possibility and of experimentation, epic theater knows *pieces*—but not works.

Gesture, then, replaces the aesthetic concept of form in Benjamin’s rethinking of theatricality. With the notion of form, however, it shares the attribute of being “fixed” and “delimited”:

Unlike human actions and undertakings, [gestures have] a definable beginning and a definable end. This strict, framelike enclosing of every element in a posture [*Haltung*] that as a whole is caught up in a living flux is one of the basic dialectical phenomena of gesture. From this an important conclusion can be drawn: gestures are obtained all the more someone engaged in an action [*eines Handelnden*] is interrupted. (p. 521)

A gesture, then, is a bodily movement that interrupts and suspends—the German word *Haltung* literally suggests a “holding” or “stopping”—the intentional-teleological-narrative progression toward a meaningful goal and thereby opens up the possibility of a different kind of space: that of an incommensurable singularity. It does this by replacing action with acting. Or, rather, it detaches the movement of acting from the conscious and goal-directed decision of *eines Handelnden*, someone acting. Acting is no longer reducible, if it ever was, to some *one*, for instance, to an actor or an agent as individual or as subject. Instead, it reveals itself to be a function of its *placement* or what

Benjamin, adopting and adapting a Marxist term from Brecht, calls its *Zustand*.

Normally translated and understood as “condition,” often in a causal sense, the German word *Zustand* changes once it is defined as the site, not just of a gesture that is cited, but of one whose citation reveals its potentiality to be re-cited, its citability. Cited as citable, gesture is never simply present, but split between past and future, invoking the past to portend an unpredictable future. A form of repetition, citation reveals that it is not necessarily a return of the same. Or, rather, that the return of the same is itself not necessarily identical or unchanging—as with repetitive, ritualized habits that have become so automatic as to escape conscious control. Benjamin seems to have this sort of repetition in mind when he notes that what is essential in epic theater rests

not on great decisions, which lie along the flight-lines of expectation [*Fluchtlinien der Erwartung*], but on the incommensurable, the singular. “It can happen that way, but it can also happen entirely differently [*ganz anders*]”—this is the basic attitude of anyone who writes for epic theater. He relates to the story the way that a ballet teacher relates to his pupil. His primary concern is to loosen her joints to the limits of the possible.²²

The reference to ballet here recalls how closely the notion of gesture is bound up with, although not reducible to, that of the body. But this body is to be understood, not in the Aristotelian sense, as a vessel or container, but rather in terms of its articulations. The essence of gesture, as bodily movement, is to be sought neither in the head nor in the heart but rather in the *joints* that make such movement possible while also exposing it to interruption—for instance, as spasm or paralysis. To experience the body, not simply as a continuous medium or entity, but as the possibility of an imperfect, disjointed machine—this is what Benjamin seems to envisage in and through the notion of “citable gesture” or, as it might also be rendered, “gesture on the move.”

Just this experience of the body as the interruption of organicity and as machine is intensified by the spread of electronic media. Such “media” can no longer be regarded as the passive element or condition of the realization of “works” or acts. Rather, media transform

the very places “in” and through which they take place. This transformation affects not merely individual subjects and objects, things and events, but also traditional conceptions of place and body as (unmoved) container and (movable) contained, respectively. It is against this context of the transformation of place and body through electronic media that the renewed significance of theater and the theatrical is to be sought.

A major function of the theatrical in an age of electronic media is to articulate the ways in which sites—and sights, but also sounds and other “sensations”—remain linked, in however mediate a manner, to bodies, although not necessarily to *human* bodies, at least as traditionally understood. With the increasing problematization of the principle of containment as defining the mutual relation of place and body, the privilege of the human body, dominant in the Greco-Christian history of the West, can no longer be taken for granted. Despite a persistent and popular tendency today to equate “body” with “human body,” electronic media and “popular culture” both underscore that “bodies” are not necessarily less bodily for being nonhuman. To speak of “the” body in the singular, whether gendered or not, almost inevitably means to privilege the human body over all other kinds: animal, plant, inorganic. By contrast, to invoke the citability of gesture as a determining mechanism of contemporary theatricality is to call attention to the body as an organic whole, something other than a vessel or container of the soul—as something other than what today is so often and so confidently designated as “embodiment” (today’s secular successor to “incarnation”).

