



Exploring Textual Action

**Edited by Lars Sætre,
Patrizia Lombardo,
Anders M. Gullestad**

Aarhus University Press

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Contents

Preface: Exploring Textual Action [7](#)

Part I: Elaborations

- J. Hillis Miller, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE
Performativity₁/Performativity₂ [31](#)
- Svend Erik Larsen, AARHUS UNIVERSITY
“Speak again. Speak like rain” –
The Mediality of Performance [59](#)
- Lars Sætre, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
Powering Textual Action:
Duras’ Space in
Véra Baxter ou Les Plages de l’Atlantique [83](#)
- Erika Fischer-Lichte, FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN
Culture as Performance –
Developing a Concept of Performance [123](#)
- Mads Thygesen, AARHUS UNIVERSITY
Interaction and Framing in the
Performance *Insideout* by Sasha Waltz [141](#)
- Randi Koppen, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
Re-thinking the “Performative Turn”:
Fashioned Bodies, Sartorial Semiotics
and the Performance of Culture, 1900-1930 [165](#)
- Patrizia Lombardo, UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA
Bazin, Bresson and Scorsese:
Performative Power and the Impure Art of
Cinema [187](#)

Part 2: Explorations

- Atle Kittang, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
**Topography and Textual Action in the
Urban Prose of Balzac and Breton** [223](#)
- Ragnhild Evang Reinton, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
**Producing “...images we never
saw before we remembered them”.
Memory as Textual Action in Walter
Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit um
Neunzehnhundert*** [253](#)
- Tone Selboe, UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
**Virginia Woolf
and the Ambiguities of Domestic Space** [283](#)
- Asbjørn Grønstad, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
**Dead Time, Empty Spaces: Landscape as
Sensibility and Performance** [311](#)
- Anders Kristian Strand, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
**Textual Action
in W.C. Williams’ *Paterson*** [333](#)
- Jorunn S. Gjerden, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
**The Reader Address as Performativity
in Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Usage de la parole*** [367](#)
- Anders M. Gullestad, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN
**Loving the Alien:
Bartleby and the Power of Non-Preference** [395](#)
- Contributors [423](#)
- Index [429](#)

Exploring Textual Action

Preface

The present volume is the first publication to stem from the research project “Text, Action and Space. Performative language and topographical patterns as converging areas in modern drama, prose fiction and film”, or “TAS” for short.¹ The individual essays collected in this anthology are the result of shared investigations in an area where the concerns of both aesthetic and cultural analysis meet. Initiating basic research by approaching modern drama, prose fiction, poetry and film in a focused inter-aesthetic framework, they discuss the theoretical implications of some of the most important debates within the Humanities during the last 50 years. These

1 “Text, Action and Space” was initiated by Lars Sætre and Atle Kitang at the University of Bergen in 2006, with Sætre as project leader. Along with these two, Patrizia Lombardo (University of Geneva) and Svend Erik Larsen (Aarhus University) make up its leadership group. For this volume, Ragnhild Evang Reinton (University of Oslo) and Anders M. Gullestad (University of Bergen) have served as additional members of the editorial group. TAS consists of scholars from Norway, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the United States, and represents a plethora of disciplines in the Humanities: comparative, Anglo-American, Germanic, Italian and French literary studies, theatre studies, dramaturgy, and film studies.

are centered on three main, interrelated basic questions: respectively, that of *performativity*, of *space* or topography, and of the *converging of genres and art forms*.

To start with the last of the three, modernity has been characterised by a vast move that can be traced in modern literature and art up to contemporary media: the converging of genres, from the Romantic *mélange des genres* to the present ruptures of the various artistic expressions, dramatically reshaping their identities. Epic traits have entered modern drama; features of recent dramatic art have emerged in prose fiction; writers re-circulate the same materials in series of works within drama and fiction, sometimes also in film and TV. Partly inspired by literature, film has cultivated its paradoxical specificity as an aesthetically “impure” and inter-medial art form; video installations have changed the world of painting; the division between theatre and film is becoming increasingly blurred; the use of cyber technologies in special effects has proliferated in film and other media. And – as was already the case for the founders of the Romantic literary journal, the *Athenaeum* – during the 19th and particularly the 20th century, criticism and philosophy have influenced artists to such a degree that fragments from different philosophers and theorists from Søren Kierkegaard or Friedrich Nietzsche to Jacques Derrida or Roland Barthes can appear as creative elements in their works. Undoubtedly, the “impurity” of the converging of genres marks aesthetic configurations with an imprint of other forms or media, pointing to an exchange and fusion of their respective characteristics.

Why do genres and art forms converge? In which contexts are the shared forms inscribed? What aesthetic strategies are made possible by such convergence? What cultural effects does it have? These and related questions are discussed in the anthology in order to highlight how the aesthetic transactions install changes with a vast existential and cultural impact on

human perception, imagination, reflection and interaction – between people, as well as between people, technologies and the material world. In particular, such an impact is the case with the shared capacity of fiction, drama, poetry and film to function as *localised performatives*. That capacity opens up further questions: what is the relationship between space and topographies, on the one hand, and performativity and textual action, on the other? What existential contents, meanings or values in the recent history of modernity do phenomena in performative language and in topographical patterns open up for, and how can they help us reflect on culture’s conditions of possibility?

This brings us to the two other questions informing this book. First, to that of the *performativity* of aesthetic works, or, to be more precise, of how they can have an impact on their surroundings. Through the scrutiny of the action of the aesthetic dimension of art works and their impacts on the reader or the spectator, and through a rich comparative material selected from both historical and late modernity, the anthology investigates central artistic configurations and their installation of cultural shifts.

As originally theorised by J.L. Austin in his groundbreaking *How to Do Things with Words* – based upon his William James Lectures at Harvard in 1955 and posthumously published in 1962 – performative speech acts are ways of doing things with words and signs. Language not only *reveals* a pre-existing phenomenon or a state of affairs, it also has the power to *create* and *install* something new. A dynamic modelling of the world, and of *a* world, is taking place. Even though Austin chose to focus on “serious” utterances of the kind where one means what one says, this performative dimension is undoubtedly present in all forms of language, including those of drama, theatre, poetry, prose fiction and film. Here, they are for example to be found in the enunciations and in

the movements of characters, or in the works' rhetorical and material figurations, or in their composition and form.

This ability of aesthetic works has wide-ranging effects on the everyday world, and consequences for apperception, understanding and reflection in that world – socially, culturally and historically. A number of modern theorists discuss the creativity of art and culture in terms of performative language and cultural performativity or in closely related perspectives.² This anthology draws on the thinking of some of these, and also attempts to show its potentials for analysis, and to make some distinctions. In so doing, the essays aim to give an assessment of this diverse field, including the possibilities for re-applying old concepts in new ways as well as for creating new ones.³

The generating power of such creative transformations is what we call the *textual action* of aesthetic works, hence the title of the anthology. In their focus on that power, some of the essays discuss the performativity of art works, while others approach their textual action either by trying to define its scope, or by interrogating its relationship to performativity. While neither of the terms is new, textual action has hitherto largely been used in an undefined, commonsensical way, whereas performativity has been used as a specific term within theatre studies,⁴ but elsewhere often with meanings that are vague or bordering on the metaphorical. So one of our aspirations is to salvage these terms from unreflected us-

2 For example Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernst Cassirer, Richard Ohmann, Mary Louise Pratt, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Gilles Deleuze, Shoshana Felman, Angela Esterhammer, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jacques Rancière, to name but a small selection.

3 Regarding these basic questions, see in particular the contributions by J. Hillis Miller, Svend Erik Larsen, Lars Sætre, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Atle Kittang.

4 Cf. Carlson (2004).

age, trying to delimit their possibilities and strengths when consciously related to each other and applied to aesthetic works in a thorough manner. Launched here as a first step towards further investigations, such analyses of art's generating powers seem promising, as they are both precise and wide enough to be aesthetically inclusive. They foreground the *energy* of texts and their potential to transform human perception and life.

Although more work remains to be done in this regard, what is gained through the mutual enriching of the notion of textual action and theories of performativity is a highlighting of the bond between the truly *creative* aspects of an utterance and its illocutionary power (as opposed to its constative functions as mere expressive and mimetic representation). That power breaks with the logics of causality, time, place and the supposed linearity of the everyday by way of a productive relationship between space and language, thereby affecting human life through textual, symbolic acts and their possible ramifications. Another gain is the possibility of describing the aesthetic utterance's creative changes of register, entailing a slide from mimetic descriptions and representations to a self-referential alterity with deictic shifter functions, carrying the necessary minimal rudiments of a systemic discursive character. Also, all the negative connotations in J.L. Austin's take on literary and aesthetic performatives as being "hollow", "void", "parasitic", "etiologies" etc. are avoided.

Finally, the anthology is centered on the question of *space*. Thinking in terms of textual action means taking seriously the fact that aesthetic works can act at various levels and in different localised spheres. The notion of textual action indicates precisely the *taking place* of the dynamic modelling acts of performative language, insofar as they succeed in *showing*, *changing* and *constructing locations* by performing them in language, images and gestures. Topographies are "place in-

scriptions”, installations and transformations of space. Being written or gestured, they creatively *take* place as much as they refer to or describe “existing” places.⁵ In modern drama, prose fiction, poetry and film, topographical patterns are constantly being formed and changed in the linear and spatial movements of characters, imagery, motifs, dialogue, narrative voices, and visual and mental perspectives. They are figured in dynamic patterns such as landscapes, cityscapes, rooms, bodies, subjectivities, minds and experience. They are also moulded, for instance, as communities, inter-personal relations, institutions, ethics, ideologies and technologies; literary, theatrical and cinematic universes; reading and translations. Sometimes the figuring of topography and space also bears sensory witness to the boundaries of existence, from which full cognition, understanding and knowledge are barred.

Several ways of figuring space are shared by the genres represented in these studies. In this sense, genres and art forms are also topographies. By exploring the aspects of space shared by different genres and media, the essays attempt to bring out some of its historical, cultural and aesthetic significances in modernity, while discussing some essential theories of space.⁶ Especially important here are those aspects of space and topographies that are dynamic and have performative

5 For a discussion of the relationship between the concepts of *space* and *place*, see for example Tuan (1977) and Larsen (1997, 2002 (Chap. 7) and 2007).

6 Numerous modern theorists explore the creativity and the functions of space, such as Joseph Frank, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Gaston Bachelard, Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Richard, Maurice Blanchot, J. Hillis Miller, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Casey and Paul Virilio, to name but a few. The volume edited by Crang and Thrift (2000) offers a useful introduction to some of these, as well as to other key thinkers on the subject of space.

power in the text, thereby challenging any static understanding of space as an unchangeable and inert given.

The present studies, then, are informed by some general hypotheses. First: by way of the art works' discursive and signifying "impurity" involved in the converging of genres, textual action and space installation function as agencies of culture formation. This has been largely disregarded in disciplinary scholarship, but – when approached from an inter-aesthetic perspective – the striking phenomenon of converging can be understood precisely as the interplay between the performative character of an art work and the topographies it creates and in which it takes place. Second, through concrete readings of aesthetic works and in critical dialogues with relevant intellectual forebears, it is possible to show how the interplay between performativity and space emerges, and how it produces cultural values in the re-assignment of subjectivities, communities and the production of knowledge. Third, these comparative investigations of space and performativity will allow for some order and direction in the vast production of research in cultural studies, as well as putting an alternative, dynamic method into use. The contributions are reflective close readings of art works *and* theories, integrated in the focus upon the interplay of space formations, textual action and generic/medial convergence, and their conjoined aesthetic strategies for cultural effects.

Even though we know that aesthetic works have this ability to shape reality, explaining *exactly* how, why and when this comes to pass is far from easy. If taken seriously, this fundamental insight leads to further questions, as pressing as they are tricky. Just to name a few: is this active, shaping force of aesthetic works something that can be properly understood? Is it totally random, or is there some deeper order to it that can be grasped? If the latter is the case, will this for example allow us to foresee the effects a work will have – if not with

complete accuracy, then at least with some predictability? Should achieving such effects then be considered an aim of those creating art, or would this be tantamount to sacrificing everything that makes aesthetic works valuable on the altar of propaganda, no matter how well-meaning the intentions? Related to this is the question of whether the ability to cause effects is linked to the quality of aesthetic works, or if there is no special relation between the two, so that a mediocre but popular novel can just as easily cause effects as a great one? And what is, in fact, meant by the word effects, a term which can of course indicate a plethora of different reactions ranging from the miniscule (such as yawning and putting away a boring book) to the gigantic (such as being inspired to start a revolution)? Is the term precise enough, or are other and better notions available?

Elaborations

As anyone who has ever grappled with questions such as these must soon have realised, they do not only proliferate endlessly – their slipperiness will also easily lead one astray if one does not come armed with theoretical tools sufficient for the task at hand. This, then, has been the aim of the first part of the anthology, entitled “Elaborations”: as if we had to dig out an old city or erect a new building, here we have attempted to assemble essays that give an overview of some of the tools that might be of use in such a venture, trying them out, attempting to see how far they can get us, delimiting their strengths and weaknesses, as well as trying to clear up common misunderstandings that might have surfaced over time.

Even though there are certainly other possibilities, our starting point has been a nexus of related notions that have proven very productive for intellectual thought: *performatives*, *performativity* and *performance*. As attested to by

Mieke Bal and Jonathan Culler, among others,⁷ these have long and complex histories, their trajectories – sometimes intertwined, sometimes differing – the result of the many critical debates that have followed in the wake of J.L. Austin’s founding of speech-act theory.

Chief among these debates about Austin’s legacy, perhaps, is the one between John Searle and Jacques Derrida in the 1970’s, representing the clash between analytical and continental philosophy at its most heated.⁸ Since then, J. Hillis Miller has played an important role in the further development of a deconstructive approach to the insights of speech-act theory. Miller opens this anthology with the article “Performativity₁/Performativity₂”. Here, he offers clarifications of, on the one hand, how the concept of “performativity” has come to refer to widely different things, and, on the other, the differences between Austin, Derrida and Judith Butler, whose influential work since the end of the 1980’s has pushed this trajectory in yet other directions. Miller also offers a detailed reading of George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda* in keeping with the theoretical distinctions he makes.

Important as Butler’s work on how questions of social justice and equality can be approached through insights from speech-act theory and performativity studies has been and continues to be,⁹ it is not always evident what bearings her writings have upon the question of aesthetics. Much clearer in this regard is theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, who has shown how a Butler-inspired approach can be fruitfully com-

7 Cf. Culler (2000) and Bal (2002).

8 See Searle (1977) and Derrida (1988). For an alternative approach, critical of both Derrida and Searle, see Cavell (1994).

9 Exemplary in this regard is her *Excitable Speech* (1997), for example in analysing the performative aspects of *hate speech* and regulations in the US army, where defining oneself as homosexual was deemed an *act* for which the utterer could be dismissed.

bined with more thorough attention to the aesthetic qualities of the work at hand. Further elaborating some of her main arguments from *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004), in this anthology's "Culture as Performance – Developing a Concept of Performance", she calls for the development of a new aesthetics adequate to the challenges posed by the "eventness" and "liminality" of performances.

Some of the possibilities and difficulties facing such a new aesthetics are taken up in Mads Thygesen's "Interaction and Framing in the Performance *Insideout* by Sasha Waltz". In active dialogue with Fischer-Lichte's views, he shows how certain theatrical performances can be said to resist integration into a theoretical framework that stresses their role as purely "self-creating systems". At the same time, he also approaches some of the questions raised by Miller about the intellectual lineage from Austin to Derrida to Butler, but from the perspective of dramaturgy and theatre studies.

The article by Randi Koppen – "Re-thinking the 'Performative Turn': Fashioned Bodies, Sartorial Semiotics and the Performance of Culture, 1900-1930" – also takes up the thread from Fischer-Lichte, more specifically from her book *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual – Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (2005). Through interrogating clothes as a way of performing an identity, Koppen here shows how the sartorial played a key role in the shift from a "textual" to a more "performative" culture.

The distinction between *performativity* and *performance*, crucial to Fischer-Lichte, is further interrogated in Svend Erik Larsen's "'Speak again. Speak like rain' – The Mediality of Performance". Offering a much-needed clarification of the relationship between these notions, Larsen then goes on to show how the latter concept – originating in theatre studies and usually used in the context of actors "putting on a show" for an audience present in the flesh – can also be brought to

bear upon texts not intended for the stage – including prose – without merely extending the meaning of the term by way of analogy, but through a genuine reflection on literature’s particular textual actions.

Focusing on the performative aspects of another medium lacking the possibility of communication based on the bodily co-presence of actors and audience that is so fundamental to theatre, Patrizia Lombardo, in her “Bazin, Bresson and Scorsese: Performative Power and the Impure Art of Cinema”, shows how the question of film having an *impact* on the viewers was central to critics and directors connected to and influenced by *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*. In so doing, Lombardo shows that the thinking of theorists such as André Bazin and Robert Bresson in many ways bears a resemblance to and can be fruitfully read in dialogue with different approaches to performativity, thus making both traditions emerge in a new and different light. These points are accompanied by analyses of films by Bresson and Martin Scorsese.

Finally, included in this section is also Lars Sætre’s “Powering Textual Action: Duras’ Space in *Véra Baxter ou Les Plages de l’Atlantique*”. Drawing on the works of J. Hillis Miller and Jacques Rancière, the question of the generating power of textual action is here approached from the vantage point of the figuration of space in aesthetic works, precisely because spatial representations or evocations might trigger transformations in perception of both the external and internal worlds. Sætre also analyses the functions of converging phenomena in Marguerite Duras’ work.

Explorations

Based on the groundwork thus laid out, the different articles that together make up the second part of the anthology, “Explorations”, then set to work, seeing where these ideas might

take us. These essays are not meant as simple applications of theoretical tools. Instead, they aim at a dynamic use of those instruments, one that is always closely attuned to the work under scrutiny, be it prose, poetry, art, theatre or cinema.

Starting out with the essay by Atle Kittang, “Topography and Textual Action in the Urban Prose of Balzac and Breton”, this section is directly oriented towards textual analysis of what has been prepared by the first part, also developing further the conceptual framework. Thus, Kittang deepens the understanding of textual action in a close dialogue with texts of Balzac and of Breton. He shows how a nuanced use of this term allows us to avoid Austin’s (still troubling) refusal to accept that aesthetic works should be considered a legitimate area of interest for speech-act theory, or, for that matter, his relegation of such works to the realm of the “parasitic”.

Taking up the lead offered by Sætre, several of these essays are concerned with the relationship between textual action/performativity and the question of aesthetic works and space; for example the city of Paris in Balzac and Breton, as interpreted by Kittang, able to produce – expected and unexpected – encounters that are extremely powerful; or landscape in film, as analysed by Asbjørn Grønstad in his “Dead Time, Empty Spaces: Landscape as Sensibility and Performance”. Pursuing the general *invisibility* of landscape – *i.e.* the way it is perceived as little more than a backdrop for the action, and very rarely as something to be approached on its own terms – Grønstad considers how it takes on a performative dimension in the recent work of directors such as Bruno Dumont, Theo Angelopoulos and Carlos Reygadas, capturing the viewers’ attention at the expense of the story being told.

Another take on the textual action/space nexus is to be found in Anders Kristian Strand’s “Textual Action in W.C. Williams’ *Paterson*”, elaborating how the performative force of Williams’ poem rises out of the way the river – more specifi-

cally the Passaic River – functions as a dynamic device, both structurally and thematically. In her “Virginia Woolf and the Ambiguities of Domestic Space”, Tone Selboe, on the other hand, focuses on the importance of domesticity for the converging of aesthetics and quotidian life that informs Woolf’s *œuvre*. Selboe sees the textual action of Woolf’s work as an ongoing, creative dialogue with the space of her Victorian past, as well as with that of her contemporaries. The last text that explicitly interrogates the importance of space in coming to terms with the performative effects of aesthetic works is Ragnhild Evang Reinton’s “Producing ‘...images we never saw before we remembered them’. Memory as Textual Action in Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*”. By juxtaposing Jacques Rancière’s theories with Benjamin’s thoughts on the production of experience through remembrance, and with his vision of the urban space of his childhood, Reinton asks how such an active recollecting can intervene in the present. She also argues that as a perspective, textual action allows for a more dynamic approach to Benjamin than does reading him as a melancholic mourning the past.

In “The Reader Address as Performativity in Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Usage de la parole*”, Jorunn S. Gjerden sheds new light on Sarraute’s notion of *tropisms*, suggesting that a fundamental “desire to establish contact” characterises both the relationship to the other and the relationship between text and reader in her writing. The performative aspects of enunciation and narrative structure in *L’Usage de la parole* can thus be said to strive to mobilise the reader and awaken our passion by confronting us with alterity. In “Loving the Alien: Bartleby and the Power of Non-Preference” – the last text of the anthology – Anders M. Gullestad returns to the legacy of J.L. Austin, more specifically to his notion of “performative speech acts”, which has tended to become subsumed under and obscured by the more general concept of performativity.

Through a critical engagement with the influence of speech-act theory on Gilles Deleuze and J. Hillis Miller's different approaches to Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener", he argues that, conceived as a speech act, the enigmatic scrivener's generic reply – "I would prefer not to" – can be said to push Austin's theory "to its limits".

Indeed, by testing the limits of some theories, opening up the hidden structure of sentences in various texts, linking themes, juxtaposing notions and trying out new interpretations, the *elaborations* and *explorations* of this anthology stress the very hypothesis underlying the notion of textual action: aesthetic works – works of art, literature, music, theatre, cinema etc. – are not stable objects, finished once and for all, whose sole purpose is to be contemplated by us, as "disinterested" perceivers. Rather, they are *active*, shaping forces, capable (at least sometimes) of generating effects that extend far into the quotidian, thereby undermining any clear distinction between art and "real" life.

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Bergen/Geneva, October 2009

Lars Sætre, Patrizia Lombardo, Anders M. Gullestad

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PART I:
ELABORATIONS

Performativity₁/Performativity₂

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The central point of a paper on performativity I gave some years ago at a conference in Oslo was to argue that an equivocation exists in this word and that this double meaning has caused some intellectual confusion.¹ I call the two meanings of “performativity,” performativity sub one and performativity sub two. The confusion has led some scholars in performance studies, especially, perhaps, those in feminist performance studies, to accept an intellectual lineage that goes from J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* (1980, first published

1 A much-extended version of this discussion, one that gives a fuller account of the complexity of Judith Butler’s thought, appears in chapter 7 of my recent *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). I have incorporated several paragraphs from this extended discussion later on in this essay. The discussion of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* in this essay also appears in a somewhat different form in *For Derrida*. Used with permission by Fordham University Press. The original discussion of the two performativities was prepared for a conference at the University of Oslo and was subsequently published, in a form different from this essay, as “Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida’s Special Theory of Performativity” (Miller 2007).

in 1962), to Jacques Derrida's *Limited Inc* (1988; the two main essays in this book were originally published in 1972 and 1977), to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2006, originally published in 1990), to performance studies of various sorts in dance, music, theater, and everyday life. Here is part of what *Wikipedia* says about "performance studies." I cite *Wikipedia* as a good example of informed academic opinion:

An alternative origin narrative [for "performance studies"] stresses the development of speech-act theory by philosophers J.L. Austin and Judith Butler and literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Performance studies has also had a strong relationship to the fields of feminism, psychoanalysis, and queer theory. Theorists like Peggy Phelan, Butler, Sedgwick, José Esteban Muñoz, Rebecca Schneider, and André Lepecki have been equally influential in both performance studies and these related fields. Performance studies incorporates theories of drama, dance, art, anthropology, folkloristics, philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, and more and more, music performance (Anon. "Performance Studies". *Wikipedia*. Accessed January 24, 2009).

Here is part of *Wikipedia's* account of Butler's early and still highly influential book:

The crux of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* is that the coherence of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality – the natural-seeming coherence, for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies – is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, in their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological "core" gender. This is the sense in which Butler famously theorizes gender, along with sex and sexuality, as performative.... The concept of performativity is at the core of Butler's work. It extends beyond the doing of gender and can be understood as a full-fledged theory of subjectivity. Indeed, if her more recent books have shifted focus away from gender, they still treat performativity as theoretically central (Anon. "Judith Butler". *Wikipedia*. Accessed January 24, 2009).

This lineage, I hold, is problematic. I have no quarrel with Butler's idea that gender is constructed by the coerced repetition of socially approved gender roles, though I think one needs to think a little about her extremely influential ideas before accepting them outright. Moreover, her theories of selfhood are subtle and have changed over time, from the early *Gender Trouble* on. Butler's theory is oddly ambivalent. On the one hand, she holds, gender and selfhood generally are not innate. We are born blank slates. That means we could be different from what we have become. That's a cheerful hypothesis, though a little unsettling in its implication that we are not ever really anybody, just a role we have adopted or have been forced to adopt. On the other hand, Butler holds that the force of socially iterated repressive imposed roles is so great that they are extremely difficult to resist. That's a gloomy hypothesis. Perhaps, however, the strength and appeal of the Butlerian theory lies in this doubleness.

The mistake lies in claiming direct support for this in Austin or Derrida, though I think Althusserian "interpellation" can perhaps be legitimately claimed as an antecedent. It is not unlikely that Butler at some point read Louis Althusser's influential "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." That essay argues that we are called or "interpellated" to be this or that self by various institutional forces: family, church, school, the police, and so on. Althusser's famous example is "the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" (Althusser 1972: 174). Unless we want something bad to happen to us, we respond to such interpellation with some version of Abraham's response to Jehovah's hailing him in the Abraham and Isaac story in the Old Testament: "Here am I" (Genesis 22: 11). As Althusser says: "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (Althusser 1972: 173). Butler does pay explicit homage in *Gender Trouble* to

Michel Foucault's somewhat similar ideas as an important influence on her thinking.

Austin, however, did not mean anything much like Butler's "performativity" by what he called "performatives". An Austinian performative (performativity sub one) is a mode of speech act that is a way of using words to make something happen, as in the minister's "I now pronounce you man and wife". This formula, uttered by the right person in the right circumstances, brings it about that the couple are married. The sentence exists in various forms in different denominations and times. Austin's "felicitous" performatives presuppose a pre-existing fixed and stable selfhood (the self that says "*I pronounce*", or "*I promise*") as well as fixed rules and conventions, firmly in place, that determine which performatives are going to work to do something with words. Austin is for law and order. He wants to make sure that when the judge says, "I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead", the sentence is really carried out and seems a just verdict, reached by proper legal procedures. Austin explicitly disqualifies performance in the sense of playing a role. In order for a performative utterance to be felicitous, he says firmly, I must not be acting on the stage or writing a poem or speaking in soliloquy (Austin 1980: 22). Becoming another gender by appearing in drag and "performing" another gender is foreign to Austin's thought.

By "iterability", moreover, Derrida, in his critique of Austin, means that performative enunciations such as "I christen thee" or "I pronounce you man and wife" or "I sentence you ..." have as a feature of their "felicity" that they may be used over and over and in many different social contexts, including odd and anomalous ones. Derrida wants to break down Austin's distinction between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts, as well as Austin's claim that the context can be "saturated". Austin himself in various ways eventually

puts his initially firm distinctions and definitions in question. Derrida's "iterability" is foreign to Butler's notion that social repressive iteration makes me think, mistakenly, that I have a pre-existing stable and fixed gender. "Iterability" is used in two different ways in the two cases. The mistake sometimes (I don't say always) made by those in "performance studies" is to confuse two quite different things: performance as in "She performed Ophelia" or "He performed a Mozart sonata" (performativity sub two); and a performative speech act, as in "I pronounce you man and wife" (performativity sub one).

To sum up, at this point in my essay, I could state matters this way, relating to the key concepts of *repetition* and/or *iterability* – concepts that figure in one form or another in Austin, Butler and Derrida:

Austin's performatives need to be repeatable. They require the idea of a stable selfhood or identity, as well as fixed rules or conventions within contexts that he believes can be "saturated", securing the "uptake" of (felicitous) performatives. Austin's repetitions, were they at all theoretically and practically feasible, would, despite their alleged changing, doing or making something by words, be *repetitions of sameness and identity* as far as selfhood, contexts, and normative rules are concerned.

Butler's ideas of selfhood, gender and identity cut two ways: they are held to be fictions resulting on the one hand from the force of socially iterated, repressive and imposed roles that, on the other hand, might be counteracted in alternative roles as the (potentially liberating) construction over time of gender and selfhood through the repetition of stylized bodily acts, linguistic, societal and other behavioural patterns in any context. Such constructed selfhoods would also relate to the *iteration of sameness and "identity"*, but now as constructed, fictitious entities based on coerced or liberating role-play, on acts.

Derrida's performatives can be repeated in any contexts, including what Austin thinks of as "anomalous" contexts. They undo the idea of felicity or infelicity as well as the idea of saturation of contexts. They include any performative utterance, also Austinian anomalies, etiolations and parasitical ones. Importantly, they also disqualify the requirement of the self-conscious ego and any presence of intentions. In Derrida, the performative is seen as a response made to a demand made on me by the "wholly other" [*le tout autre*], a response that, far from depending on pre-existing rules or laws, on a pre-existing ego, I, or self, or on pre-existing circumstances or "context," *creates* the self, the context, and new rules or laws. Derridean performatives are essentially linked to his special concept of time as "out of joint," as *différance*. A Derridean performative creates an absolute rupture between the present and the past. It inaugurates a future that Derrida calls a future anterior, or an unpredictable "à-venir," as in Derrida's iterated phrase in his late work: "*la démocratie à venir*," the democracy to come. My response to the call made on me is essentially a reciprocal performative saying "yes" to a performative demand issued initially by the wholly other. My "yes" is a performative countersigning or validating a performative command that comes from outside me. In this sense the iterability of *Derridean performatives are repetitions in différence*. They inaugurate differences in time, space, matter, culture, and subjectivities.

A full account of Butler's theory of performativity would take many pages. Her ideas have changed over the years and are still evolving. I am, moreover, interested as much in what readers have made of Butler's thinking as in what she actually says. These may differ considerably. I have taken the *Wikipedia* entries on Judith Butler and on performativity and performance studies as good indications of received opinion. *Gender Trouble* has done much good in the world. It has

done good by persuasively putting in question “normative” binary heterosexuality and thereby making a space for gay and lesbian sexuality and gender. Butler’s primary target in *Gender Trouble* is not just habitual notions that sex and gender are innate, natural, unalterable, but, more specifically, the dependence of the feminism current in 1990 on just those ideas of normative heterosexuality that it ought to have contested. Feminism’s acceptance of heterosexuality led it to exclude gays and lesbians from the “real” and the “intelligible”, almost as violently as did (and still does) the hegemony of primarily straight male social and legal power. Butler contests the reigning ideology of sex and gender by tirelessly, patiently, with passion, and with much nuance arguing that sex and gender are not natural, biological, innate, and pre-existent, but that they are the violent product of iterated discursive formations that sequester as unnatural and “unreal” sexual and gender minorities in their considerable variation:

Juridical power inevitably “produces” what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of “a subject before the law” in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law’s own regulatory hegemony (Butler 2006: 3).

Butler begins, in an important paragraph in the preface to the reissue of *Gender Trouble* in 1999, by making overt the way *performativity*, a relatively infrequent word in *Gender Trouble*, has in subsequent years become the central focus of the book’s influence. It is, moreover, Butler says, a topic she has turned to again and again in subsequent work, in a constant process of modification. “Much of my work in recent years,” says Butler,

has been devoted to clarifying and revising the theory of performativity that is outlined in *Gender Trouble*. It is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views on what “performativity” might mean have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticisms, but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations (Butler 2006: xv).

“*Performativity*” was a word whose time had come, like the word “*deconstruction*,” and, like “*deconstruction*,” it has come to mean whatever people “formulate” it to mean or use it to mean to say, including the different meanings over time that a given theorist, such as Butler, ascribes to it. Another example, as I have indicated, is the use of the word “performativity” in the discipline of Performance Studies. Though Butler uses the words “*performance*” and “*theatricality*” in *Gender Trouble*, she nowhere mentions Performance Studies, just as she does not mention Lyotard’s frequent prior use of the word “*performativity*” in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979; 1984). It may be that Butler independently invented the word and a version of its concept, even though others had already used it. Butler’s *Excitable Speech* (1997) makes much more overt use of speech act theory, that is, performativity sub one.

The preface of 1999 to *Gender Trouble* is to a considerable degree an attempt to explain just what Butler means by “*performativity*”. The word appears over and over in that preface. The conflation of performativity sub one and performativity sub two is present in many of Butler’s formulations, as when she says, “As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act’, as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (Butler 2006: 200). The phrase “*as it were*” indicates a wavering that is

explicitly and somewhat uneasily acknowledged in the preface of 1999, under the name “*waffle*”:

Gender Trouble sometimes reads as if gender is simply a self-invention or that the psychic meaning of a gendered presentation might be read directly off its surface. Both of these postulates have had to be refined over time. Moreover, my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical (Butler 2006: xxvi).

Having posed a distinction between what I have been calling performativity sub one and performativity sub two, and confessed to having waffled about that distinction, Butler goes on immediately to take back with one hand what she has offered with the other. She does this by way of a claim that a linguistic speech act and a theatrical performance are always related, “chiasmically,” though what she says hardly supports the claim that one is the crisscross reversal of the other, which is what a chiasmus is:

I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions (Butler 2006: xxvi–xxvii).

The two kinds of performativity are then superimposed once more in the next sentences, and not in the crisscross of a chiasmus:

If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with

specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous. This ambiguity has consequences for the practice of coming out, for the insurrectionary power of the speech act, for language as a condition of both bodily seduction and the threat of injury (Butler 2006: xxvii).

It is true that language always has some form of embodiment, whether as inky marks on the page of my copy of *Gender Trouble* or as the sounds I breathe forth when I speak, accompanying my speech, perhaps, with significant gestures. It is also true that Austin allows that a bodily gesture, such as a judge donning a black hood to condemn a criminal to be hanged, can substitute for a literal speech act such as “I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead.” The materiality of language, however, is an exceedingly peculiar kind of non-material materiality, as Derrida, Paul de Man, and others have in different ways argued.² The relation of spoken language to bodily gestures hardly supports the asser-

2 For a collection of essays primarily on de Man’s concepts of materiality, see *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Cohen *et al.* 2001). This volume contains Judith Butler’s essay on the relation of the body to language, by way of a discussion of Descartes’s *Meditations*, “How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine” (Cohen *et al.* 2001: 254-73), as well as Jacques Derrida’s essay on, among other things, de Man’s “materiality without matter,” “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) (‘within such limits’)” (Cohen *et al.* 2001: 277-360). Both essays would merit extensive discussion, especially when they are set side by side. “The Body” is of course a major topic in recent feminist studies and in cultural studies. A search on 12/21/2008 of the keywords “body, politics” in “melvyl.worldcat.org” turned up “about 5,385” books and articles, with titles like *Body Politics in Paradise Lost* or *The Female Body and the Law*, in inexhaustible permutations. Butler somewhere reports that women in her audiences have often asked, “What about the materiality of the body, Judy?” A book by Butler much subsequent to *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter: On the*

tion that the theatrical and the linguistic are “always related,” even chiasmically. A given speech act can go on functioning performatively in an infinite variety of material embodiments and circumstances, including many that are not in any direct way incarnated in a human body, for example in a signed declaration such as a mortgage agreement. A speech act is not limited, as Austin knew, to spoken language. The signature may have been the result of a bodily act, but once it is inscribed on paper it goes on working in unpredictably different contexts, for example when the mortgage is cut up into “tranches” by a computer program and then eventually those pieces, or some of them, are part of a credit default swap that helps bring about global financial meltdown when I default on the mortgage.

Daniel Deronda as *fictional example*

I shall exemplify the difference between performativity sub one and performativity sub two by way of two passages in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, first published in 1876: in one passage, Daniel promises to carry on Mordecai’s work after the latter’s death: “Everything I can in conscience do to make your life effective I will do” (Eliot 1986: 600). This echoes an earlier promise Daniel makes to Mordecai: “I will be faithful” (Eliot 1986: 564). Both these statements are in all strictness forms of the speech act Austin calls a “performative,” performativity sub one, except that they appear in a work of fiction. No real Daniel Deronda ever existed to say, “I promise.” Deronda’s fictional utterances are hypothetical examples of how to do things with words. What do they

Discursive Limits of “Sex” (1993), focuses, as its introduction begins by saying, on the problematic of the body’s materiality in its relation to the performativity of gender.

do? They put the imaginary Daniel in a new position, the position of someone who in the future will either keep his promise or fail to keep it. All promises do that. Daniel keeps his promises. Gwendolen, the other protagonist of *Daniel Deronda*, makes a promise to Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's old mistress, that she fails to keep. She promises not to marry Grandcourt: "I will not interfere with your wishes" (Eliot 1986: 189). All these are clear fictive examples, I claim, of performativity sub one.

In the other passage, Gwendolen performs an aria by Bellini before the sharp critic and true musician Klesmer. This is an example of performativity sub two. Klesmer then passes a rigorous and, for Gwendolen, dismaying judgment:

Yes, it is true; you have not been well taught Still, you are not quite without gifts. You sing in tune, and you have a pretty fair organ. But you produce your notes badly; and that music which you sing is beneath you. It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture – a dangling, canting, see-saw kind of stuff – the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon (Eliot 1986: 79).

Gwendolen's singing is an example of performativity sub two. It does not fit Austin's characterizations of a performative speech act, which will generally be an utterance in the first-person present tense like "I promise", or "I bet", or "I warn". Gwendolen's singing is a performance, not a performative. It may reveal her character, her weakness as a singer, as well as the shallowness of Bellini, in Klesmer's view, but it does not fit any of Austin's examples of ways to do things with words.

An earlier brief discussion of *Daniel Deronda* in the Oslo paper referred to above had a simple goal: to give clear examples of performativity sub one and performativity sub two in order to exemplify as forcefully as I could the difference

between them. I made the mistake, however, of incautiously observing that

if I had more time I would analyze in detail two moments in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* that demonstrate both the fundamental usefulness of performativity theory for understanding what happens in literary works and, at the same time, the essential function of literary study as a way of understanding what is at stake in performativity studies.

Lars Sætre has called my bluff by asking me to do just that. It was incautious of me because doing what I promised could be done would require a lengthy reading of the whole novel, an impossibility in a short paper. Every phrase and sentence in this long novel counts, every scrap of imagined conversation. I can, however, sketch out what such a reading might be like. Those interested may wish to read Cynthia Chase's admirable essay, "The Decomposition of the Elephants" (1986), to see how much can be done with little in readings of *Daniel Deronda*.

I argued in the Oslo paper that Daniel Deronda's promise to Mordecai to carry on his work after his death exemplifies not so much an Austinian performative as a Derridean one. What is the difference? Austinian performatives depend on a pre-existing self and on pre-existing rules and conventions. The performative speech act must be uttered by the right person in the right circumstances. Derridean performatives, on the contrary, create the self that utters them, as well as the context that makes them felicitous. They are, moreover, a response to a call made by something or someone "wholly other". I am no longer sure I was right in what I said in the Oslo paper. Deronda's two promises to Mordecai fit Austin's description of a felicitous performative in that both take the form of a first-person pronoun plus a present tense active verb, or at least an implicit one: "[I promise] I will be faith-

ful”, and “[I promise] that everything I can in conscience do to make your life effective I will do”.

Daniel’s promises, moreover, are based on a pre-existing “I” or “ego”. He is presented throughout the novel as an earnest, self-conscious man of thoughtful rectitude who is determined to do his duty when he can see it clearly. The whole fabric of English morality is firmly in place as a context for his promise-making. He is free to commit himself to a vocation. His problem is that no overwhelming, life-determining duty has as yet presented itself. He is in the whole early part of the novel without a vocation. Now an irresistible duty does present itself. Mordecai’s appeal to him is based on a notion, borrowed from the Kabbalah, of metempsychosis. They are one soul in two persons. After Mordecai’s death his soul will pass into Daniel and Daniel will continue his work of furthering the Jewish cause by helping to establish a new Jewish nation. Mordecai is convinced, correctly as it turns out, that Daniel must really be Jewish. Daniel’s promises are made, though he does not yet know it, on the solid basis of his actual Jewish identity. It is not the case, as in Derridean performatives, that he becomes a new self when he utters a performative speech act in response to an appeal made to him by someone or something “wholly other”, or that he is a Butlerian blank slate that becomes a social self through the iteration of some form of role-playing.

The performativity theories of both Derrida and Butler, different as they are, would have seemed appalling to George Eliot. She was a firm believer in fixed innate selfhood, or she saw those who lacked such a thing as being in a parlous state. The drama of the Daniel Deronda part of the novel is that Daniel discovers who he already is, that is, that he is a Jew. Once he discovers that he has no choice but to be faithful to his discovery, and he joyfully does that. He keeps his promises to Mordecai. To many modern readers, me included,

this seems almost too easy. It is a strange wish-fulfillment version of the Freudian “family romance” in which the child’s fantasies that his parents are not really his parents, that he is a prince in disguise, do actually come true. How nice it would be, a modern reader thinks (that is, someone who feels himself or herself, in Montaigne’s phrase, as *ondoyant et divers*, wavering and diverse), if some unquestionable power would tell me who I already inalterably am. In George Eliot’s defense, it must be said that the somewhat absurd fable of the Daniel Deronda part of the novel was a response to a full sense of what would be so disastrous about the alternative Derridean or Butlerian theories of the self. Her novels belong in the middle of a spectrum, in English literature at least, that goes from the assumption that selfhood is innate and fixed to the assumption that it is variable and socially constructed. This is not exactly a historical sequence, since all English novelists, even those of the same historical period, have different assumptions about selfhood. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* challenges any assumption that, for example, something like Virginia Woolf’s ideas about selfhood in *The Waves* were unique to the modernist period.

The other half of *Daniel Deronda*, the catastrophic story of Gwendolen Harleth, can be read as a proleptic presentation and critique of Butler’s theory of performativity, as it is somewhat oversimplified in such derivative accounts as the previously mentioned entry in *Wikipedia*. The portrait of Gwendolen is one of the greatest and most complex character presentations in Victorian fiction, comparable, let’s say, to Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina in subtlety. It is not all that easy to say something worthy of Gwendolen’s complexity in a few paragraphs. A shorthand approach can be made by way of a recognition that she is only one of many characters in *Daniel Deronda* who are presented by way of their performances or their performativity sub two. An essential theme of *Daniel*

Deronda is singing and acting in public, literal performance, and what doing that means for selfhood. The novel offers itself to modern-day performance studies as a wonderful reservoir of Victorian theories of performativity sub two. Klesmer, modeled on Liszt, whose work George Eliot much admired, is a great composer and pianist. Deronda's Jewish mother, he finally discovers, was a famous singer and actress, whose stage name was "Alcharisi". Mirah, the good Jewish girl, foil to Gwendolen, whom Deronda saves from drowning herself in despair and ultimately marries, has been forced by her father to become a singer and actress. Gwendolen is more than once measured by her abilities as a singer and actress.