The resurgence of theatricality as citable gesture calls into question the self-evidence of this “in” or “em-.” In so doing, it brings into play one of the chief axioms of Western modernity: that of the immanence of the subject. What is involved can be illustrated by going back to one of the earliest discussions of “digitality,” long before the age of binary computation. In his discussion of place and its relation to the body in book 4 of the *Physics*, Aristotle distinguishes the way place can be said to “contain” bodies from the way these “contain” their component parts or members:

The next step we must take is to see in how many ways one thing is said to be *in* another. In one way, as a finger is in a hand, and generally a part in a whole. In another way, as a whole is in

its parts; for there is no whole over and above the parts. . . . Again, as the affairs of Greece are in the King, and generally events are in their primary motive agent. . . . And most properly of all, as something is in a vessel, and generally in a place.²³

What happens, however, when the vessel begins to move, when it becomes a vehicle, and when its movement is not primarily locomotive, involving a change of place? What happens when the function of the finger is no longer determined primarily through the fact that it is located “in a hand” as “generally a part” is located “in a whole”? What happens then to the “interior” of the hand and of the body? If one observes carefully what distinguishes the gestures of Balinese dancing and theater, for instance, from those of conventional Western theater, including traditional ballet, one might speculate that the movement of the extremities, and in particular of the fingers, plays a decisive role precisely to the extent that such fingers can no longer be said to be simply “in” the hand, but rather to *draw* the hand, and the body to which it is attached, to its outermost limits and beyond, toward a space that is both distant and near at the same time. It is difficult to imagine a single King or God dominating or informing such bodily movements, which seem to be determined, not by what they try to hold or hold onto, but by their ability to let go, and in letting go to establish a different kind of “contact” or relation. That contact or relation might come close to what Benjamin referred to, in German, as *Zustand*, normally translated as “condition” or “situation.” I prefer to render it, here at least, as *stance*.²⁴ That involves what the word in German literally says: a *standing toward* something else, a gesturing elsewhere, pulling the body after it.

The possibility in the new media and their technologies for such gesticulation and dismemberment fascinated Benjamin, just as their “uncanny” and “automatic” aspects fascinated Freud, especially when they involved a “severed hand.”²⁵ If Aristotle regarded the relation between hand and finger as that of whole to part, what Freud discovered to be profoundly “uncanny” was their separation, a condition of all relation, including that of “the” body to “itself.” What could be more familiar than the fingers of a hand? But when those fingers are no longer “in” the hand, what could be more uncanny?

In this context of uncanniness, “digitalization” reveals its curiously ambivalent character. On the one hand, the “digit” suggests discrete-

ness: the clearly defined unit of the finger serving as model for the no less clearly defined and distinct numerical unit. On the other, however, the numerical unit does not relate to the combinations it constitutes as a part to a whole. It is a relational element in a combinatorial process. In computers, that relation is built upon binary opposition: 0's and 1's, closed and opened circuits, positive and negative, each only "meaningful" as the other of the other. This combination of otherness constitutes the medium of the new media, at least insofar as they are increasingly "digital." There is no inherent limit to the combinatorial sequences that constitute digitized code, no more than there is any intrinsic limit to the combination of letters, words, and their sequencing in discourse. This lack of *intrinsic* limitation, and hence delimitation, is what excludes the relation of part to whole from serving as a paradigm for code or discourse. But this also makes it increasingly difficult to *hold* the human body to be the exemplary occupant of the motionless vessel traditionally understood as "place."

However, as the figure "hold" in the previous sentence suggests, this "breaking" or perhaps better, *jarring* of the vessels, calling into question the paradigm of an organic whole containing its parts, has long been anticipated by the very functions that have served to valorize the different bodily organs. The hand, for instance, has been privileged as the organ of grasping and seizing, holding and controlling, perceiving and conceiving: in short, getting a handle on the world. In this, it relies upon "its" fingers doing its bidding. The fingers must be "held" to be subordinate to the intention "embodied" in the hand. The hand is thus the organ that "empowers" the body, which in turn is "held" to "embody" the soul, the spirit, or, more secularly if not securely, the personality. And yet the finger remains discrete, separate from the hand, not merely an integral part. If it is required for grasping, it can also engage in very different kinds of contact: that of touching, for instance, caressing, or pointing.²⁶ Pointing can be a means of anticipating the seizure and appropriation of what is being pointed at or out, but it can also involve a movement *away* from the familiarity and control of the grasping hand. In pointing, the finger can pull the body elsewhere, as in the Balinese dance-theater already mentioned. A finger can be recognized as a finger, even and especially when it is severed from the hand, from the body. It still remains discrete.

With the spread of "digitalization" something quite similar may be happening today to the sense of the body and to the notion of identity