Eliot's theory of performativity sub two is complex and perhaps even contradictory. On the one hand, Klesmer's compositions and performances are praised because they come directly from his powerful and commanding personality. In them he expresses a pre-existing self:

Herr Klesmer played a composition of his own, a fantasia called *Freudvoll, Leidvoll, Gedankenvoll* [Joyful, Sorrowful, Thoughtful] – an extensive commentary on some melodic ideas not too grossly evident; and he certainly fetched as much variety and depth of passion out of the piano as that moderately responsive instrument lends itself to, having an imperious magic in his fingers that seemed to send a nerve-thrill through ivory key and wooden hammer, and compel the strings to make a quivering lingering speech for him (Eliot 1986: 79-80).

On the other hand, Klesmer's performances are the result of the long and arduous acquisition of a skill that is like a craft. That craft you must study and be taught by masters, as a patient apprentice. You do not just sit down at the piano, and then express yourself. You must first study long and hard, as well as submit yourself to the limitations of your instrument, in this case the "moderately responsive" piano. Since Kles-

mer has done both of these things, he can compel the strings to make a quivering lingering speech for him, as though he himself were speaking through the sounds he makes.

Deronda's mother is probably modeled on such famous actresses or singers as the Jewess Rachel (mentioned in the novel) and the Italian Grisi (also mentioned). She was a "born singer and actress" (Eliot 1986: 696), which suggests that these talents are innate, part of her selfhood as a gifted person. She was, however, also arduously trained. She became a famous actress and singer, until she began to lose her voice and sing out of tune. She then married a Russian nobleman: "I made believe that I preferred being the wife of a Russian noble to being the greatest lyric actress of Europe; I made believe – I acted that part" (Eliot 1986: 703). The novel leaves no doubt about Alcharisi's great gifts and great success. These did not, however, make her a good or happy person. She deliberately betrayed her Jewish heritage and her father's piety to become a singer/actress, and she gave her son, Daniel, away to be brought up as an Englishman by one of the many men who loved her, Sir Hugo Mallinger. She thereby has cruelly prevented him for many years from learning that he is a Jew, that is, from learning who he really is.

Eliot is discreet about whether Alcharisi became the mistress of Sir Hugo or of any of her other suitors. Perhaps yes; perhaps no. Her repudiation of her Jewish heritage can be read in a way ironically like *Wikipedia's* somewhat reductive version of Butler's early position, since Eliot disapproved of what Butler is said to enjoin. Moreover, in a further irony, in her current work Butler embraces her own Jewish heritage, for example in the section on Lévinas in a quite recent book, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005: 84-101). She is more like Daniel Deronda than like his mother. Alcharisi deliberately repudiates the self her father and her Jewish community wanted her to be, that is, a good, subordinate, obedient

Jewish daughter and wife. She chooses rather the freedom of becoming a great singer and actress. Alcharisi embodies the possible disconnect between acting and singing, on the one hand, and personal integrity such as might lead one to make promises and keep them, on the other. Her marriage to Prince Halm-Eberstein was a piece of insubstantial playacting not based on a solid selfhood. In a wonderful passage in the scene in which the Princess tells her son Daniel the story of her life and justifies her abandonment of him to Sir Hugo, Eliot describes her highly theatrical performance, a mixture of defiant self-defense and confession, by way of an oxymoron, as “sincere acting”:

The varied transitions of tone with which this speech was delivered were as perfect as the most accomplished actress could have made them. The speech was in fact a piece of what may be called sincere acting: this woman’s nature was one in which all feeling – and all the more when it was tragic as well as real – immediately became matter of conscious representation: experience immediately passed into drama, and she acted her own emotions. In a minor degree this is nothing uncommon, but in the Princess the acting had a rare perfection of physiognomy, voice, and gesture. It would not be true to say that she felt less because of this double consciousness: she felt – that is, her mind went through – all the more, but with a difference: each nucleus of pain or pleasure had a deep atmosphere of the excitement of spiritual intoxication which at once exalts and deadens (Eliot 1986: 691-2).

The Princess’ performance for Daniel is presented as a battle between her real self and the false self she has trained herself to become. “It was as if”, says Eliot, “her mind were breaking into several, one jarring the other into impulsive action” (Eliot 1986: 700). She has decided to tell Daniel of his Jewishness in a victory of her real Jewish self, what Eliot calls “the poor, solitary, forsaken remains of self, that can resist nothing” (Eliot 1986: 699), and of her father’s desires for

her, over her false, artificial acting self. Eliot is here again faithful to her presupposition that each of us has an innate, ultimately inalienable, self.

Mirah is another cup of tea. Her bad father has forcefully separated her from her mother and from her mother's Jewish piety. Her father has forced her to become an actress and singer. She tells the assembled Meyrick family, which has given her sanctuary, that she has always hated acting. Her father's mistress and her teacher, "an Italian lady, a singer" (Eliot 1986: 252), predicts her failure: "She will never be an artist; she has no notion of being anybody but herself" (Eliot 1986: 253). This conforms to the anti-theatrical tradition that says that being a good actor or actress is a priori incompatible with the integrity of a fixed selfhood that can commit itself in loving attachment to another person. Henry James' *The Tragic Muse* (1889/1890) is an admirably subtle exploration of this theme. Mirah confirms her happy limitation (from George Eliot's perspective) when she says, "I knew that my acting was not good except when it was not really acting, but the part was one that I could be myself in, and some feeling within me carried me along" (Eliot 1986: 258). This propensity, somewhat paradoxically, makes her a gifted singer of songs that she can use as a means of self-expression. When she sings for Herr Klesmer, to get his judgment on her chances of making a living in London as a singer, he shakes her hand afterward and says, "You are a musician" (Eliot 1986: 541), though he says she should perform only in private drawing-rooms, since her voice is not strong enough for the concert hall. Singing, for Eliot, seems to differ from acting in that good singing is not incompatible with having a solid, fixed self.

Gwendolen's performativity

That leaves Gwendolen, the most complex case in the novel of the relation between performativity and selfhood. Her performances should be judged in the context of the presentations of Klesmer, Alcharisi, and Mirah. Gwendolen is a good demonstration of Judith Butler's claim that society coerces people, particularly women, to be something artificial and limited. Social selfhood, for Butler, is artificial in the sense that it is not innate. It is limited in the sense that a limitless potential is narrowed to fit a preconceived mold. Society imposes on women the ideological presuppositions of gender difference, as if they were natural and innate. Society shapes us. It is, Butler argues, our responsibility to try to shape society so that the process by which we acquire subjecthood will become as beneficial as possible. Deronda's Zionism is an example of a noble attempt to shape society for the good of a whole group: the Jewish people.

Gwendolen has been coerced, interpellated, to be what she is. Gwendolen's ideas and her feeble ability to play and sing are those of the ordinary genteel middle class young marriageable woman of the Victorian period. She thinks she is a gifted singer, but Klesmer passes remorseless judgment. She has a "pretty fair organ", as he tells her, but she has "not been well taught", and her choice of Bellini is a disaster, since his music "expresses a puerile state of culture", "no cries of deep, mysterious passion – no conflict – no sense of the universal" (Eliot 1986: 79), such as Mirah's singing exemplifies.

Gwendolen's singing, as opposed to Mirah's, expresses her lack of authentic selfhood rather than her possession of it. When, faced with the, to her, horrible prospect of becoming a governess, she arranges an interview with Klesmer to get him to assure her that she can have a great career as an actress singer. She says to him,

I know that my method of singing is very defective; but I have been ill taught. I could be better taught; I could study. And you will understand my wish; – to sing and act too, like Grisi, is a much higher position. Naturally, I should wish to take as high a rank as I can (Eliot 1986: 296).

Klesmer tells her, as gently but as firmly as he can, and at length, that she has no hope of becoming a second Grisi. She is starting far too late, and even with years of arduous training she “will hardly achieve more than mediocrity” (Eliot 1986: 303).

Does this mean that Gwendolen has no fixed self? Not quite. Her presentation is a wonderfully perceptive portrait of what Freud was to call a hysteric, though without Freud’s etiology of hysterical symptoms. She is subject to what today we would call “panic attacks”. Gwendolen’s self is a strange combination of “an inborn energy of egoistic desire” (Eliot 1986: 71), a foolish desire for mastery over others, such as she quite mistakenly thinks she will exercise over her cruel husband Grandcourt, and a deep underlying hysterical fear of open spaces, of reality, and of death. After the panic attack I describe below, Eliot comments that

She was ashamed and frightened, as at what might happen again, in remembering her tremor on suddenly feeling herself alone, when, for example, she was walking without companionship and there came some rapid change in the light. Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself (Eliot 1986: 94-5).

In the remarkable event involving performativity sub two that Eliot is here commenting on, Gwendolen thinks to dazzle her family and the other guests at Offendene by performing the scene in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* in which Hermione is

wakened by music from her statue-like fixity: “Music, awake her, strike!” It is a fine irony that Shakespeare’s scene ascribes to music the power to awake someone from a sleep that is like death, for example the trance-like sleep of Gwendolen’s everyday alienation from herself. It is a further irony that Klesmer should play the music that awakens this pseudo-Hermione. When Klesmer strikes a thunderous chord on the piano, a wall panel flies open and Gwendolen is faced with a hitherto hidden picture. The picture shows a dead face and a fleeing figure. In the Hermione scene Gwendolen’s sudden sight of the dead face and the fleeing figure brings on a hysterical fit of extreme terror. She stops her life-long playacting for a few instants. She becomes for a few moments what she really is. She is a person dominated by a hidden fear, fear not of anything in particular, but of human existence itself, of its open ungovernable spaces that are forever beyond her control. For a moment she is not performing at all. She is herself, even though that takes the form of looking like a statute embodying Fear:

Everyone was startled, but all eyes in the act of turning towards the opened panel were recalled by a piercing cry from Gwendolen, who stood without change of attitude, but with a change of expression that was terrifying in its terror. She looked like a statue in which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes, usually narrowed under their long lashes, were dilated and fixed. ... Gwendolen fell on her knees and put her hands before her face. She was still trembling, but mute ... (Eliot 1986: 91-2).

Daniel’s anomalous speech acts

The powerful episode of Gwendolen’s playing Hermione is proleptic of a scene much later in the novel dramatizing her guilty inability to help the drowning Grandcourt when he

falls overboard from their yacht in the Mediterranean. “I saw my wish outside me”, she tells Daniel when she confesses to him her complicity in Grandcourt’s death (Eliot 1986: 761). Her confession comes late in the novel. It involves two more somewhat anomalous speech acts uttered by Daniel. These are authentic cases of performativity sub one, but strange ones. A confession is a performative use of language in the sense that the one who confesses not only speaks the truth, constatively, but also does so in a way that may have consequences. A confession may be a way of doing something with words. It may, for example, bring about a trial and conviction if what is confessed is a criminal act. Since Daniel does not make Gwendolen’s confession public, just as a priest keeps the secrets of the confession box, her confession leads only to his response. That response is an odd kind of promise quite unlike the ones Daniel makes to Mordecai. The scene of Gwendolen’s confession is quite painful, even embarrassing, to read, not only because it marks the breakdown of her self-possession, but also because it makes clear that she sees in Daniel not only a moral savior, but also a possible husband. For the first time she is capable of a genuine love for someone other than herself. Daniel’s destiny, however, is to marry Mirah, even though some readers may expect or hope that the two halves of the novel will come together in a triumphant union of Gwendolen and Daniel. Eliot raises that hope only to dash it in a way that strikes me as a somewhat cruel punishment of Gwendolen, however much she may deserve it.

Daniel listens with immense sympathy and sorrow to Gwendolen’s confession, and consoles her as best he can by saying that Grandcourt would almost certainly have drowned even if she had made extravagant efforts to save him. At one point Daniel’s response to her detailed confession and pitiable hope that he will not forsake her is just to hold her hand. This is an unspoken promise that is defined,

in a striking formulation, as being like putting your name to a blank sheet of paper, signing a blank check, as we might say today:

He took one of her hands and clasped it as if they were going to walk together like two children: it was the only way in which he could answer, "I will not forsake you". And all the while he felt as if he were putting his name to a blank paper which might be filled up terribly (Eliot 1986: 755).

Here a gesture, the handholding, substitutes for a literal speech act, in a way that Austin's theories allow. Daniel fears, however, that the blank sheet of paper with his signature on it, another performative, will be filled up by Gwendolen's expectation that he will marry her. Later in the scene, after she has described her "wickedness" in allowing Grandcourt to drown, she beseeches him once more, "You will not forsake me?" and he answers, "It could never be my impulse to forsake you", but "with the painful consciousness that to her ear his words might carry a promise which one day would seem unfulfilled: he was making an indefinite promise to an indefinite hope" (Eliot 1986: 765).

Is this what Austin calls a "felicitous" promise or not? Yes and no. Daniel certainly means it when he says it will never be his impulse to forsake Gwendolen, but she takes his words in a different way from his intention, which is simply to be kind to Gwendolen in her extreme distress. Daniel has a foreboding that he may be misunderstood. He has spoken his promise

with that voice which, like his eyes, had the unintentional effect of making his ready sympathy seem more personal and special than it really was. And in that moment he was not himself quite free from a foreboding of some such self-committing effect (Eliot 1986: 765).

Daniel has not meant to commit himself, but his words, his voice, and his eyes commit themselves for him. This is a splendid example of the way a speech act may have unintended consequences. It may make something happen all right. It may be a way of doing something with words. It may, however, do something quite different from what the speaker means to do.

This doctrine of the unintended results of a speech act anticipates Paul de Man's notion of speech acts in "Promises (*Social Contract*)", in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), and elsewhere in his late work.³ I remember hearing de Man encapsulate this in a seminar by saying, "You aim at a bear, and an innocent bird falls out of the sky". The words you utter enter the interpersonal, social, and political world, where they have such consequences as they do have when they are taken in a certain way. Sometimes your well-meant words may have violent or cruel effects, as when Daniel unintentionally misleads Gwendolen into thinking he might love her. His words operate on their own, independent of his intention or will, as he half suspects. Any performative I utter is like signing my name to a blank check or on a blank sheet of paper, leaving someone else to insert the amount I owe or the obligation I have incurred.

Can Daniel be held responsible for a breach of promise? That is a difficult question. He has, after all, uttered those words and must take responsibility for having uttered them. He has held Gwendolen's hand and promised never to forsake her. Dickens in *Pickwick Papers* dramatizes this question in a comic but nevertheless profound way. Pickwick's innocent note to his landlady, Mrs Bardell, ordering supper, "Dear Mrs B.—Chops and tomata sauce. Yours, PICKWICK" (Dickens 1972: 562), seems to her and to her lawyers, ab-

³ For a full discussion of Paul de Man's theory of speech acts, see chapter 3 of my *Speech Acts in Literature* (Miller 2001).

surdly enough, a proposal of marriage. This leads to a suit for breach of promise, the trial of Bardell against Pickwick that lands Pickwick in prison. Any form of words may have an unforeseen and unintended performative effect, such as getting you in prison. It might be better to keep silent.

Derrida's theory of performatives is more radical and disturbing. He affirms that even silence does not protect you from radical breaches of promises you have never explicitly made. Derrida holds in *The Gift of Death* (1999; 2008) that I have made an implicit promise to care for every person and animal in the world, every "other" whatsoever, even if I have never uttered a word that can be taken as an overt promise to do that. This limitless obligation leads to the aporia of responsibility. I have no hope of fulfilling all my responsibilities to all those others, each and every one of them. I take care of my one cat, but I ought to be feeding and housing all the cats in the world, all those cats that are dying of starvation and exposure every day.

A thoughtful reading of the episode of Gwendolen's confession in *Daniel Deronda* is a good example of the way literature is an exemplary place to investigate the complexities of performativity sub one in its difference from performativity sub two. All the other characters in the novel offer other examples, in a spectrum of possibilities. This exemplarity can be investigated, of course, only if by a willing suspension of disbelief the reader or critic thinks, for the moment, of these fictive, language-created personages as if they were real people.

I claim to have exemplified the distinction between the two kinds of performativity. I claim also to have demonstrated that both speech act theory and performance studies, fundamentally different as they are, allow the critic to ask questions of literary works that may lead to productive readings of them. The critic, however, must guard against presuppositions, such

as my predilection for Derrida even over Austin, whom I also greatly admire. The critic must be prepared to be surprised by the answers her or his questions elicit.

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“Speak again. Speak like rain” – The Mediality of Performance

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First a claim: all performances are acts, but all acts are not performances. The argument follows in the remaining part of the paper, showing how some acts can be fenced in as performances, and how the corresponding notion of performance offers an approach to literature that emphasizes its textual dynamics. Let us first take a look at an act, and then see on which conditions it becomes a performance. With a hammer in my right hand and a nail in my left I swing the hammer and hit my thumb. *Ouch* and four letter words. Is this a performance or just a clumsy act? It definitely belongs to the last category, but perhaps not to the first. If I decide to define it as a performance, if only a bad performance, would I have added anything substantial to an understanding of my clumsiness and spontaneous use of a particular vocabulary? Probably not.

But if instead the hammer act, with or without a spectacular thumb hitting, happens on stage, it is altogether different. The hammer equilibrist may then have been a carpenter desperately trying to finish the backdrops before the opening

night. In this sense one may have called it a performance, given the fact that he was not just using a hammer like me, but doing his best to implement professional skills which I can definitely not claim to master. He was performing them, one might say, although badly.

So, for an act to be called a performance the minimal requirement is that a certain already existing repeatable scheme of action must be put in place to be realized through the performance. The scheme may be said to define the *performativity* of a certain material medium, that is its capacity to perform in a particular way. In this case it defines the body's carpenter-performativity when properly trained. If we stopped our reflection here it would also make sense to talk about the performance of an engine, as we do when we talk about cars, but hardly about its performativity. Any such performance without human interaction is, however, of no interest for us, not even metaphorically, although it belongs to the standard semantics of English and other similar languages. A *performance* involves media that are always integrated in *human activity*.

Now, during the show, prepared by the carpenter among others, there might be a sequence where an actor is supposed to place a picture on the wall. He will then have to pick up a hammer and a nail, but one night he misses the nail and hits his thumb. He might do so by mistake and will then have to be replaced by another actor the following night. The mishap was not part of the performance, we might say, although it takes place on stage. He may still incorporate a good actor-performativity and only had an accident. For the term performance to have any meaning, we must therefore be able to place its components inside or outside different types of performance. They may be situated, for example, inside or outside the performance of an actor or, with partly different dividing lines, inside or outside that of a carpenter

(or of an engine). Finally, the components may belong to an act outside any performance at all. Then the performative elements are part of the much larger category of acts in which performances only partake as a subcategory. In this case we may just call the unfortunate manipulation with the hammer a mishap, an accident or some other type of human act. In other words, performances depend on certain specific *spatial limitations* in order for them to take place as performances and not just as various acts.

The actor might also hit his thumb without really hurting it as part of the performance. An attractive young girl who happens to be a nurse enters from the wings accidentally carrying her first aid kit with her, takes care of his finger, and later also of him and eventually they marry. As part of the performance, that is. Now we have a performance in the most widespread standard meaning of the term: a *symbolic act* on stage, carried out by a number of people according to some predefined rules, guidelines or principles laid down in a manuscript, a director's staging, theater conventions etc. To consider a performance as a basically symbolic act entails that it is not just a delimited act taking place in time and space; but being a symbolic act it produces *meaning* beyond the performance itself, and this meaning is *directed towards an audience physically co-present with the performance* (Carlson 2004, Larsen, Johansen, Østergaard 1991).

Whatever physical ramifications the space of a performance may have – a theatrical space may be shaped in almost any imaginable way – its essential feature is that it is a communicative space allowing for the performance to unfold as a *communicative act*. Or, to be more precise: the theatrical space is *generated* as a communicative space through the performance. Without the performance, it is just the working space of a carpenter finishing the props or of a cleaning lady sweeping the floor of the dress circle.

Performances as a specific type of *acts* are limited in both space and time and are to be distinguished from both action and performativity. *Action* in general is the mere occurrence of the act irrespective of its location and duration. Action is the term for an unspecified and continuous doing, for instance in the phrase “take action.” In the same way, actual speech is an acoustic action because it is a human activity. Only when we perceive the acoustic continuum as language and chop it up in separate segments is the soundscape turned into delimited meaning-producing units. Now it becomes a verbal act. Whether or not as language it is also a performance, we will see in a little while.

In contrast to action, *performativity* is not an actual process we may or may not be able to delimit in time and space, but a capacity to carry out particular performances. Like Aristotle’s *dynamis* it is the more or less strictly formalized capacity of a certain medium to be realized as a performance, that is as a communicative act – *energeia* Aristotle would say – that constitutes the space in which meaning can be produced and directed toward somebody. And if this somebody, the observer of and in the act, is familiar with the performativity of that particular medium, e.g. a language, or this mix of particular media, e.g. a theatrical event, the communication will work.

Therefore, we can only interpret a certain type of action as an act, seen as a human action delimited in time and space, if we understand it as a realization of a certain generative program: the carpenter’s bodily skills put to work, or grammatical competence turned into an utterance. Furthermore, we will only be able to understand it as a performance if we know that there is a symbolic coding behind it that makes it a meaning-producing act, although we may not be able to catch the meaning: we watch a performance in a theatrical tradition we do not understand; we only register it as some

kind of theater. We do not misunderstand it either; we simply do not understand it. Finally, we can only understand or misunderstand the meaning produced for us in a performance if we are familiar with the performativity of the medium or the media involved in the performance, even if we cannot spell out in detail the particulars of this performativity, e.g. a performance of a classical European symphony which is also understandable for those who cannot specify all the structural details of how this assemblage of sounding violins, woodwinds and brass becomes a symphony.

The mediality of performance

So far we have presupposed that the performance generates a communicative space and that it unfolds as a communicative act with the co-presence of an audience. But hammer, nail, thumb and swear words may also be part of a movie, a computer game or some other medium which is not three-dimensional in the same way as a theater space is. As audience we are then co-present with a screen and maybe with a keyboard and a mouse. Is the movie a performance? Is the computer game? If so, they are definitely different from the theater. But do they differ in such a radical sense that it makes them non-performances? Or are they just a modification of what has up till now been called a performance and therefore themselves a kind of performance?

In the theater a performance comprises the bodily actions on stage with a corporeal audience. Without the audience the stage is just the place for various activities, as during a rehearsal session or when the carpenters are busy. But in a movie or in a computer game we may have a performance represented *in* the movie or the game while we as onlookers and players are co-present with the screen and maybe engage with it interactively, but not with the represented perfor-

mance. If we characterize this difference as essential, most performance theory of recent years will have to be discarded. Performance is then simply taken as a theatrical metaphor for an endless variety of actions and not as a term in a proper sense, just like theater in earlier epochs was used as a metaphor of the world, *theatrum mundi*, or the book as a metaphor of nature, the big book of nature.

But we may instead change our view of the theater performance and thereby extend the validity of the performance term beyond its traditional use, not as a metaphor but as a real concept. It sounds reasonable to do so, simply because of the mutual exchange of aesthetic strategies between theater, film, video, TV, games, installations etc. all over the world today. Following this line of thought, we may regard the body of the actors as their medium for gestures, speech, dressing etc. From this point of view the audience is co-present with a specific medium of the theater, the acting bodies (together with props, lighting etc.), and not with bodies of certain individuals who happen to be placed on stage. In the same way, the movie goers or game players are co-present with a medium which just happens to be materially different from their own body.

One may go further and hold that the performance generates a communicative space in which an audience *participates* in the performance through their bodily *co-presence with a performative medium*. In a theater they listen, watch, laugh, cry, reflect, boo etc. in their co-presence with the actors' bodies; in the cinema they react the same way and in the case of pornographic movies maybe with even more active bodily manifestations of their co-presence with the screen; and in the case of the computer game they participate interactively with digital icons and avatars on the screen via mouse, joystick or keyboard. The singing of hymns in church and standing up or sitting down during readings from the gospel are also part

of the participation in the mass as a performance integrating various visual, verbal, acoustic and olfactory media.

We are now finally ready to discuss whether a linguistic text and a literary text in particular can be seen as a performance (see also Esterhammer 2000). Before I do so I will recapitulate what I have said so far about a performance. A *performance* is as a symbolic act delimited in time and space, but different from other acts in certain important aspects. It generates a communicative space through the co-presence of an audience with specific material media, in such a way that they participate in the performance via their interrelation with the media of the performance. The body may be one such medium.

Performativity is a media-specific capacity of any given medium to generate a space for communicative acts like performances, and in most cases more than one media-specific performativity play a role in a performance. In a more technical and philosophical sense we may define performativity with reference to Kant's philosophy as the media-specific and thus *material condition of possibility of a performance*.

From this perspective the particularity of a performance depends, first of all, on the medium or media it uses, not on the outcome it produces as meaning. This is, however, the case in Judith Butler's well-known gender theory – a performance produces a gendered social identity. A parallel view of the theatricality of everyday life can be found in Erving Goffman's micro-sociology, highlighting how social identities are social roles produced by public and semi-public human interaction.

Butler's basic argument is social and epistemological: gendered human identity is defined as the symbolic outcome of the bodily-based social performance of people, not by any essential core of identity, and thus it is historically negotiable. But she underestimates the fact that the body itself is not

negotiable, only the use of it. In the same way the materiality of the media involved in a performance and their inherent performativity are also not negotiable in the same sense as the meaning produced by the performance.

Directors may change the meaning of *King Lear* in new performances or in versions realized in other media than theater, just like a gendered identity evolves through history through ongoing social interaction. But there are media-specific and thus material features defining the performativity of the media involved. These features are more stable than the outcome of the performance and may even be unchangeable in the time frame of human history and experience. They define the difference between acts and performances and between different performances. To study performance from the media perspective, and not from the perspective of its outcome, will give a more precise grasp of the various types of performance which are active in a culture.

Text as performance

One such medium is verbal language and therefore also literature. Viewing language from the point of view of linguistic acts rather than linguistic structures started almost at the same time as structuralism in the early 20th century, and since the linguistic turn from the late 19th century the two viewpoints have sometimes completed each other and sometimes competed with each other. It is the emphasis on the linguistic act as the defining aspect of language that gives rise to theories about language as basically a performative medium, not primarily as a cognitive or expressive medium, although in both cases it is defined by its underlying rule-governing structures, but not by the same structural components.

Many small streams merge in the waters of linguistic performance theory. One is *discourse theory* with Michel Fou-

cault as one important figure, viewing linguistic acts as defining and exercising power relations, and together with Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action [*kommunikatives Handeln*] an important milestone holding discourse to constitute a shared human space outside institutionalized power relations. Another trend is the *phenomenological* theories of language as an act or event producing a shared human life world as suggested by e.g. Paul Ricœur.¹ He also investigates *narration* as a particular discursive act constructing collective and individual identities, an idea that is developed in psychology by Donald Polkinghorne among others. This insight achieved a particular prominence in the research on *trauma* and related therapeutic practices, as in Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's work.

The most prominent theory that promoted language as act and opened for a conception of verbal practice as performance is without any doubt J.L. Austin's speech act theory, his view of illocutionary acts in particular. Reformulated in the terms I have suggested above, they are defined as delimited verbal and hence symbolic acts like "I promise", "I name" etc. which by the symbolic means of language create a communicative space in which people who are bodily co-present with the performative medium in speech or writing participate in a particular performance of promising or naming and thereby achieve a particular role in the communicative act (as witness, beneficiary, utterer etc.). Austin's theory is further developed by John Searle with special emphasis on the obligations imposed on the participants by the performance, a sort of contractual relationship between utterer and receiver in the case of different performances, that of promising, of producing fiction, of lying etc.

1. On discourse theory, see also Larsen & Johansen 2002, ch. 3.

The performativity of language establishing the condition of possibility of performances involves the media-specific features of language like the system of pronouns, time and aspect of verbs, certain adverbs delimiting time and space like “here”, “now”, “there” etc. They delimit the communicative space and distribute the roles of the participants in relation to the specific verbal performance. The modern foundation of the study of these features was established by Émile Benveniste’s studies of the *enunciation* and Roman Jakobson’s analysis of the role of the deictic elements of language, which he (using a term from Otto Jespersen) called the verbal shifters.

One of the particularities of these deictic elements, defining the performativity of language, is their capacity to make language self-reflexive. When I say “I promise to give you £1,000”, I simultaneously refer to a content – the transfer of a certain sum of money – and to the process in which the promise is performed for somebody: the “I” is the utterer of this particular utterance here and now; the present tense of the verb concerns the same here and now; the “you” is the agent established by the utterance as the receiver here and now. Crucial in this context is that language is not a performance because of the promise itself being uttered, but because language at the same time, through its self-reflexive performativity and as an integral part of the very nature of promising, constitutes a communicative space for a delimited symbolic act here and now when read or listened to by someone. It is the media-specific quality of language that makes linguistic acts performances of a particular nature, not the meaning produced by the act.

To analyze language from the point of view of performance requires an emphasis on the use of the elements defining the performativity of language and their basic function. This function is to give all utterances a double reference – to a referent

outside the utterance, e.g. a promise of money – and to the utterance itself as a symbolic, communicative act, delimited in time and space by the performance (see also Larsen 2005 and 2007). This requirement hits the nail on the head in the analysis of literature as a particular type of language as performance, and that without any danger for our thumbs turning the pages or moving the cursor if we are reading digitalized versions of the texts. In the following I will analyze two short stories to hammer my argument home.

The empire writes back

My first example is a short-short story “Natives and Verse” from Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* (1937) (1985: 287-288). The aim of the analysis is, of course, not just to find out whether or not the text can be categorized as a performance. This would just be a typologizing exercise of little or no interest to literary studies. The aim is instead to find out how the performative approach adds to the understanding of the text and how it can specify the particular performance of this text.

The text shows two performative dimensions: the performance *in* the text and the performance *of* the text. This gives it a double reference – to an event which is represented in the text and also, self-reflexively, to the text itself. Thus it fulfills the conditions for a linguistic text to be a communicative act we can label a performance. Moreover, this double structure constitutes the very meaning of the text.

The performance *in* the text is simple. The white European first-person narrator finds herself in the field with some of her young black native laborers working in the maize-fields on her farm in Kenya. To amuse herself, as she says, she starts to tell nonsense verses in Swahili with marked rhymes in the end:

There was no sense in the verse, it was made for the sake of the rhyme: – “Ngumbe na-penda chumbe, Malaya-mbaya. Wakamba na-kula mamba.” The oxen like salt, – whores are bad, – The Wakamba do eat snakes. It caught the interest of the boys, they formed a ring around me. They were quick to understand that the meaning in poetry is of no consequence, and they did not question the thesis of the verse, but waited eagerly for the rhyme, and laughed at it when it came.

That this is a story about a performance is clear. A particular communicative space is carved out of the working space the moment the I starts to produce rhymes. Although it is an *ad hoc* performance it is rule-governed, based on the phonetic performativity of language as an oral phenomenon: it follows both the phonetic rules of language and the social rules of colonial power. The “I” alone defines when it is time to work and when it is time to have fun, and she is the natural center of the entire performance – they gather around her and ask her to go on.

There is also a power of knowledge on her part: she knows about the rhythmic and rhymeless poetic traditions of the natives and shows their almost childish surprise, but they know nothing of her tradition. This is also stated in the opening lines of the story, where she tells us about the natives’ encounter in the missionary schools with European hymns in rhymes and rhythms bound to the European languages. This is a foreign thing to them.

The performance is now also turned into a quasi-class room setting: she asks them to rhyme themselves and thereby to change their subjective role in the performance from receiver to utterer, although on her conditions. Instead they urge her to continue with the words: “Speak again. Speak like rain.” She confesses that she does not understand why they do not want to produce rhymes themselves, nor what the reference to rain actually means. She does not even guess why, but

she takes the rain to be a positive sign in the dry area she is living in. Thus the performance in the text is a performance that confirms, in an almost innocent way, her power over language, interpretation and social activity.

But one might also see a discrete countermove in the performance. If she by the performance turns herself into a school teacher, as if in the missionary school, she also makes herself foreign among them by the performance behind the relaxed intimacy they acquire through the performance in the field, a foreignness which is also hinted at in the end when she confesses that she does not understand the natives' motives not to rhyme and to refer to rain.

This insecurity becomes more prominent when we look at the performance *of* the text as a narrative act. It constitutes a different communicative space involving not the natives but a reader like the first-person narrator herself. The story is clearly told to readers familiar with European use of rhyme and rhythm who know what hymns and missionary schools are outside Europe. In this space she moves from one subject position in the opening to another at the end. The story opens like this: "Natives, who have a strong sense of rhythm, know nothing of verse". Here we have a marked contrast between the natives' strong unconscious "sense" of rhythm and the complete absence of knowledge with regard to European verse. The syntactical structure with an inserted relative clause and the use of present tense places the contrast as an unquestionable fact that shows her knowledge both about verse and about the sense of rhythm which the natives are hardly aware of themselves. They just practice.

There is no explicit I-subject, but a few lines later she uses the collective pronoun "we" – "we had been harvesting maize". But at the very end of the short story the situation is reversed. Now the story focuses on the lack of knowledge of the "I" and her strong sense of something on the margins of

her knowledge – the meaning of rain. Here she is deprived of her initial knowledge of the natives. The story ends:

“Speak again. Speak like rain”. Why they should feel verse to be like rain I do not know. It must have been, however, an expression of applause, since in Africa rain is always longed for and welcomed.

The natives’ “strong sense” takes over *her* performative medium, language, through something *they* obviously “feel” but she does not. Now it is her knowledge that is deficient and she can only rely on a sort of strong sense of interpretation through guessing: rain must have a positive meaning. The story places her as a negative mirror of her own position in the opening, and thus in the position of the natives, whereas *they* now take the initiative by asking *her* questions she cannot answer.

The first-person narrator is not able to finish the story – did she continue the rhyming? Did she convince the natives to make verses themselves? Did they go back to work? The reader never knows. The story just peters out. In this way the performance *in* the story is just broken off without an ending that may correspond to the activities opened by the performance. We simply stop when she is cornered by the invitation from the natives, following on her own successful poetry session, not knowing what they want from her and why. Her sovereignty is shaken for a brief moment.

The performance *of* the text makes this contradictory turn the main effect of the performance, carried out by the use of pronouns and the use of the discursive means of direct speech – first the narrator quotes her own verses, then she renders the natives’ invitation: “Speak again. Speak like rain”. Those are the two only instances of direct speech. The last one is the stronger of the two. It establishes a communicative space where she is marginalized due to her lack of understanding.

She does not even comment on what is shown in direct speech. But it is a matter of fact that the natives actually produce a verse which in English contains the rhyme they refused to make (again-rain) and also rhythm and a metaphorical meaning. In contrast to their reluctance and her incapacity to understand this short phrase it transcends the space delimited in the first place by the performance.

The narrator's verses are just nonsense verses directed to no-one in particular. They want to oblige her, but she cannot. She does not want to oblige anyone, but is just amusing herself, as she says. Performances are, however, communicative by nature and she becomes caught in the communicative act and loses the grip of the situation and the natives take command. The performative approach shows us the text as a sophisticated interpretation of the contradictory complexity of colonial power relations. It shows how, in Salman Rushdie's apt phrase, the empire writes back (cf. Ashcroft e.a. 1989).

The boundaries of performance

My second example of how a performative approach may shed new light on a text is Franz Kafka's story "A Hunger Artist" (1924) (Kafka 2009, orig. title "Ein Hungerkünstler"). Here too we have a clear performance *in* the text, or rather not one performance, but the story of the dramatically declining career of the hunger artist through his performances. The performance *of* the text, related to the narrator and the discursive registers of the text, also proves to be essential for the interpretation, although with different means and consequences than Dinesen's story has shown. The story line of Kafka's text has a linear simplicity, but when seen in the double perspective of the textual performance it reveals a disturbing complexity.

During a period of many years an artist attracts huge public

attention with a strange specialty: he is fasting for forty days in a cage, then takes a rest before he repeats the performance. The paradox of the performance is that it challenges the limits of the medium he uses for the performance, his own body. So the playfulness and the repetitiveness of the performance, as well as its delimitation in space and time, are put at risk every time the performance takes place. It is a performance like Russian roulette or a duel, bordering on the realm of acts of another kind. The performance itself may get out of hand more seriously than the manipulation of a hammer on stage.

If we do not place the medium, his body, at center stage, then the performance, of course, produces his identity or rather identities whether he dies or not. He will forever be the renowned hunger artist, although various spectators speculate about his motives – is he just seeking fame? Is he just interested in the money? Is he a pervert? With the medium as our main focus instead of various identity constructions, we are constantly challenged by the tricky and scary boundary between symbolic acts and other acts, between human control through performances and the brute materiality of life and death.

Therefore, if the performance is to be repeatable, a meta-level is required that controls that boundary. The hunger artist has an impresario who has dictated the limit of forty days' duration, because the hunger artist cannot do so himself. Once engaged in his fasting he just wants to go on and stay in the cage and will eventually die before the next show. When time is up his exit from the cage is another meta-level of the hunger act. Young girls are selected to help him out surrounded by an applauding and thrilled audience, a doctor and some musical entertainment as well as a meal. The performance of the artist and the meta-levels are not separate performances, but integrated parts of one performance. Otherwise it could not keep its status as a symbolic and communicative act de-

limited in time and space. As in soccer: the referee is part of the performance.

In other words, the moment the meta-levels of the performance are set apart from the core act, the fasting itself, the performance will inevitably change its nature and gradually dissolve. It becomes an act with no limits and no audience and thus just a fatal way of life. This decline begins when the artist dismisses his impresario and makes his performance part of a traveling circus. This is the beginning of the end. The circus establishes new working conditions, partly with his consent, and places him – with proper signs, though – near the stalls housing the exotic circus animals. No time limit, no glorious exit. People only notice him in passing on their way to visit the animals during intermissions. Finally he is completely forgotten and only found again when the circus wants to use the cage for something else. Hidden in the straw a supervisor finds him dying and treats him as a lunatic. Then he dies.

In his last words he asks for forgiveness in a hardly audible whisper. He did not perform anything. As an artist he was an imposter. He simply could not help fasting, he just followed his nature. His act was not the result of his own free choice or training. In his cage he has always been more like the animals in the stalls and the panther who, well fed, replaces him in the cage after his death attracting new public attention. Like the artist, it is just acting panther-like without dreaming of getting out of the cage. His animal nature was already anticipated during his heyday. Now and then he roared aggressively at the public toward the end of the forty days' fasting, and the impresario had to make excuses to the spectators.

The performance *in* the text questions the limit between being human with the possibility of choosing what to do and what to be as in a performance, and being non-human, following what the body tells us to do like an animal. More importantly, the story also shows that the existence of the

boundary itself is not a question of choice. That hunger or dehydration, biologically, ultimately leads to death, is not a choice, only how we eat or don't eat and stage these processes culturally. They mark an irreconcilable tension between body and identity, a fight for life and death independent of the specific identity we may choose. If the widespread metaphorical use of performance and performativity in modern cultural and textual theory risks blurring the boundary between performance and other types of acts and between various types of performances, Kafka reminds us of the inescapable ontological and existential reality of such boundaries.

The performance *of* the text further emphasizes this reminder. Up till now I have concentrated on the story of the protagonist, the hunger artist and his agents – the impresario and the circus. But there are other equally important characters: the spectators. Without spectators, there can be no performance. They play an important role *in* the story, although not driving the story line forward. Moreover, they mirror *in* the text the roles of both the narrator and the readers *of* the text – *us*. In other words, the various spectators inscribe the performance of the text as an essential part of the text itself. Or rather, they force us to regard the text in a performative perspective.

The story line is clear with a foreseeable fatal ending, and so is the thematic focus on the boundary between acts with different ontological status – performances and other acts. In contrast, the role of narrator and spectators develops in a process of increasing confusion. We begin with a clearly authoritative narrator with an unquestioned knowledge of events past and present: “In the last decades interest in hunger artists has declined considerably”.² Moreover, he knows

² “In den letzten Jahrzehnten ist das Interesse an Hungerkünstlern sehr zurückgegangen”.

the innermost secrets of the protagonist: “For he [the artist] alone knew something that even initiates didn’t know – how easy it was to fast”.³ Obviously the narrator is also familiar with this hidden fact and discloses it to us. Everything is told with a matter-of-factness deprived of any emotions.

But the anonymous omniscient narrator is not the only narrator. The public narrative from the eloquent mouth of the impresario every time the artist leaves his cage is clearly recognized by the narrator as empty rhetoric which is produced just to satisfy the audience. But when the hunger artist himself talks to some of the spectators, the watchmen and other nightly observers in particular, the narrator offers no details: the hunger artist “was ready to joke with them, to recount stories from his nomadic life and then, in turn to listen to their stories.”⁴ This is a separate and repeated performance of which the omniscient narrator has nothing to tell us.

The narrator is also a spectator himself like the audience, the watchmen, and the visitors in the circus. In this capacity he is sometimes only one among several others, and then the general insecurity of observation applies to him as well: “However, it was in general part of fasting that these doubts were inextricably associated with it”.⁵ The doubts referred to have to do with the suspicion of some spectators that the artist is hiding some food under the straw in the cage. This suspicion is never confirmed or refuted. “For, in fact, no-one was in a position to spend time watching the artist every day

3 “Er allein nämlich wusste, auch kein Eingeweihter sonst wusste das, wie leicht das Hungern war.”

4 “war bereit, mit ihnen zu scherzen, ihnen Geschichten aus seinem Wanderleben zu erzählen, dann wieder ihre Erzählungen anzuhören.”

5 “Dieses allerdings gehörte schon zu den vom Hungern überhaupt nicht zu trennenden Verdächtigungen.”

and night without interruption”,⁶ and the narrator never reveals how things really stand with respect to hidden provisions.