that it supports. The "digital" points away from its immediate manifestation, is "allegorical" in the sense given the term by Benjamin: it signifies something other than what it represents, situated elsewhere. Every "here and now" points toward a "there and then."²⁷ Visual, verbal, acoustic "qualities," the objects of "sense impressions," are produced by sequences of relations that have no intrinsic relation to anything other than the most rudimentary form of relationality itself: that of binary opposition. The most familiar manifestation of human identity, the individual body, which since the Reformation serves increasingly as the model for the isolation of the individual before God, comes to be regarded with suspicion and even fear. To be sure, such suspicion is massively channeled into directions designed to preserve established categories and perspectives, above all, the principle of containment. Fear and perhaps hope of a radical alternative is preempted by the question "What" can the body "contain"? Popular films from *The Body Snatchers* through *Alien* to the *Terminator(s)*, *Matrix* and beyond, all bear witness to the becoming-uncanny of what seems most familiar, the (not always human) body, as well as to its canny reappropriation as container of the (not always human) soul. It seems to matter less what it contains than *that* it contains something at all, albeit beings from outer space. To be sure, the actual depiction of such beings, which tend to assume the form either of amorphous organisms or of machines, suggests an experience of the body as the place where the clear-cut figure of the self-evidently human blurs. A body that is no longer clearly demarcated from its surroundings inevitably raises the question of its relation to place, which is no longer simply its exterior. Rather, this body can itself be a place, a stage or staging area for effects whose scope is not clearly predictable. The ensuing uncertainty is often reinscribed in a narrative that claims to be meaningful and self-contained, with an immediately intelligible beginning, middle, and end. The narrative form of the story finally reasserts the wholeness that this problematization of the body and place as containers tends to upset. Not its content but its ending as such that is "happy," insofar as it provides a coherent frame to which the "viewer" can cling in the hope of being only someone who merely "views."²⁸

The commercial constraint of this narrative reassurance of the spectator has profound political ramifications. Ever since the eighteenth

century, the “body politic” has provided an important paradigm in constructing the putative unity of a variegated and heterogeneous political entity, whether as “nation,” “people,” “class,” or “community.” A “democracy” is only conceivable insofar as the *demos*—the people—is presupposed. How can a people “rule” if it is not, in principle, unified and whole? And yet, the narratives that traditionally provided a framework for such unification have been undermined by the tendency of the televisual media to furnish discontinuous series of images rather than continuous sequences of scenes. The popularity of the sitcom and reality show suggests a desire of viewers to accede to the kind of continuity that the socioeconomic constraints of “globalized” capitalism tend to disrupt. The increased mobility of capital contrasts ever more sharply with the reduced options of those dependent on wage labor to survive. In a globalized society, wage labor has a hard time keeping up with “delocalization.”

Concomitantly, the technological and institutional status of the “media” grows increasingly dependent upon the exigencies of short-term profit maximization.²⁹ The media tend to reproduce the instabilities for which they simultaneously offer palliatives, not just in the “content” of programming, but in its “frame”: what is euphemistically but symptomatically designated as the “commercial break.” The commercial break exploits the anxiety associated with far more drastic breaks to come. In announcing the “commercial break,” the television speaker enjoins viewers to “stay with us,” assuring them that “we’ll be right back.” “Staying with us” in this sense is the capitalist version of the other tendency of the media, whether old (language) or new: namely, “parting with.” The television viewer is thus encouraged not to leave (“stay with us”) and promised a speedy return of the same subject-matter. This incessantly broadcast appeal reveals something distinctive about contemporary theatrocracy. To have staying power, today’s media audiences must answer “present” to the call of the media. They must respond or, as one says today in the era of total communication, “interact,” however ambiguous such interaction inevitably is. The audience is, after all, the commodity that networks sell to their clients, the advertisers. And so it is decisive that the audience should indeed “stay with us,” *during* no less than *after* the “break.”

Such theatricality tends both to confirm and to undermine the rule

of the audience. On the one hand, it confirms that the audience is an integral and determining part of the media as spectacle, constantly monitored by network producers and writers. On the other, the “interactivity” of the audience is largely defined by the “interval” framed by the commercial breaks. Those breaks themselves can never be called into question as structuring framework. Instead, the not so subliminal message is that to survive the coming “breaks” it may be prudent not to question their totalizing, framing function. It may be best to sit tight and “interact” in the ever shorter intervals granted between the breaks. For the break is what “saves”: whether as “breaking news” or “news breaks.” The Good News that television brings to its viewers is that they can survive the break—but only if they stay put.

“Give me a break!” (from the break)—this is the unsung plaint of theatrocracy today. The media respond by interrupting their programs to bring a special announcement. The more catastrophic the message, the better, so long as it fills the “break” that separates viewers of the broadcast media today and enables them to “survive” the spectacles they behold.

All of this is changing, of course, with the Internet, in which the function of the screen is no longer—or not yet?—as rigorously, and linearly, framed by the commercial break as in broadcast television.

To be situated before a television screen—even more, before a computer screen—is of course something very different from being situated in a theater before a stage. The orchestra pit has been replaced by the commercial break. And yet, this new situation is determined by a tension between anticipation and reflection, storytelling and interruption, that has a long history, reaching back to the emergence of theater itself. And yet insofar as all these situations are determined by a tension between anticipation and reflection, storytelling and interruption, they participate in a long history, which reaches back to the emergence of theater itself, as practice and as theory. In the following chapters we will discuss a few of these earliest articulations in order to explore how the medium of theater has, from its inception, responded to the enduring desire to *survive the break*.