The spectators have other more pressing problems than their limited insights. They also always become participants in the performance, “they participated”,⁷ as stated in the beginning. The children in front of the cage look in awe “holding each other’s hands for safety”,⁸ and reluctantly two girls from the audience become an active part of the performance when they follow the artist out of the cage at the end of the show. And when the watchmen keeping an eye on the cage during the night exchange stories with the artist, they create with him their own performance embedded in the larger one, but only as a kind of aside, in the same way as the artist himself is reduced to a sideshow in the circus. The feeling of being a participant is disturbing, and “When those who had witnessed such scenes [the performance] thought back on them a few years later, often they were unable to understand themselves”.⁹ Being a spectator changes the spectator himself.

Nevertheless, the narrator keeps up the distance through his detached descriptions, supporting his disengaged omniscience. But the reader cannot help noticing that he is not really omniscient but has to state that no spectator knows everything; nor is he really detached and cannot avoid being drawn in as an active participant – thereby losing his privileged panoramic position. This situation becomes clear in the final paragraphs of the story. Otherwise entirely shaped by the narrator’s emotionless report, the text is now dominated

6 “Niemand war ja imstande, alle die Tage und Nächte beim Hungerkünstler ununterbrochen als Wächter zu verbringen”

7 “sie [...] teilnahmen”

8 “der Sicherheit halber einander bei der Hand haltend”

9 “Wenn die Zeugen solcher Szenen ein paar Jahre später daran zurückdachten, wurden sie sich oft selbst unverständlich.”

by direct speech when the artist dies. In this way we as listeners or readers become observers ourselves, without the filter of the narrator mediating between the events and our own observation and interpretation. Here we receive directly the central message of the artist: he was a fake artist because he could by nature not do anything but fasting. Therefore he surprisingly asks for forgiveness, almost out of the blue.

The artist's final self-recognition has, however, been transmitted to us by the narrator previously, presented as moments of bad conscience. Now his confession and begging for forgiveness is out in the open. The circus supervisor takes this to be a sign of madness. The narrator normally explains the artist's motives and attitudes without hesitation, but has no comments at all at this point. Only we, the readers, can react – we can refuse, misunderstand or take the utterance at its face value. But we have no meta-level to guide us. Or, as it is said about some people's reaction to the artist's performance as the act of a swindler: "It was impossible to fight against this lack of understanding, against a world of misunderstanding."¹⁰ The performance *of* the text turns us into participants in this world of permanent uncertainty.

If the performance *in* Kafka's text highlights the delicate ontological balance between performances and other acts in life, the performance *of* the text situates us as readers on this boundary when confronted with the direct speech of the artist about his own performances, but to which nobody reacts other than the reader interpreting the story without any help from the omniscient narrator of the story. The performance of the text turns the reader into a participant.

10 "Gegen diesen Unverstand, gegen diese Welt des Unverstandes zu kämpfen, war unmöglich."

“Holding each other’s hands for safety”

The two analyses above have regarded the dynamics of a text as a performative dynamics. As the double reference of language is an immanent property of all utterances or texts, it will always be possible to see them as types of performances, all literary texts included. But as the main goal of approaching literary texts through a conceptual framework, such as the concepts developed in this article, is to offer an interpretation of the possible meanings of that particular texts or group of texts, or of other media-specific products, then what is always possible does not always seem to be relevant. But in the case of Dinesen and Kafka, the performative approach has in fact opened new relevant perspectives.

The reading of Dinesen has turned her text away from the usual autobiographical reading making a point out of the partial disagreement between her letters and *Out of Africa*, or more broadly as an expression of her aesthetic and ethical view of life. Kafka, on the other hand, has been given other perspectives than the allegorical readings that dominate the traditional interpretations, now and then with a psycho-analytical touch. In both analyses the performative focus shifted from the outcome of the performance to its specific mediality. In this way language too can be conceptualized as a performative medium. Here, the double orientation of the performance *in* the text and the performance *of* the text has underlined the interaction between text and reader as a particular performative textual dynamics.

The performative approach also adds to a general understanding of language and literature as a performative medium among other performative media, but with a specific performativity that allows texts to interact with other media in the larger media landscape of our culture. However, the two readings have made it clear that a performative approach

does not just include the texts in a category of textual acts. Instead they open new specific layers of meaning, different in the two texts but based on the same general theoretical framework.

Moving around in this modern media landscape, we are confronted with its constantly moving ontological boundaries between performances and other acts. We become participants in the dynamics of the landscape when we negotiate these boundaries through the symbolic performative acts of our daily life. In this process we cannot escape a certain dizziness now and then, and may reach out to hold each other's hands for safety as the children do in front of the hunger artist's cage. Even if it does not make us any safer, at least it saves us hitting our thumbs with a hammer should we feel tempted to erect protective fences in order to define the boundaries once and for all and set out watchmen as in Kafka. Holding hands may even prevent us from performing this act at all. It will always be in vain.

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Powering Textual Action: Duras' Space in *Véra Baxter ou Les Plages de l'Atlantique*

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Marguerite Duras' late modern sequential art, her late theatre texts not excepted, confronts us with a peculiar representational mode emerging from a *mélange* of *obliqueness* and *slowness*. Minimal plots and character actions proceed slowly in the theatre texts, and so does their textual representation. Duras' representation of things, images and characters, as it were, de-composes them in relation to quotidian, mimetically recognisable patterns. Yet constructively, her mode shifts our attention sideways onto aspects of the depicted that strangely somehow recombine them, this time in a new space, away from "what happens" and from the full presence and plentitude of consciousness – in her characters as well as in readers or viewers. The present article on the theatre text *Véra Baxter* (1980), like my previous studies of *Savannah Bay* and *Agatha*, will attempt to establish a horizon from which it is possible to substantiate analytical and theoretical arguments for the

peculiar textual creativity of Duras' representation.

My discussion will seek answers to three clusters of basic questions that keep recurring in research on the relationship between creativity as textual action (“performative language”) and topographical patterns in sequential art, particularly in late modern drama and prose fiction. First, in what resides the powering energy, the driving force in the alignment of textual action and topography? Second, how can elements leading to the converging of genres, art forms and media – such as theatre text, prose fiction, film and painting – be related to the animating force in the space/textual action nexus? And third, can the energy between space and textual action, as well as this converging, play a role in culture, *e.g.* by creatively questioning ideological structures?

I Preliminaries: theoretical elaborations

Among the great variety of stimulating readings of Duras, a plethora of influential poststructural contributions have been of special interest to my approach. By persuasively highlighting prominent paradoxical features in Duras' art, some of them have circumscribed a “*de-fascinating*” or *de-humanising* vein in the aesthetics of her *œuvre* (*e.g.* Heinich 1980; Bange 1987). Others have convincingly analysed Duras' paradoxical rendering of images, things, desires, bodies and characters as an effect of the writing, and filming, of contradictory elements, as a blend of *literal* (“*object*”) *separation* and *metaphorical fusion* (*e.g.* Hill 1998; further Knapp 1998; Willis 1987). The tentative refraction of critical theory and Lacanian psychoanalytical concepts relating to the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic¹ onto the interpretative horizon of Duras'

¹ Referring *e.g.* to Lacan 1981; later pursued by *e.g.* Salecl and Žižek 1996; and Dolar 2006. Concepts used are those of the primary

works makes these analyses compelling. Beyond their concerns to come to terms primarily with the aesthetics of object, image and character representation, however, my focus is on yet another empirical dimension of Duras' sequential art, of which peripheral aspects of objects and characters may well be a part: its *space*, how it is creatively generated as a dynamic, ever-widening but paradoxical entity, and how it may bear a creative relation to textual performativity, to textual action. Additional theoretical perspectives will be helpful to gain a better understanding of the role of Duras' configuration of space in terms of textual creativity.

One gets a sense of an ambiguous dynamic power at work in Duras' handling of space. On the one hand, that power is felt in her widespread rewriting of literary materials and subject matters into different generic or medial versions, and also in that her writing and rewriting rely on elements which make different genres, art forms or media converge. On the other, there is a creative power of space in the individual Durasian work of art. In both cases, ruptures *and* extension, disclusion *and* inclusion, amount to a textual doing which renders what is represented "mimetically" and existentially "here", as well as being separated off and "not here" at the same time.

The sense of the power of this space seems to emanate from Duras' well-known use of aesthetic building blocks – localised topographies, performatives, images and things, but with sudden leaps between them, small or vast. Abruptly we are torn away from characters and "action" in one locality to another one close by, or further off, on another shore or

separation, of positions in relation to the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic and border zones of "being-encompassed" and "being-separated", as well as partial objects such as *the object voice* and *the object gaze* (something separated from me ("not mine") and fused to me ("mine") at the same time).

continent; dialogic space gives way to the narrator's space and to the reader's, to another part of Duras' literary *œuvre* or her films, to other writers' art works, sometimes even to the filming of her film sets. While the localised building blocks seem disconnected, yet we sense an oblique link between them that make them strangely "perforated", flowing into each other. The reduction of character action, story-line and the velocity of the dramatic action seem to be corollaries of the power perceived in the ruptures between the localised components *and* in the carving out of a peculiar, new fusion. The lateral shifts of attention move from localised "mimesis" and immediacy to the material and archaeological quality of "invisible" or suppressed aspects of the represented. On the level of localised detail, fusion appears to occur in the spatially encompassing play between singular aspects of images, motifs, sounds, movements, phrases, perspectives, gazes, names etc.² The "material shift" gives us a sense of de-personalised representation and opens up onto a de-fascinated space; we are taken beyond the immediate localised elements.

If representation of space in Duras is at the same time a serial play of *discluding* (from a phrased, "mimetic" continuity) and of *including* (into an enigmatic and ineffable, yet phrasable, wholeness), it might well share properties with performative language, or textual action. Here, Duras' iterative, oblique shifts to foregrounding or "making visible" material and archaeological aspects of localities, and of locally represented things and images, seem to play a crucial role. Theories of speech acts and performatives teach us that the creativity or performativity of language (*i.e.* textual action) depends

2 Duras testified to "rupture", "découpage" and "multiplicateur" as actively and extensively applied creative modes in her work, generically as well as inter-aesthetically/medially. Cf. *e.g.* the 1970's interviews by Xavière Gauthier, Michelle Porte, and Susan Husserl-Kapit (Willis 15, *et passim*).

precisely on the installation of elements endowed with deictic shifter functions and their iterability (Austin 1975; Jakobson 1957). Furthermore, the repetition of the shifts creates a textual play of self-referentiality that extends across a variety of (localised) discursive contexts – a creative play that must be “countersigned” by the other, the reader or the viewer, to take productive effect (Derrida 1982). Referring to each other, and comprising different localised contexts, Duras’ shifts to materiality and “archaeology” are enabled to carve out and draw the contours of a new, alternative communicative space to be phrased. My reading of *Véra Baxter* will analyse a series of components endowed with deictic shifter functions – obliquely at play between the mimetically understandable and the yet unknown, between phenomenalism and exteriority, opening up for the impact of a space of de-fascinated alterity, unhinged from social and personal bonds.

While the creativity of such deictic shifts in Duras seems to involve and to make us mindful of the objectness of things,³ the textual power of that alternative space may also well include the power to address and reflect upon and counter personal and cultural ideologies. If ideology is a mismatch between consciousness and material reality,⁴ then the making visible and the phrasing of that reality may have the function of questioning erroneous patterns of consciousness. As ideological abuses and their aberrations of the mind tend to be literally embodied, *i.e.* materially incarnated in oppressed bodies of characters, cultures, or landscapes, a thwarting of aberrational patterns may lie in art’s spatial remaking of those

3 *Deixis* (in Greek) carries the sense of “display”, “a showing”, “a pointing”, “proof”.

4 Miller (1995: 194); based on Marx, Althusser, and de Man. Cf. also my discussion and references at the end of Section VI, below. My thoughts about ideology have been much inspired by Miller 1995, especially the chapter “Ideology and Topography: Faulkner”.

afflicted bodies. Often Duras' texts give us a sense of such a re-embodiment, within the realm of the material or at the margins of phenomenal existence.

The spatial displacement to otherwise "unseen" marks and traces in characters and landscapes offers such marks as material rather than as "legible" or "understandable".⁵ But as such they *happen*, and are inscribed on the flesh of living bodies, the reader's included, and in the literal concreteness of landscapes, not in their "passivity" as mere surroundings. The topographical transfer of marks, then, between an oblique space and the scene of materially stifled embodiments of aberrational affliction, is an *event*: it makes the impacting mark material in a new way, prone to escape the trite incarnations of ideology, and to become legible when someone countersigns and reads them. Such a "creative logic" – the material embodiments of aberrations and oppressions being "critiqued" by material exteriority – is quite frequent in Duras. We see it for example in her recurring theme of love, whose character embodiment in variants of illicit, deceitful, perverted, or violent love is represented that way: shifts to "unseen" aspects of bodies and objects in the localities leave imprints that somehow "speak back" and recast afflicted bodies. The power of that reworking makes us mindful of a world of discursive alternative beyond the one aberrationally embodied. At the very least, a peripheral inception is thus passed on to a critical reflection upon love, its conditions of possibility, and its potentials in human life.

My question of the nexus between space and textual action has reached the level of a hypothesis: in Duras, the peculiar configuration of space is the prime powering force of textual

5 In this lies art's complex relationship between aesthetic sensoriality and discursive "legibility" inscribed, *i.e.* between doing and knowing; action and knowledge – "[a]n incommensurability [that] remains the human condition" (Miller 1995: 215).

action. Jacques Rancière's theory of art's aesthetic regime seems relevant to explore the question. He theorises a move from the representation of *human* action into a *textually* acting language (offering representation to the bodily muted and unseen), and helps us further understand the dynamics of spatial otherness, and what it does or "performs" textually.⁶ Essential is his idea that while the oblique space enables a sensorial release of things to be seen afresh and made sayable, that space expansively combines the released components with a repetitional linear phrasing.

According to Rancière, art works of the *representative regime* rely normatively on narrative plot and character action, wholeness, verisimilitude, and decorum – all of which turn them into "fiction". The sayable (*mythos* and *logos*) suppresses things and the sensorially visible, and delimits affects to the plot-segment of represented reality. Opposed to this, and resonating more with Duras' aesthetics of space and textual action, stand works of *the aesthetic regime of art*, whose elements of *opsis* and *pathos*, as well as those of *mythos* and *logos*, are set free and made equivalent. While visibilities and affects are made equivalent with sayabilities and phrasing, the apperceptible materiality of things may emanate emotions and affect, and any phrasability is open to be used. Things and images are not muted or left to remain unseen.⁷ Of particular interest for my approach to the creativity of space in Duras is a sense that the power of her

6 Central to this study are *The Future of the Image* (2007a); *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2007b); and *Film Fables* (2006).

7 In the equivalence of *pathos* and *logos* – *pathos* stands for a sensorial, material presence, for the visible, and for the ruptures and suspenses caused by the impact of that presence. *Logos*, on the other hand, are the distancing, mediating, re-encoding, and signifiatory dimensions of the work of art. They establish readability and "meaning", and help mould a "story" out of raw sensorial presence.

textual action resounds in the dual powers which Rancière identifies in what he calls *the aesthetic sentence-image*. That image is the linkage of *the phrasal power of continuity* and *the imaging power of rupture*:

[The aesthetic sentence-image is] the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically – that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image. [...] The sentence-function is [...] that of linking. But the sentence [...] links in as much as it is what gives flesh. And this flesh of substance is, paradoxically, that of the great passivity of things without any rationale. For its part, the image has become the active, disruptive power of the leap – that of the change of regime between two sensory orders. The sentence-image is the union of these two functions. It is the unit that divides the chaotic force of the great parataxis into *phrasal power of continuity* and *imaging power of rupture* (2007a: 45-46).

Initially ineffable yet phrasable, the language of aesthetic sentence-images produces epistemological mystery, otherness. Arising out of the linkage of the dual “powers” as textual action, it offers representation to silences inscribed on muted, unseen bodies of *any* things, images and localities: generators of sensorial affects of agonies or bliss, fused in the creation of a new expanding space to be textually phrased.⁸

8 It is worth noting Rancière’s underlining of the shift between “two sensory orders”; in terms of perception he thereby echoes the creative topographical transfer between *discursive* spaces, underpinned in theories of performatives. The art work somehow has to balance between the power of sensorial impact, and that of “legible” discursivity (Rancière: “schizophrenic explosion” vs. “consensus”). For sensorial, material exteriority to take effect, a possible or a minimal textual play of self-referentiality must be generated by the disruptive power of sensorial otherness. Rancière writes that the sentence-power *per se* exerts “paratactic power by repelling the schizophrenic explosion”, whereas the more creatively active image-power “repels the big sleep of indifferent triteness of the great communal [and

Some working hypotheses: *Véra Baxter* carries elements of both a representative and an aesthetic regime of art, the latter dynamising its textual action. The play not only “converges” with other versions in the same genre or in another medium in Duras’ *œuvre*. Certain of its elements also allow for the converging of genres, art forms and media (theatre text, prose, film, and painting). These need to be identified, as do their functions in a late modern critique of ideology. Rancière’s discourse-analytical focus on the historically conditioned relationship between the sayable and the visible within the regimes of art, and between these and knowledge, may help us account for at least some of these complexities of the theatre text.⁹

II *Véra Baxter* or The Atlantic Beaches

The *Véra Baxter* material figures in three French versions. It first appeared in 1968 as a theatre text, the play entitled *Suzanna Andler*. Subsequently, it appeared as a film under

commodified] intoxication of bodies” (cf. 2007a: 58). His thinking thereby clearly also echoes art’s propensity to question and recast embodied ideological patterns.

- 9 Rancière’s perspective covers all relevant genres, art forms and media in view of their history – from the 17th C to the present. In drama, prose fiction, film, and painting he analyses representational structures installed by an *aesthetic* rupture happening further back in art and in the discourse on art than merely the last 50–60 years (late modernity). The aesthetic regime appeared in early 19th C prose fiction, and has, by way of 19th and 20th C discourse on art, important preconditions in the Classical Age of (genre and family) painting already in the 17th C.

the title *Baxter, Véra Baxter* (1977).¹⁰ Again rewritten and recirculated, now as a “scénario” [screenplay] as well as a theatre text and a play for the theatre, it was then published as *Véra Baxter ou Les Plages de l’Atlantique* in 1980. The latter – abbr. *Véra Baxter* – is my main reference in what follows. For citations in English, Philippa Wehle’s 1985 translation of this version as *Véra Baxter or the Atlantic Beaches* (published 1986) is used. The other versions will be drawn in when natural to further substantiate my argument.

The *personae* in dramatic conflict in this thematically trivial and quotidian play are Véra, who stays at the summer mansion “The Colonnades”, and her husband Jean, eloped with a lover at Chantilly. Véra is a woman in her late thirties, the mother of three and a faithful wife for 18 years. Although full of care, she is also filled with desire and now suicidal, deceptive, and alcohol-ridden. Jean is thoroughly *unfaithful*, wealthy, travelling, fornicating, and addicted to gambling. The Stranger (a visitor who, like the rest of the characters, stays at the Hôtel de Paris in Thionville) sees Véra at the mansion, and eventually tries to make her formulate a usable story of her plight and help her reshape something of an identity. Monique Combès and Michel Cayre, on the other hand, are both in Jean Baxter’s service in his deception of Véra. Monique is one of Jean’s previous lovers, while Michel is a friend whom Jean has paid to make Véra stay in the Atlantic-Coast mansion and to make love to his wife, described as nun-like and “kind of Catholique (*pause*) at heart” (25). Jean’s motivation

10 *Suzanna Andler*: In *Théâtre II*. It was written in the course of a few weeks for Duras’ friend, actress and playwright Loleh Bellon. Says Duras, it is “a kind of venture into the boulevard world” [“sorte de gageure boulevardière” (1980: 5)]. – The film *Baxter, Véra Baxter* was directed by Marguerite Duras and features Claudine Gabay, Noëlle Chatelet, Delphine Seyrig, Claude Aaufaure, Nathalie Neil, and Gérard Depardieu.

is to boost Véra's desire – and to regain his desire for her, the dialogue speculates. Among the themes, then, are desire and a wrecked marriage, truth and deception, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, as well as faith and commitment, lies and untruthfulness.

Scarce elements of plotted action do appear – in the framing of Véra, and in the *anagnorisis* fragments of her identity remake. However, the plot/character nexus has a lot missing, and the themes of the ambivalences and contradictions of desire, love and lies are disseminated onto and imbue all the characters, not just Véra. An uncritical interpretation based on a narratively oriented reading certainly *might* conclude that the open ending signals that Véra (and Michel and Monique) are on their way to a better life. This, though, would leave out the greater part of the text, which disrupts the plotted *mythos* and transgresses a representative regime of art. *That* part consists of objects and images, gazes and localities in space formations – unsayable as integral elements in the rudiments of character action. The central movement of the play clearly belongs to those images and things in space formations, and to the peculiar way those objects are rendered as visibilities in spaces, and are made sayable in the text. The animating force of the play rather seems to be of an aesthetic art regime. While images, objects and localities are working to escape and be unhinged from the *mythos*/character-bond, it appears they seek a phrasing for their own sensorial qualities *outside* the narrative story-line, in order to “speak” their own “muted” language. They need to be accounted for accordingly.

III First spatial segment

Above all, *Véra Baxter* is a complex arrangement of things, images, gazes, and localities. The reader is struck by three spatial segments moving next to, in between, and onto one

another in the flow of the text. I will account for them one by one.

The first segment has the function of an amplifying, “mirroring” extension purely in the service of the narrative line of the story. Repeated hints about Véra being framed and the ploy to have her take a lover and a summer house – both, she realises, have already been hired for her – make up the plotment. This *might* be said to lead up to the formation of a personal insight and to her possible identity remake. Yet, the ending leaves open what she will do – join The Stranger, or return to her husband, or commit suicide etc. While the story-line of character action is extremely vague, yet its rudiments make out a tripartite structure of space.

In a “reading for the plot”, the play figures Jean Baxter in a *stable, unchangeable, and impenetrable space*. He speaks, the narrator tells us, with a voice “emerging from a kind of thick silence reminiscent of the thick silence of a soundproof room” (30).¹¹ He is characterized by the others as unchangeable. His life is at one with the rules of circulation of the commodity and consumer world. Stuck in his inability to love, he hardly shows empathy or emotion. He is an automaton of the world of money and sex. Likewise, descriptions and self-characterisations place the *former* Véra in a structurally similar space. Her commitment and faithfulness have known no exteriority. These characters know nothing beyond themselves; they inhabit a space of flat identity and sameness. The *present* Véra, though, is exposed to the other extreme, the *space without borders*. Characterising it – and her – are the boundlessness of the Atlantic Ocean and its beaches, the open French windows of the huge “Colonnades” mansion, the largeness of the garden, and the surrounding

11 “à sortir d’une espèce d’épaisseur de silence qui rappelle celui d’une chambre sourde” (54).

darkness that it extends into, as well as the blurring effects on her of alcohol, the sounds, music, and cries from a party, and so on.

In between, there is a *space of ambivalence, indecision, and possible change* – bordered by both boundlessness and impenetrability – where the possible remaking of Véra’s identity *might* be said to be going on. Above all, this space is figured in Véra’s discourse (but also in that of the split and agonised Michel). While her speech is inconsistent and ambivalent, it expresses truthfulness and commitments, but also points out the “favourable” effects of drinking, dissolution, the blurring of time orientation, even deceptions about her recent encounters with a lover. The middle space of processual ambivalence is that of The Stranger, too, with his double discourse of truthful compassion whilst eliciting a re-orienting, self-formulated story from Véra, and of an aroused, uncontrollable desire for her.

Unchangeably impenetrable; borderless; and ambivalent – these space dimensions constitute the first spatial segment of *Véra Baxter*. Rudimentary, though mimetically recognisable, it is motivated by the normative requirements pertaining to representative art (Rancière). Here, objects and images are fictionally subsumed under the prevalence of plot and character action in the play’s life-world, of wholeness, and of verisimilitude. One might say they function merely as “props”.

IV Second spatial segment

The operating mode of *Véra Baxter*’s two other spatial segments is quite different. There, the sensorial quality of *objects and images* certainly comes to bear – as the emergence of *another space*, obliquely beyond that of the first segment.

First, a few general, textually all-pervasive examples of objects and images, here emerging in the narrator's voice at various points:¹²

[About "The Colonnades" estate:]

[And here the ocean. Loud. White. – Suddenly, its roar which blends into that of the turbulence, then fades. [...] Suddenly, the music of the turbulence, continuously fierce and harsh, distant. [...] Laughter and cries descend on the shut estate. [...] So, one realizes that the outside turbulence and "The Colonnades" are two hundred metres from one another, that they *look at each other* of sorts: the one folded in upon itself, motionless, the other shameless, indiscreet, violently trespassing, spattering the other.]

[About the hotel bar and Thionville:]

Gusts of turbulence in the bar, [on the grounds, in Thionville,] coming and going, as if trying to enter, to find a place somewhere: a strange threatening presence, a potential contradiction. [...] The outside turbulence grows more audible, harsh, ironic [(as if it were gibing at this *truth* in question)] (22-23).

[About "The Colonnades" estate and its gazes:]

[Instead of finding her battered by, isolated, impenetrable to the outside world, we find Véra Baxter intensely tuned in to listening to this exterior world. Like a blind, deeply absent-minded person, she attempts – not without a certain clumsiness – to dance to the tune of the outside turbulence. To tune herself to it, on the *outside*. Outside the story of Véra Baxter. [...] Phrases of strange language launched across the French grounds of Thionville, like summonses. [...] Roar of the ocean. And all the while these lingering remains of cries and laughter from an assuaged celebration. One sees what she is looking at: the outside turbulence. In the image she is blurred foreground. One looks at it with her. [...] A

12 At times, the English translation skips crucial sections of the French original. These have been translated and inserted by me, and are here, as well as in subsequent cases, rendered in bold, italicised brackets in the quotations. The guiding, italicised captions are also mine.

man [sees] and then looks. The bond of a gaze – subsequent to that of roar – takes effect. *Véra Baxter has been seen. And sees.*]

[*About the castle at Chantilly [sic]:*]

[Gigantic ceremonial of this love story, outside of all legend. We are speaking of this medieval one [as a textual play on the word, also: this middle-age one, *LS*], of Véra and Jean Baxter, our contemporaries.]¹³

13 [*About the “Colonnades” estate:*]

“Et voici la mer. Forte. Blanche. – Son bruit tout à coup qui se mêle à celui de la turbulence et puis qui disparaît. [...] La musique de la turbulence, tout à coup, toujours vive et aiguë, lointaine. [...] Rires et cris arrivent sur la villa fermée [...] On découvre ainsi que la turbulence extérieure et “Les Colonnades” sont à deux cents mètres l’une de l’autre, qu’elles *se regardent* en quelque sorte: l’une repliée sur elle-même, inerte, l’autre impudente, indiscreète, l’offensant, l’éclaboussant de sa violence” (10-11).

[*About the hotel bar and Thionville:*]

“La turbulence arrive par bouffées vers le bar, dans les parcs, dans Thionville, repart, revient, comme cherchant à entrer, à se poser quelque part: menace étrange, démenti en puissance” (16). [...] “Et déjà, la turbulence extérieure se fait entendre, aiguë, ironique (comme si elle se jouait de cette *vérité* en question)” (20).

[*About the “Colonnades” estate and its gazes:*]

“Au contraire de la trouver abattue, isolée, calfeutrée contre le monde extérieur, nous trouvons Véra Baxter dans l’écoute intense de ce monde extérieur. Comme aveuglée, profondément distraite, elle essaye – non sans une certaine gaucherie – de danser sur l’air de la turbulence extérieure. A s’accorder à elle, au *dehors*. Au dehors de l’histoire de Véra Baxter. [...] Des phrases en langue étrangère lancées à travers les parcs français de Thionville, comme des appels” (21). [...] “Bruit de la mer. – Et toujours ces restes de cris et de rires d’une fête apaisée. – On voit ce qu’elle regarde: la turbulence extérieure. Elle est en amorce dans l’image. On la regarde avec elle. [...] Un homme [voit] et regarde à son tour. – Le lien d’un regard – après celui du bruit – s’opère. *Véra Baxter a été vue. Et voit*” (22).

[*About the castle at Chantilly [sic]:*]

“Cérémonial gigantesque de cette histoire d’amour, hors de toute légende. Nous parlons de celle moyenâgeuse, de Véra et Jean Baxter, nos contemporains” (54).

In spite of their directional functions in *Véra Baxter* as a film script and as a theatre text, these lengthy passages from the narrator clearly transcend a director's instrumental "feed" or cues on stage or set. Objects, images, and spaces here voiced by the narrator, as well as his auditive and visual apperception and interpretation of them, carry their own aesthetic and creative weight. Importantly, these localised phrases and performatives of the narrator's are also shared and repeated by the characters, both in dialogues (way off from their *plot*), and in their minds, as seen above in the switches to indirect narration. Passages like those quoted above, then, work themselves free, stand out in the text all along, and form sudden poetic-dramatic sideways shifts to another space. These are happenings, events. They transfer the objectness of things to an oblique topography. There, their materialities are fused by self-referentiality to each other, and comprise a large number of contexts. They open an alternative, "exterior" discursive space.

A new world to be heard and seen and re-embodied arises, and affects us. In the quoted passages, we witness a topographical transfer in that world's external pressure to be absorbed into phenomenality, and *vice versa*. The alterity of its space, "outside of all legend" and narrative, stands obliquely away from the triviality of the story, and makes the text truly act. We also witness that the alterity emanates from the upheaval of "mimetic" binary opposites (outside/inside, subject/object): the turbulence, roar, grounds, music, laughter, cries, dancing and the "gigantic ceremonial" are anthropomorphised. By impact, they mark the bodies of the depicted characters. The image-objects even turn into a "strange language", *summoning* the characters *outside* of the plain "story". And Véra gets blended into that external space through the bond of a reciprocal gaze and hearing. The iteration of these rupturing image-objects and localities,

then, fuses them into a space to the side that turns the text to “act”.¹⁴

Like Véra, the reader both marvels and wonders at the mystery of the objects and images of the alternative space. Distantly, they are “familiar”, yet at the same time they are separated from the characters and us, they are outside the “mimetic” life-world. The “mystery” is similar to the double poetics of the aesthetic image found in other modern thinkers of space (Sartre, Bachelard, Blanchot):¹⁵ in an animating manner, the image negates the world, and gives life to a *distant* imaginary space to be formulated in language. But on the other hand, this image is *presenced* to me – materially, sensorially, affectively – and works as a mere reduplication (*dédoublement*) of *itself*, in impacting ruptures. Both separated from the life-world, yet by impact seen or heard in it, as something *different* that affects me, the image and the space it engenders, challenge and work to recast language in order to be phrased. A double negation, then, is at play, two kinds of powers, as textual action. While the image negates my world by its *imaging power of rupture*, it also challenges and activates the *phrasal power of continuity* (Rancière). That paradox springs from aesthetic art’s equality of *pathos* and *logos*, of *opsis* and *mythos*, resulting in the possible redistribution of the sensible: the structure of what can be seen, and of what can be said. This “mystery” can be observed in the

14 In the analysis below, I organise them into a second and a third spatial segment.

15 Sartre: *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (2004); Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space* (1964); Blanchot: *The Space of Literature* (1982).

second and the third spatial segments of *Véra Baxter*. Here are some further examples from the second:¹⁶

Opsis. Mainly two separated locations – the hotel bar and “The Colonnades” mansion (there is also a short sequence at Chantilly) – constitute the *opsis* of the play. Characters in one location sit waiting and talking about characters in the other location, and the narrator tells us of characters moving between them (Monique, The Stranger): this circulation connects them. However, the “perforation” of the localities into one another occurs by way of “isolated” material elements figuring in *both* locations: alcohol, emptiness, darkness, luxuriousness, the roar of wind, dancing, music, laughter and cries. In relation to the story, this is already a representational sideways slide (to the margins of *diegesis*). But that shift opens up a new, second space. The oblique shift sensorially presences the mentioned objects by reduplicating them, over and over. This foregrounds the literal separation from the rooms, of the objects found in them. The new spatial *fusion* comes into being, then, by a *rupture*: the presencing impact of the mentioned sensorial elements. Quite apart from the story-line of character action, this *textual* action is produced by objects and images that make themselves free. They break away as

16 By *Véra Baxter*'s own logic of performativity, the materiality of the spatial “phenomena” of things, images and localities that offer themselves up for analysis, distributes itself as positions in a new discursive topography: by the text's own performative creativity, *i.e.* by the emerging space's repetitive self-referentiality, the elements that are obliquely fused together as a new space “belong” to a) that which is to be sensed/seen/heard (*opsis*, places, landscapes, the turbulence, the terrible grounds), b) that by which to see (“mediating” perspectives, gazes), and c) that which is sensing and is delimiting knowledge, meaning and identity (names, “identities”). In the *phenomenal* world, those positions would parallel the object world, the apprehension process, and the subjectivity delimiting meaning, identity and knowledge. In *Véra Baxter*, they are all offered up for sensorial estrangement, reflection, and re-embodiment.

an independent, emerging spatiality. *Textual* action, then, emerges as another, sensorially inter-rupted “story”.

Mediation. This fused-but-suspended spatiality also extends into the localised topography of mediation. Here, the oblique material slide can be seen in the dynamics of the play’s perspectives and gazes, its gaze-ness. An unusually active narrator’s perspective often interrupts the reader’s perspective. He addresses the playing as well as us. Thus, the reader’s gaze is fused to the narrator’s gaze. In the linked gazes, however, it is their material presence *as gazes* that is foregrounded. By ruptured linkage, this spatial trajectory (*opsis* – reader’s gaze – narrator’s gaze) extends even further, and includes The Stranger. Despite his initially impartial perspective and “understanding” of the thematic problems of framing, desire, and dissolution, and of how to ameliorate them,¹⁷ he too gets engulfed by the very same problems (not least when with Véra, who clearly awakens his desire). His gaze breaks away from privileged “insight”, and then emerges by mere affective impact as a gaze onto other gazes (in postures, he sees the characters, and us, seeing). Likewise, the reader and the narrator see *him* seeing. And to the same topography of gaze-ness, by a further foregrounding shift to the side of dramatic action and “mimetic” representation, are added the acting *characters’* gazes. In a series of instances, side-text and dialogue foreground *how*, or rather *that* they see, not the “contents” of what they see.

The aforementioned sensorial qualities of *opsis*, then, fused with the materiality of “mediating” gazes, open up a space beyond signification, an impacting mystery to be phrased

17 In the narrator’s ironically disruptive phrasing: “The connection has been made with the customer: the privileged observer of the story” (23). [“Le lien est noué avec le client, c’est-à-dire le spectateur privilégié de l’histoire” (19).]

anew. An oblique linkage occurs – of material entities that are literally separate and torn away from everyday functions and meaning. This actually occurs – performatively happens – as textual events, and it allows for something distant to emerge into presence.

Places, landscapes. In what emerges as space, sensorial traces of places and landscapes are inscribed as well. In the dialogue lines, the textual movements into cities, villages, landscapes and continents are in part places where Véra and Jean once spent time together, but mostly where Véra met with the lover that had been hired for her, and Jean eloped with his mistresses. Yet these locations break away from the character/story nexus, and stand forth as a spatially fused, oblique visibility. Linked are the sensorial qualities of localities; those of Thionville-en-mêr (where the play is set) and those of Paris, Chantilly, Bordeaux, Arcanges, Venice, the Balearic Islands, Cannes, and further, the Atlantic beaches, and California. While the sensorial impact of these places and landscapes comes to bear, their “perforated” fusion also extends into the other works of the Véra Baxter “cycle”, and into Duras’ whole *œuvre*. There, the same or similar torn-out objects and their linkages connect the *Véra Baxter* text to the topography of Duras’ entire lifework of living, art works, agony and bliss. Correspondingly, the quotidian, *thematic* trivialities of the phenomenal life-world – of faith and unfaithfulness, truth and lies – fade from focus.

Names. When asked by Véra why he has come to see her, The Stranger replies:

Because of your name I think. As soon as I’d heard it, back there at the Hôtel de Paris, for the first time, I wanted to see the person who had that name. (*Pause.*) Just because of those two words. (*Pause.*) Véra (*pause*) Baxter. (*Pause.*) That name. – VÉRA BAXTER [*repeats her name as if she heard it for the first time*]: Véra Baxter. – THE STRANGER: Yes. (*Pause.*)

I recognized it. (*Pause.*) Do you remember? – VÉRA BAXTER [*enters into a state of madness, without being aware of it*]: No. (40)¹⁸

A topographical archaeology of oblique traces is inscribed into the main character's name, Véra Baxter.¹⁹ Etymologically, the name-image of "Véra" carries the archaeological-sensorial elements of faith/faithfulness, truth, care, and identity stability. A person named Véra sees, and (supposedly) believes what she sees. But by contrast and rupture, the name-image of "Baxter" (a variant of "baker") carries archaeological-sensorial elements of the folk-myth scorn of *de backer's* or the baker's, *i.e.* an illegitimate, fatherless child. The name "Baxter", then, speaks of an identity genetically unaccounted for and without stable roots – of one exterior to firm fixation in a personal identity. Such a person, it may be argued, observes without quite seeing (who she is), and is observed without quite being seen. The entire name-image of "Véra Baxter", then, carries the paradoxical qualities of the one who faithfully knows herself – *but also* of the one who fathoms and

18 "À cause de votre nom je croix. (*ferme les yeux, cherche*) Dès qu'il a été prononcé, là-bas, à l'Hôtel de Paris, pour la première fois, j'ai eu envie de voir qui le portait. (*temps*) Seulement à cause de ces deux mots (*temps*) : Véra (*temps*) Baxter (*temps*) De ce nom. – VÉRA BAXTER (*répète son nom comme si elle l'entendait pour la première fois*) : Véra Baxter. – L'INCONNU : Oui. (*temps*) Je l'ai reconnu. (*temps*) Vous vous souvenez? – VÉRA BAXTER (*entre dans la folie, sans le sentir*) : Non" (105).

19 In *Suzanna Andler* (where the doubling character of *The Stranger* had not yet been conceived) the final, lengthy dialogue takes place between Suzanna and Michel Cayre. Here, a parallel trace of the "archaeology" and its impact of "overdetermination" analysed in the following is pronounced by Michel: "Has it never occurred to you... that something else... another story, more, more distant... intervened? But without us knowing about it? without it being visible to us? [...] That your entire life through there may have been unbeknownst to all – this lasting permanence unattainable to anybody" (*My transl.*).

is observed by an unknown, unseen and muted “truth” and “knowledge” about herself, lodged in topographical reaches of an unattainable, yet sensorially impacting beyond.

Furthermore, these archaeological refractions extend to include the proper names in the titles of the two other works of the “cycle”: the film (1977) and the first play (1968). The film’s name-image of *Baxter*, *Véra Baxter* intensifies the ruptures between “phenomenal truth” and a muffled yet intervening “knowledge” of an “object gaze” at the margins of the names. Fused with the ever-widening oblique space, attention shifts back and forth between the archaeological qualities of its components. The name-images in the first play of the cycle, *Suzanna Andler*, has a similar, silenced “overdetermination”. The archaeology of the name “Suzanna” goes back to the apocryphal anecdote of Shoshannah, the pure “lily”, in the *Book of Daniel* (Ch. 13), and extends throughout the entire history of art. It carries the same aspects as those of “Véra” – truth-steadfastness-faith in the world one sees. But in similar fashion to “Baxter”, the name-image of “Andler” has the archaeological quality of being seen (by another gaze) without oneself seeing that gaze. It plays on “antler” (the deer-stag’s horns), from *ante ocularis*. “Andler/antler”, in other words, obliquely speaks as that which resides before the eyes, yet cannot or can hardly be seen by them, but by another gaze. Also the entire name-image of “Suzanna Andler”, then, is linked to the emerging archaeological-material space under analysis.

We now better realise how the plays and the film in an obliquely emerging space of “mystery” can link the impacting material elements of three vast complexes: *opsis* localities, place and landscape topographies (“that to be sensed/seen/heard”) are fused to those of the topography of gazes (“that by which to see”), and further to those of names and identities (“that sensing, that delimiting knowledge, meaning and

identity”). By carving them all out as a new space, by way of their self-referentiality, the text makes them emerge as a new sensual-discursive space to be phrased and reflected upon. In all of them, now unmuffled, something *sees* and/or *speaks back*, working to be visible and sayable through the liberation of the sensoriality embedded in their archaeology. Thus, the constitution of the phenomenal world we have “faith” in, of how we apperceive it, and of the knowledgeable meaning and identity we elicit, are being radically questioned, in an ever-extending oblique space which occurs as events. This second space segment, then, animates and functions as a generator of textual action. Its “happening” is a possible redistribution of the sensorial traits of visibility and sayability in what our world, our apperception, and our subjective constitution are made up of. Thereby arises also the possibility for a questioning of “the ideological”, and for the re-embodiment of “meaning” and knowledge.

V Third spatial segment

While Rancière’s theory is basically of linguistic orientation – aesthetic images and objects in space are textual events that creatively join a *combinatorics* with the *affects of the impact of suspense and ruptures* (2007a: 46) – his approach to these phenomena is inter-aesthetic, and also furthers the study of converging in and between art forms, genres, and media. The identified basic dynamics of aesthetic space for textual action will here be inflected to a reading of *Véra Baxter’s* third spatial segment, but I will also formulate initial answers to the second basic question I posed – of how phenomena of converging can be related to the animating force in the space/textual action nexus. Though clearly of the same structural kind as the second, a third spatial segment motivates its subdivision, first, because of its accent

value, *i.e.* the sensorial force of impact and the prevalence of things and images that make it up. Second, its images belong to the world of natural phenomena, and finally, it best clarifies the propensity of *Véra Baxter* to converge with other genres, art forms and media.

The turbulence. In the narrator's voice and in the characters' exchanges about their miserable lives of desires and deception, the text throughout reduplicates the powerful image of turbulence. The linkage of its sensorial presences makes an ineffable space emerge, richly modulated: as sounds coming and going (music, laughter, screams; 21; 26; 29; 39);²⁰ as gusts of air, as a storm, and as wind (22; 35).²¹ It is presented as vibrations, as light waxing and waning (36; 41),²² and as a strange, inviting language across the grounds (1980: 9; 21), violently spattering its gaze upon the world, which is folded in upon itself (1980: 11).

Crucial is the *creative* textual event of *Véra's* merging with this turbulence: she is summoned by it, and suddenly: "In the image she is blurred foreground. One looks at it with her".²³ The text turns her into an inaugural zone of the image, of the turbulence itself, which – at the same time – she, and we, are looking at (1980: 22). Importantly, its impact stems from an outside, at a distance from the trivialities of story or legend, trying to utter itself, and to establish its alterior space within phenomenality. It is critically "gibing" at "this *truth* in question" (23), but makes its threat a "harsh, ironic" though rectifying "contradiction" (22), all of which causes the characters to merge with it. Striving for a visibility hitherto unknown, and seeking a phrasable language, out of which

20 1980: 9-11; 35; 46; 50; 98.

21 1980: 16; 79-80.

22 1980: 87; 108.

23 "Elle est en amorce dans l'image. On la regarde avec elle" (22).

another story could be formulated, the event exemplifies how ruptures of the aesthetic image-space animate the text to make something new happen.

Moreover, the turbulence complex exemplifies the occurrence of generic converging. In the case at hand (and in a theatre text), the prosaic-novelistic “flatness” of dedramatised representation figures as a corollary precisely to the textually powering space-engendering image. Slowness and obliqueness are the peak effects. Character action is slowed down in favour of durative textual progress (also abundantly marked by the narrator). In addition, the intruding space spills over into the dialogue: its increasing attention to the strangeness of the emerging space defocuses from the familiar thematic conflicts of the character action. The space’s search for phrasing side-tracks representation, and shifts the focus away from character-action and plot onto the textual progress, which takes the shape of slow, dedramatised representation. Crucial is the insight gained – converging occurs as a corollary to the sensorial ruptures and textual phrasing of the thing-image to emerge as space, *i.e.* as the paradoxical work of separation-and-fusion.

Other thing-images dedramatise similarly. In the flat prose both of characters and narrator they gain attention as a space of strangeness and mystery. Examples of such spatial boundlessness are the Atlantic Ocean, its wind, and the Atlantic beaches – as well as the forest landscape of Thionville, and the ponds and woods of Chantilly. Also connected are extensive topographies of light and of sounds, whose auditive and visual flaring up and waning modulate into a tactile topography of rhythm. The narrator’s and the characters’ discourse, in which they dwell on buildings and apartments, as well as their discursive panning of rooms and objects of furniture, must also be mentioned here. The material quality of such sensorial impressions groping for linguistic phrasing

challenges the characters' life-world; they are "scary", they "contradict". But the intruding space that they engender is also an "invitation" to be engulfed in a boundlessness. It may be strange and violent, yet it activates wonder and mystery, even redemption and bliss.

The terrible grounds. Another powerful thing-image, repeated throughout the text – that of "the terrible grounds" by the beaches around the mansion²⁴ – seemingly exerts no affect at all of an invitation to join, just the impact of mere terror. But only partly so, since ultimately that territory of exterior violence is also transformed into a creative textual event. It occurs when Véra and The Stranger are conduced to circumscribe the "grounds" and do so in their brief staccato speculations about an encrypted place in the beach landscape on which an act of violent separation allegedly has taken place. Véra's "version" of "the terrible grounds" inflects her agony to the owners of the mansion, and to the near past. She sketches a conjugal crisis, domestic violence, and death.²⁵ The Stranger places the violent event in the distant past of sequestered women on the Atlantic Coast during the Crusades:

24 It figures extensively in the last scenes – in Véra's phone conversation with her husband, and in the lengthy exchange between Véra and The Stranger, as well as in the narrator's voice. Some random examples, here from Véra's lines: "the grounds here... it's terrible... terrible" (30); "and then the grounds... so deserted [...] if you screamed... no one would come" (31); "The grounds are frightening" (39). – ["ces parcs ici... c'est terrible... terrible" (57); "et puis, ces parcs... tellement déserts [...] on crierait... personne ne viendrait" (62); "Les parcs font peur" (102).]

25 "They're more or less separated. They had it built and then... (*Rather long silence.*) Something must have happened here, a few years ago... I can't remember too well... the wife tried to kill herself, or else someone tried to kill her... (*Stop. She falls silent. Silence.*)" (40). – ["Ils sont plus ou moins séparés. Ils ont fait construire ça et puis... (*silence assez long*). Il a dû se passer quelque chose ici, il y a quelques années... je me souviens mal... C'est la femme qui a essayé de se tuer, ou bien on a essayé de la tuer... (*arrêt*)" (103).]

in their horrific fears of exteriority, they turned to the night around them and “began talking to the trees, to the sea, to the animals in the forest”. “Were they burned?” asks Véra, and The Stranger replies “That’s right, yes. (*Pause.*) One of them was called Véra Baxter” (40).²⁶

The sensorial power of agony imparted by the oblique space-image here seems to overwhelm Véra and to reinforce the plight of her quotidian life, since its initial textual effect in her “version” is a mere “translation” of the “dramatic” discourse of a boulevard-world life she knows only too well. That effect is transformed, however, when linked to The Stranger’s “version”. Out of the grounds’ speechless impact, the textual event of a new discourse is generated. It includes both of the characters as well as the space of exteriority as productive interlocutors. And, crucially, their speculating on these topographical margins by, as it were, making their exteriority accessible to Véra Baxter’s name, transposes their sensorial affect into productive “legibility”. The text’s shift to sensorial affect here extends the space of the (nominal, non-essential) discursivity of a life-world, with all its ambiguities. That way, the terror of agony can be handled and made productive. Their two versions taken together actually demonstrate how the predicament of originary, violent separation

26 “Et c’est comme ça qu’elles ont commencé à parler aux arbres, à la mer, aux animaux de la forêt... – VÉRA BAXTER (*off*) (*temps, se souvient*) : On les a brûlées?... – L’INCONNU : C’est ça, oui. (*temps*) L’une d’entre elles s’appelait Véra Baxter...” (106). As can be seen in *Suzanna Andler*, where Michel Cayre utters the corresponding passages while mentioning Michelet, there is here a (hidden) reference to the – to many provocative – corporeal thinking of the historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and his prodigious, recurring motifs of the woman (medieval or modern), her material body, and blood as crucial driving forces of historical generation – alluded to as a witch in constant danger of being punished. A debate in France about the historian’s views was partly induced by Roland Barthes’ admirable book *Michelet par lui-même* (1954).

(which installs exteriority for phenomenal existence) can be dealt with in human life: stifled existence is transformed by a decision to “read” the oblique spatial mark of violence, in this case by shifting from stale “mimetic” narration to rudiments of alternative representation. At the same time, such discourse re-embodies and makes topographies habitable. Both material agonies and mortal dangers, as well as the blisses of an illimitable exteriority, can be seen, faced, voiced, fused, and phrased for the future. – Even the most “negative” of thing-images in *Véra Baxter*’s image-space, then – that of the terrible grounds – finds a phrasing and is another demonstration of the powering role of space in textual creativity. Duras here demonstrates in art the generating and animating force of textual action – a power that “fundamentally” resides in a space which J. Hillis Miller calls “the preoriginal ground of the ground”, and an “unplaceable place”. “The atoptical” is another name he gives to that locus of primary separation and the originary performative event (1995: 7).

VI Converging phenomena in Véra Baxter or The Atlantic Beaches

Aesthetic space as the generative power of textual action in Duras is connected to the vital role played by the “visibilities” of senses and perception in Durasian discourse. Her aesthetics actively combines “visibilising” affect with alternate, “unheard” discursive continuity. Thereby, her aesthetics performs textually on two levels. It not only conflates and converges the common ordering of spatial sensoria and of what they enable us to see, hear and feel (“a redistribution of the sensible”; Rancière 2007b). The ongoing converging of the senses in Duras’ space also prompts and provides the link to the converging of generic, artistic and medial phenomena. To

give an overview, I will here sketch the variety of converging factors in *Véra Baxter*. This will lead up to some conclusions regarding my third basic question: how the motoring energy of the space/textual action nexus and converging may play a role in the de-ideologisation of culture.

It is in the rupturing/rephrasing qualities of the space-engendering image that the phenomenon of converging is installed. The sensorial, affective exertion of Duras' textually acting images fundamentally depends upon two qualities, one in the continuity dimension of the play, the other in its register of focalisation: *slowness* (linked to duration), and *obliqueness*. A handy phrase to characterise textual progress in *Véra Baxter* would be "Slow, dead slow; and sideways!" In this *dramatic* text, paradoxically, slowness and obliqueness are prime movers in its representational mode – for the impacts of the images to be stated, reach a level of sayability, and textually perform exertion for a changed visibility. Stated in structuralist terms – while *slowness* in the continuity dimension refers to the syntactic or syntagmatic level, opening onto alterity to be "said" or formulated; *obliqueness* refers to the paradigmatic level of equivalence, *i.e.* that of similarity and difference, opening onto alterity to be apperceived or "seen".

Reflecting in such terms on the text's representational mode – *slowness/duration* and *obliqueness* – shows us, first, that the changed visibilities and sayabilities are linked to the qualities of the theatre text's representational mode. Second, it shows that the alterity installed by the visible and the sayable in Duras is related to Rancière's theory of how the art of the aesthetic regime exerts image and space as *sentence-images*. Third, it emphasises the basically linguistic provenance of Rancière's aesthetics of the sentence-image. And fourth, these considerations underscore that the qualities of *Véra Baxter*'s representational mode fundamentally match precisely the dominant qualities of the series of *converging* representational

modes that this theatre text prompts for use, *i.e.* the text's propensity for modes characteristic of other genres, art forms and media (and *vice versa*). The reason why this is so, it turns out, is that the prime qualities of these converging forms are, on the one hand, precisely the combinatorics of *stating/telling/writing/presenting slowly and at length*, and, on the other, (by sliding, sweeping, panning foci) *showing beyond/behind/below/to the side of/askew*. Let us look briefly into the major converging modes in question.²⁷ All these variants conduce the reader to focus, not only on what the single phrasal variant stately represents, but also, and importantly, towards the margins of the represented, for what the represented obliquely might make visible.

Temps mort (1). Typical of *Véra Baxter's* mode are innumerable sequences rendered in part as "straight" stage and/or camera directions, tuned to amplify a mimetic character/story-line/scene representation. Many are pause and silence indicators. But only in part, since the silences, the pauses, and even the "camera instructions" attain a frail but strongly sensorial textual-dramatic existence: a topography of their own, so to speak. For example, they extend way beyond being a cue to pan, and develop a fragmentary "story" or "prosaic poem" on how the gaze of the camera either lags behind the character's gaze, or moves up to and surpasses it. They even phrase scenes where the object of the character's gaze is rendered as an image – whose blurred, gazing character is an integral foreground of the image (1980: 22). Furthermore, silences and pauses *pervade* the text in both dialogic and narrator's segments, in which the narrator's interpretational glosses are integral. Such pauses also blur or superimpose a shot or a

27 Modes analysed here are well established already in *Suzanna Andler* (1968), as well as being highly prominent in the film *Baxter, Véra Baxter* (1977).

panning onto another one, frequently depicting another local topography. There are also pausing “silences” – in which the sensorial sound or image of one shot is superimposed onto the image and the sound of another. All of these elements appear in a complex apperceptive variety. They slow down the phrasing and the textual progress, and repeat or duplicate themselves in slightly alternative textual formulations. “Mimetically” they reduce the velocity of development within the slice of represented reality. And clearly – both on textual level and in represented reality – they install a temporal dimension of vast duration. These phenomena converge *Véra Baxter* with those of numerous *temps mort* variants – well-established components of *modern film* and of the *modern novel*, in the tradition of the *nouveau roman*, for instance.

Tableaux. In a great number of scenes, moreover, *Véra Baxter* applies the *tableau* (of characters), shared with the art of *painting*. Character positions are given and gaze directions projected. Independent of dramatic action, *represented time* is radically slowed down, and the image and the space represented are retained, for the exertion of sensorial affect. While reading the tableau we observe its image and given space, yet we are conducted to looking sidelong at the image, for visibilities in its margins. By the same token, *textually presented time* (in which no character action occurs) is prolonged to generate a certain duration. Even textual signifiers, then, are “slowed down” and made to linger. This double effect of tableaux – the slowing-down of represented image, and of presented phrasing – contributes obliquely to the coming-to-sight of a peculiar spatiality. In some cases, an overwhelming silence accompanies the tableaux. Unleashed from dramatised action – *silences* figure paradoxically in their own sensorial right, as occurring *events* represented in the text: “Silence everywhere. [Here and on the outside.] Silence as if it were

an event” (39).²⁸ Silence in a sense performs itself, sensorially, also on the textual level. The effect of such a peculiar phrasing is that represented images, as well as images as presenced signifiers, can be apperceived at length. Reading shifts sidelong, or is induced to “go beyond” images, to perceive the space they make emerge.

Postures of gazes figure as another representational mode – a converging component that the play shares with the art of *painting*. Sometimes two characters’ gazes meet and are retained. Sometimes tableau-like postures occur, as when one character’s gaze heads in one direction while another’s is directed at the one looking (sees the one seeing). Again, while seeing the represented postures and gaze directions, our apperception is inflected towards the sensorial margins of the postures, for oblique visibilities. Also textually, the repeated presencing of postures as concatenated, material signifiers to be phrased makes us look “beyond” or to the side, towards a hitherto unseen space of imagination.

Dedramatisation. Space that emerges sidelong of the retained tableaux; pervading stillnesses; silences of fixed gazes; and “silences” of shots, pannings and sound images in sliding motion or reciprocal superimposition – all of these elements figure as the dedramatisation of character action and “story-line”. As such, the theatre text with its paraphernalia of drama shares its representational mode with the “flatness” of *prose fiction* of both the 19th and the late 20th centuries. To be sure, in a variety of such prose art, the foregrounding of the duration and the slowly developing continuity dimension of represented slices of reality, but also that of the textuality of signifiers, allows for the exertion of sensorial impacts – of objects, things and images, and of textual

28 “Silence partout. Ici et au dehors. Silence comme un événement” (98).

signifiers to perform the task of making an alternative space emerge.

Temps mort (2). The representational modes that *Véra Baxter* shares with *modern film* and *modern novels* of the *nouveau roman* movement are those appearing in works by artists such as Michelangelo Antonioni, George Perec and the OULIPO Group. The *temps mort* mode of their art is often referred to as post-diegetic representation. For our purposes in the context of Duras, that term can be extended and phrased as a *lateral-, pre- and post-diegetic mode*. In film, this mode frequently implies the lingering shot of a space, a landscape or a scene to the side of or beyond characters, after the “action” has finished or moved on – in this manner giving the “background” or the “setting” a performative “life” of its own. Obviously, as “textual” action, the topographically affective visuality and the pictorial interest of things and objects are particularly enhanced at the cost of story-lines and narratively arranged character actions. Several of Marguerite Duras’ films are well-known for possessing this quality. She also developed the aesthetic practice of “obliquely” filming the filmatic shooting at and of film sets. In the micro-realism of the *nouveau roman*, textual time moves slowly, and it forwards *things*, again at the expense of plot, character and story-time. In film, the camera lingers on, or wanders along the materiality of objects, signs and gazes, with the affective consequence of alternative visibilities appearing, obliquely to the side of those in the service of emplotment and characters.

De-ideologisation. The emergence of an alternative space in *Véra Baxter* is coupled with the slow and oblique textual action within such representational modes. To these modes belong the innumerable disruptions and the traversing presence of *ellipses*, as well. While factually pervading the dialogues and narrative segments (dots, punctuated words, incomplete phrases), but also while appearing in the wider function of

being separating omissions as well as life-world disparities – common to all the modes discussed here – *ellipses* continuously suspend, shift, superimpose, and alter perspectives and contexts. Ellipses also side-track the quotidian and keep interfering with the trivial story-line of the slice of commodified, boulevard “reality” that is represented in the play. That “reality” is estranged by the creative potentials of the muffled *material* alterity of the space emanating. This sideways-shifting, *lipogrammatic aesthetics* with its elliptical bracketing opposes the inauthentic misery of the delimited, late modern existence of the play’s characters: it seems to be the “raison d’être” of *Véra Baxter* as a work of art. The play, then, and its constantly, slightly altered variants and circulated repetitions – as “scénario”, stage play and film – are possibly a critique of ideology. *Véra Baxter* is a material re-embodiment, made possible by the textual transfer of oblique material marks whose impacts carve out a spatially fused interval, a lateral fissure on stifled bodies and landscapes. A possibility is opened to consider and opt for a legibility of the impacting space and the power of its marks. Such doings are effects of textual actions with the proclivity to alter “erroneous relation[s] between consciousness and material reality”, writes Miller (1995: 194).

The functions of the most telling examples of converging phenomena in these rearrangements are those of the play’s second and third spatiality. There, the typically flowing, lateral Durasian image-space comes into being in the fusion of *and* the separation – from each other, and from a “human” life-world – of the localities, gazes, landscapes, names, identities, other art works, and powerful natural phenomena. While shifting attention away from story-content in the register of textual continuity (slow), their functions in the register of focalisation (oblique) inaugurate topographies that come to bear, precisely by the lateral/pre/post-diegetic spatiality of the *temps mort*. Materially, they are all given time – and they are

endowed with the propensity to be sensorially presented, and reflectively reformulated, in opposition to quotidian, instrumental existence.

VII In conclusion

In my analytical sketch we have studied how aesthetic space installations contribute to the power of textual action. Duras' peculiar space *happens* – and prompts us to reflecting upon basic conditions of possibility: upon the visible and the sayable, and what can be made to be so; upon what is “not mine”, and what could be, or can be “mine”.

Exposure to Duras' peculiar space means exposure not only to violence, pain, grief, sadness, and melancholy, but also to a highly constructive otherness; it is the basis, even, for the emergence of possible realisations of dreams. Embodied ideologies of truths and lies, faith and deceit certainly regulate the human life-world. When becoming unbearable to the extent of undoing our lives, they may be reformulated in a textually phrased and acting space, in which sensorial materiality matters. In such a space, categorised, instrumentalised and repressed things and images are made to be seen first, and then to be formulated afresh. Faced with rule-ridden spaces of commodified narratives, the sensorial emergence of a space of images-as-things-and-objects represents an alterity – for things have no will or intentions or plots. While phrasability is free, the “story” will have to be made – differently. Materiality matters.

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Culture as Performance – Developing a Concept of Performance

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During recent years our understanding of cultural processes has changed considerably; and so has our concept of culture. We no longer proceed only from the assumption that culture has to be understood as text made up of signs that have to be read, as the concept of culture that dominated since the linguistic turn in the seventies prescribes it: “culture as text”. We have come to understand that culture is also performance. It is difficult to overlook the extent to which culture is created as and in performances – not only in performances of the different arts but, first and foremost in performances of rituals, festivals, political rallies, sports competitions, games, fashion shows and the like – performances which, in a mediatized form, reach out to millions of people. Hence it follows that the concept of performance, that performance theory, is in the centre and at the heart of all debates in cultural, social and art studies.

In the following, I shall propose a concept of performance which is derived from the experimental theatre and perfor-

mance art of the last forty years. But I argue that it can be effectively applied to all kinds of live performances. I shall present and explain the concept by pursuing four arguments:¹

1. A performance comes into being through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, through their encounter and interaction.
2. A performance is transitory and ephemeral. Nonetheless, whatever occurs in the course of it comes into being *hic et nunc* and is experienced as present in a particularly intense way.
3. A performance does not transmit given meanings. Rather, it is the performance itself which brings forth the meanings that come into being during its course.
4. Performances are characterized by their “eventness”. The specific mode of experience they allow for is a particular form of liminal experience.

First argument: Interaction or co-presence of actors and spectators

A performance takes place in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. For every performance requires two groups of people, the “doers” and the “onlookers”, who have to assemble at a certain time and place in order to share this situation, a span of lifetime. A performance arises out of their encounter – out of their interaction.

That is to say that in a performance the media conditions are completely different from those underlying the production and reception of texts or artefacts. While the actors do something – move through the space, perform gestures, manipulate

¹ Regarding the following arguments cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008.

objects, speak and sing – the spectators perceive them and react. It may well be the case that such reactions, at least partly, are internal – imaginative and cognitive – i.e. purely mental processes. However, most of the reactions and responses can be perceived by the actors and the other spectators, e.g., giggling, laughing, shouting, yawning, snoring, sobbing, crying, eating, drinking, commenting on what is happening, getting up, running out, slamming the doors and so on and so forth. The perception of such responses, in its turn, results in further perceptible reactions. Whatever the actors do, it has an effect on the spectators; and whatever the spectators do, it has an effect on the actors and the other spectators. It can be concluded from this situation that a performance comes into being only during its course. It begets itself through the interactions between actors and spectators. Hence it follows that its course cannot be entirely planned or predicted. It is an autopoietic process, which is characterized by a high degree of contingency. Whatever occurs in the course of a performance cannot be completely foreseen at its beginning. Many elements emerge in the course of a performance as a consequence of certain interactions.

Of course, the actors set the decisive preconditions for the progression of the performance – preconditions that are fixed by the process of *mise-en-scène*. Nonetheless, they are not in a position to fully control the course of the performance. In the end, all participants together generate the performance. This not only minimizes the possibility but actually makes it impossible for one individual or a group of people to entirely plan its course, to steer and to control it. The performance is removed from the control of any one individual.

In other words, the performance opens up the possibility for all participants to experience themselves in its course as subjects that are able to co-determine the actions and the behaviour of others and whose own actions and behaviour,

in the same way, are determined by others. The individual participants – be they actors or spectators – experience themselves as subjects that are neither fully autonomous nor fully determined by others, as subjects that accept responsibility for a situation which they have not created but take part in.

This demonstrates that any performance – even an artistic one – is also to be regarded as a social process, in which different groups encounter, negotiate and regulate their relationship in different ways. Such a social process turns into a political one at the moment when a power struggle between actors and spectators begins during the performance because one group attempts to force certain definitions of the situation or the relationship between them, certain ideas, values, convictions and modes of behaviour on the other. Since all individual participants – even though this is done to varying degrees – co-determine the course of the performance as well as letting themselves be determined by it, there are no “passive” participants in the performance. In this sense, all the participants bear a joint responsibility for what happens during the performance. Furthermore, some kind of union may occur among the spectators. It is even possible that for the whole duration of the performance, or at least for certain stretches of time, a community among the spectators or even between actors and spectators may come into being. This is what might turn a performance into an eminently political process – without any kind of political topic being dealt with.

Second argument: Materiality and transitoriness

The materiality of a performance, its spatiality, corporeality and sound quality, is brought forth by and in the course of the performance, from which follows the paradox of performance: it is ephemeral and transitory. However, what appears and takes shape in its course comes into being *hic*

et nunc and is experienced as being present in a particularly intense way.

Even if, in this sense, performances exhaust themselves in their presentness, i.e. in their permanent emerging and passing, this does not mean that in their course material objects cannot be used – objects which remain as traces of the performance and can be preserved as such. When exhibited later in a museum space the focus is on the object itself, while in the performance attention is also directed towards its usage: what actions are performed by manipulating the object and what effect do they have?

Whatever appears in a performance, on the one hand, proceeds from the intentions, ideas and plans of several subjects. It is the production, the *mise-en-scène*, that defines what elements are to appear when and where on the stage, how they are to move through the space, and when and where they are to disappear from it. On the other hand, the performance as a whole springs from the interactions as described above. No matter whether such phenomena as the spectators' perceivable responses are declared to be constitutive of the performance, as was the case in John Cage's "Silent Pieces", which included all the sounds made by the spectators as well as those penetrating the performance space from the outside; or whether such elements are understood as disruptive, defining performance's materiality only as what is produced intentionally by the artists involved – in either case, whatever appears in the course of a performance co-constitutes the particular materiality of this very performance. This is why we have to clearly distinguish between the concept of *mise-en-scène* and that of performance. While *mise-en-scène* describes the materiality of the performance determined by the plans and intentions of the artists, performance includes any kind of materiality brought forth in its course. This is why the *mise-en-scène* is reproducible, whereas every performance is unique.

Even if particular genres of performance take place in spaces that are specifically construed for them, the spatiality of performance is always ephemeral and transitory. For this has to be distinguished from the architectural-geometrical space in which it takes place. The performance as such comes into being only in and through the performative space. It is the performative space which opens up particular possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators, for movement and perception, which it moreover organizes and structures. The ways in which such possibilities are used, realized, evaded or counter-acted will have an effect on the performative space. Each movement of people, animals, objects or light, each sound ringing out in the space, will change it and, thus, bring forth spatiality anew. The performative space is not stable, but permanently fluctuating and changing. That is why in a performance spatiality does not exist but happens.

This is all the more true if we consider the particular atmosphere which co-constitutes the performative space. As the philosopher Gernot Böhme has shown, atmospheres, although not bound to a particular place, pour into performative spaces. They are not tied to the objects – or the people – from which they seem to emanate, nor to those who enter the space and sense them physically. Usually, they are the first to take hold of the spectator/visitor, affecting him and thus allowing for a very specific experience of the space. Such an experience cannot be explained by having recourse to the single elements in the space – its extension, particular objects, smells, sounds etc. For it is not these individual elements that create the atmosphere but the interplay between all of them which, in theatre productions, is usually carefully calculated. Böhme defines atmospheres as “spaces insofar as they are tinged by the presence of objects, of human beings or environmental constellations. They are themselves spheres of the presence of something, its reality in space” (Böhme 1995: 33). The

phrase “spheres of presence” describes a particular mode in which objects are present. Böhme explains the mode in which a thing appears in a particular way as present as an “ecstasy of the object”. Not only its colours, smells or sounds are conceptualized as ecstasies – i.e. the so-called secondary qualities of a thing – but also its primary qualities like extension and form. The ecstasy of things influences their environment, they attract attention, even demand it, and they appear to those who perceive them as present in a particularly intense way. They force themselves into their field of attention.

The atmosphere contributes considerably to the creation of spatiality. Because of and through the atmosphere which the space and the things seem to emanate – including the smells which they give off and the sounds they make – the things and the space appear to the subject who enters it as emphatically present. Not only do they present themselves in their so-called primary and secondary qualities; in the atmosphere, they even invade the body of the perceiving subject – which is to be experienced most of all with light, smells and sounds. For the spectator is not confronted with the atmosphere, is not distanced from it; rather s/he is surrounded by it, s/he is immersed in it.

Because of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, corporeality plays an essential role in performances. In a performance we deal with the phenomenal as well as with the semiotic body. The actors appear in their bodily being-in-the-world, no matter whether this is in the form of a theatrical actor, a politician, an athlete, a shaman, a priest, a singer, a dancer or the partner in a normal everyday interaction. From their phenomenal body there may proceed a particular radiation which the other participants/spectators sense bodily. In many cases, it seems as if a stream of energy would emanate from them, which is transferred to the spectators and energizes them in their turn. In a particular way

and with a particular intensity, the actor is experienced as PRESENT. At the same time, the spectator who is hit by such a stream of energy experiences himself in a particular way and with a particular intensity as present.

The phenomenal body of actor and spectator forms the existential ground of every kind of performance – be it in everyday life, in the arts or in cultural performances. That is to say that the performative character of culture cannot be investigated properly without recourse to the corporeality of all those who participate in a performance. It is not ideas, concepts and meanings which are to be examined in the first place in order to bring into view culture's performative character, but the particular phenomenal bodies by whom and between whom the performance is brought forth – the body of the actor who (by applying certain techniques and practices) succeeds in filling the space and in drawing the undivided attention of the spectators to this, his bodily presence, as well as the body of the spectators who respond to such an experience of presence in a particular way.

In performances, it is the phenomenal body of the participants, the body in its different physiological, affective, energetic and motorial states, which affects the phenomenal body of others and is able to evoke in them particular physiological, affective, energetic and motorial states. In all these cases, the phenomenal body quite often appears at the same time as a semiotic body. Be it in an everyday interaction, in a ritual or a theatre performance, the spectator will not only sense the other in his phenomenal corporeality, but at the same time ask himself what it means that the other lowers his eyelid, raises his arm or moves through the space – regardless of whether such movements are intended to mean anything at all.

While the semiotic body in performances has attracted and received much attention, the phenomenal body of actors and spectators has only seldom come into view. This is all the

more surprising since the phenomenal and the semiotic body are inextricably bound to each other – it is possible to think of the phenomenal body without referring to the semiotic body but not the other way round. It seems productive to relate both of them to one another via the concept of embodiment.² By embodiment I do not mean the process of lending one's body temporarily to something mental – an idea, a concept, a meaning or even a bodiless spirit – which needs a body in order to articulate itself and gain appearance. Rather, the term embodiment aims at such bodily processes by which the phenomenal body generates itself as a particular body and at the same time brings forth specific meanings. Thus, by processes of embodiment, the actor brings forth his phenomenal body in a very specific way which is sometimes experienced as PRESENCE, and at the same time he produces and represents a dramatic figure, for example Hamlet. In the performance, PRESENCE as well as the dramatic figure do not exist beyond the particular processes of embodiment by which the actor brings them into existence; rather, they are brought forth by them.

These characteristics of the actor's play can be applied to all kinds of performers and their actions in other genres of performance. Even there, those who act bring forth their phenomenal body in a particular way and thus, at the same time, generate specific meanings – be it a dramatic figure or any kind of identity, a social “role” or a symbolic order. All these kinds of meanings are grounded in the phenomenal body and do not exist beside or beyond it. What we call PRESENCE in an actor, in a political leader, a shaman or a priest might also be called charisma. But this opens up quite another debate.

2 Regarding this concept cf. Fischer-Lichte 2000: 65-75.

Third argument: The emergence of meanings

A performance does not transmit given meanings. Rather, it is the performance which brings forth the meanings that come into being during its course.

For a long time, scholars proceeded from the assumption that performances serve the purpose of conveying specific given meanings. This was based on the premise that the performance of a dramatic text transmits the meanings fixed in it or a particular interpretation contained in it; that in a court festival of the 17th century a particular given allegorical programme was realized, or that political festivals and other mass performances are to be regarded as representations of an individual's power like that of Alexander the Great, Augustus, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Mussolini, Stalin or Hitler.

Such an opinion can no longer be held if the first two arguments are taken into consideration. For on the one hand there are the unforeseen and unplanned elements that emerge in the interaction between actors and spectators during the performance, which disturb the given programme. And on the other hand, the spectator's attention focusing on the particular presence of phenomenal bodies, ecstasies of things and atmospheres is channelled away from the semiotic bodies, objects and spaces etc. Thus it runs counter to the procedure of such an interpretation. Rather, it is the performance which brings forth meanings. In this sense, meanings that come into being in and during the performance are to be regarded as emergent.

To perceive the body, the objects and the space in their specific presence does not mean to perceive them as meaningless. Instead, all of these phenomena are to be perceived as something. We are not dealing with an unspecific stimulus here, mere sensorial data, but with a perception of something *as* something. In my perception the objects appear in and signify their particular phenomenality. Their self-referentiality,

accordingly, is not to be described as the mediation of a given meaning nor as a de-semantization, but as a process of a very particular kind of production of meaning. This process is performed as the perception of a phenomenon in its particular materiality, in its phenomenal being. Perceiving and generating meaning, here, are performed in and by the very same act. Meaning is brought forth by and in the act of perceiving. In other words, we do not perceive something first and then – in an act of interpretation – attribute the meaning of something else to it. Rather, perceiving something as something is performed at the same time as the process of producing its meaning as this particular phenomenal being.

A very different mode of perception goes hand in hand with this. First, the appearing element is perceived in and as its phenomenal being. The moment the attention diverges from the perceived element as such and starts to go astray, this element appears as a kind of signifier which might refer to the most diverse associations as its signifieds – images, ideas, memories, emotions, thoughts etc. It is very questionable whether such associations are made following particular rules and can therefore be predicted. Rather, it is to be assumed that they descend on the perceiving subject, more or less by chance, even if they are explicable afterwards. They are not at the percipient's free disposal, they simply emerge.

This oscillation of the perception between focusing on the phenomenon as self-referential and on the associations it evokes I call “the order of presence”. From it I distinguish quite another kind of perception and production of meaning, namely the order of representation. To perceive the actor's physicality in its bodily being-in-the-world lays the foundation for the order of presence. To perceive it as a sign for a dramatic figure or another symbolic order establishes the order of representation, which demands that any perceived element is related to the dramatic figure or the symbolic order

respectively. While the first order produces meaning regarding the phenomenal being of the perceived – which does not mean that it cannot evoke other meanings that are not directly linked to the perceived phenomena, as in a string of associations – the second order brings forth meanings which, in their sum total, constitute the dramatic figure or another symbolic order.

During a performance our perception oscillates between both orders of perception. The moment it shifts from one to the other, a rupture occurs, a discontinuity manifests itself. A state of instability comes into being, which places the perceiving subject between the two orders, transfers him into a state of betwixt and between, of liminality:³ each shift, each instability, causes the dynamics of the process of perception to take another turn. The more often a shift happens, the more often the perceiving subjects begin to wander between two worlds, between two orders of perception. They become increasingly aware of their inability to cause, steer and control the shifts. They may try to intentionally adjust their perception anew – to the order of presence or to the order of representation. Very soon, however, they will become aware that the shift takes place even if they do not intend it, that it simply happens, befalls them, that they are moved between the two orders without wanting or being able to prevent it. At that moment, the spectators experience their own perception as emergent, as withdrawn from their will and control and yet as an action performed consciously.

That is to say that the shift draws the attention of the perceiving subject to the process of perception itself as well as to its particular dynamics. At the moment of shift, the process of perception itself becomes conspicuous, thereby self-con-

³ Regarding the concepts of betwixt and between and liminality, cf. Arnold van Gennep 1960 and Victor Turner 1969.

scious, and in itself the object of perception. The perceiving subjects start to perceive themselves as perceiving subjects. This produces new meanings, which, in turn, generate other meanings and so forth. This way, the process of perception continuously takes another turn. What is perceived and what meanings are produced become less and less predictable. The perceiving subjects become aware that the meanings are not conveyed to them, but that it is they themselves who produce the meanings and that they could have generated quite a different set of meanings if the shift from one order to the other had occurred earlier or later or more or less often.

Fourth argument: The performance as event

Performances are characterized by their “eventness”. The specific mode of experience they allow for is a particular form of liminal experience.

In order to adequately understand performances, they should be considered not as works of art but as art events. Since a performance comes into being by way of the interaction between actors and spectators, since it brings forth itself in and through an autopoietic process, it is impossible to label it a work. For when the autopoietic process comes to an end, the performance does not remain as its result; rather, the performance, too, has come to an end. It is over and therefore irretrievably lost. It exists only as and in the process of performing; it exists only as event.

The performance as event – contrary to the *mise-en-scène* – is unique and cannot be repeated. It is impossible for exactly the same constellation between actors and spectators to occur at any other time. The responses of the spectators and their effect on the actors and other spectators will be different with each and every performance. A performance is to be understood as event also in the sense that no participant

can completely control it, that it simply happens to them – particularly to the spectators. This holds true not only with respect to the consequences of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, but also regarding the particular presentness of the phenomena as well as the emergence of meaning. As explained concerning the shift of perception, it also befalls the perceiving subjects and transfers them into a state of betwixt and between, into a state of instability.

Moreover, the particular eventness of performances is characterized by a strange collapsing of oppositions. The participants in a performance experience themselves as subjects who co-determine its course and, at the same time, are determined by it. They live through the performance as an aesthetic as well as a social or even political process in the course of which relationships are negotiated, power struggles fought, and communities established and dissolved. Their perception follows the order of presence as well as that of representation. This is to say that what is held traditionally in Western cultures to be an opposition which is grasped by pairs of dichotomous concepts – such as autonomous subject vs. subject determined by others; art vs. social reality/politics; presence vs. representation – is experienced not in the mode of either-or but in the mode of as-well-as in performances. The oppositions collapse, the dichotomies dissolve.

The moment this happens, the moment when one category can also be the other, our attention is attracted by the passage from one state to the other, by the instability, which, in its turn, is experienced as an event. In the space between these opposites, an interval opens up. The “betwixt and between” thus becomes a privileged category. It points to the threshold between the spaces, to the state of liminality, into which the performance transfers all those who participate in it.

Since such pairs of dichotomous concepts serve not only as tools for the description and cognition of the world but

also as regulatives for our actions and behaviour, their destabilization not only destabilizes our perception of the world, ourselves and others, but also shatters the rules and norms that guide our behaviour. From the pairs of concepts different frames can be deduced, for instance “This is theatre/art” or “This is a social or political situation”. Such frames prescribe an adequate behaviour in the situation they encompass. By letting opposite or only different frames collide, by thus allowing different, partly even completely opposite values and claims to stand side by side, so that they are all valid while at the same time they annul each other, performances create liminal situations. They transport the spectators between all these rules, norms and orders, they transfer them into a crisis.

That is to say that the performance transfers the spectators into a state which alienates them from their everyday life, from the norms and rules valid in it, without, however, showing them ways of how to achieve a re-orientation. Such a state may be experienced as a pleasure as well as a torment. The transformations that the subjects undergo can be most diverse. Mainly, they are temporary transformations, which last only for a limited time span in the performance. These include changes in the body’s physiological, affective, energetic and motor states, but also changes in status like those from the status of a spectator to that of an actor or the building up of a community between actors and spectators or only among the spectators. Such changes take place during the performance and are perceptible; after the performance has come to an end, however, they do not usually continue. It can only be discussed and decided with regard to individual cases whether the experience of destabilization of the perception of reality, self and others, the loss of valid norms and rules, actually leads to a re-orientation of the respective individual, and in this sense to an ongoing and longer-lasting transformation. It might equally be the case that after leaving the performance

space the spectator dismisses her/his temporary destabilization as nonsensical and unfounded and tries to return to her/his previous perception of reality, self and others – or that even after the performance has come to an end s/he remains in the state of disorientation for quite a while and much later, by way of reflection, arrives at a re-orientation or returns to her/his old values and patterns of behaviour. Whichever may be the case, s/he has undergone a liminal experience while participating in the performance.

In the case of artistic performances we call such a liminal experience “aesthetic”, and in the case of rituals the experience is “ritualistic”. Generally, the experiences produced by the most diverse kinds of performance are liminal in nature. However, we are able to distinguish between the liminal experience as an aesthetic experience and as a ritualistic experience. Ritualistic experience is characterized by two criteria which are not valid for aesthetic experience: irreversibility and social acceptance. However, although aesthetic experience does not result in a socially accepted change of status or identity, it may well cause a change in the perception of reality, self and others in individual participants. This applies not only to the artists involved but also to the spectators. In this sense, the event of the performance may result in a transformation of the participants, which can outlast even the end of the performance.

Conclusions

The concept of performance as outlined above entails a highly innovative potential with regard to art studies and social and cultural studies. I shall briefly describe this potential below.

In art studies, the concept of the art work is in the centre. The work has to be analyzed with respect to the different artistic devices applied and interpreted in order to understand it. If the arts no longer produce works but performances, i.e.

events, instead, as has been happening not only in theatre, music and performance art but also (increasingly since the 1960s) in the other arts, then the aesthetics of a work cannot be applied – nor can the production and reception aesthetics. What is at stake now is the challenge to develop new aesthetics (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008), above all theories of aesthetic experience as well as new methods of performance analysis in the place of work analysis.

In dealing with performances, the historical-hermeneutic disciplines will no longer be able to proceed from the premise that the performances fulfil a particular allegorical programme or represent the power of an individual – or that the performance of a dramatic text can be regarded as its interpretation. Rather, historical-hermeneutic approaches have to take into consideration that meanings emerge not before the process of performance but in its course – so they cannot be identical with the meanings which groups of persons or individuals intended to express through the performance.

The concept of performance is just as momentous for the social sciences. For given the premise that in a performance all participants, i.e. actors and spectators alike, are involved insofar as they co-determine its course and let themselves be determined by it, the widespread and popular thesis of manipulation fails. It assumes that political festivals and other mass performances are quite suited to the purpose of manipulating the people taking part according to the intentions and plans of the ruler or the ruling class. That would presuppose that the organizers are capable of applying staging strategies which have the power to overwhelm the *per se* passive audiences in a precise, precalculated way and to elicit from them the desired behaviour. If we keep in mind the interaction between actors and spectators as well as the co-responsibility which each participant bears for the course of the performance, it hardly seems likely that such a ma-

nipulation could actually occur (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2005).

A special problem is posed by mediatized performances. Film, television and video recordings of performances, in their turn, cannot be defined and understood as performances. For the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, which constitutes a performance, is not given. So they cannot be included in the concept of performance, although they can be included in the concept of performativity. Moreover, there is a considerable difference between mediatized performances in the above sense and performances which make ample use of the different media and all kinds of reproduction technologies. Such performances are a challenge for the audience because they require new modes of perception without questioning the concept of performance itself.

By developing a satisfactory concept of performance, theatre studies offer a suitable and much needed heuristic tool for other disciplines that deal with performance. The innovative potential that the concept of performance implies has yet to be discovered and explored by them.

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Interaction and Framing in the Performance *Insideout* by Sasha Waltz

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Insideout is the title of a choreographic installation by German choreographer Sasha Waltz produced for *Graz 2003 – Cultural Capital of Europe*. Waltz developed this interdisciplinary piece together with twenty actors and ten musicians from Asia, Europe and North and South America. The performance was an exhibition on the topic of “lifestyles” in which the actors presented their own stories and interacted with the audience. It represented an amalgamation of the various biographies of the dancers and showed the influence of important theoretical works on the topic (Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Ulrich Beck and Richard Sennett). The result was a multi-medial performance that combined elements from different art forms (*e.g.* dance, theatre, video, text, photography and music) in an attempt to transform the documentary material into a both complex and intriguing aesthetic experience.

I will examine how Waltz’s performance on the one hand iterates some relatively stable contextual frames of “same-

ness” (its *mise en scène*), while on the other hand playing more radically with different and alternating discursive framings or contexts, e.g. “this is theatre” or “this is a social or political situation”, in order to create a space of interaction between actors and spectators. This challenges a more traditional notion of the theatrical frame (Goffman 1986: 124ff): given that the dividing line between performer and audience is blurred, the audience becomes involved in the production. Consequently, the performance, as Erika Fischer-Lichte’s influential work of 2004 *Ästhetik des Performativen* informs us, emerges “as a result of the interaction between actors and audience”.¹ This notion of performance as an event (*Ereignis*) occurring between actors and spectators holds many promising perspectives that can help shed new light on the aesthetics of performance art. The full scope of Waltz’s performance, however, is not grasped if we follow that aspect of Fischer-Lichte’s theory which reduces a performance to the question of co-presence, role-reversal or interaction. For her, a performance must be seen as a self-governing state of affairs due to the autopoietic feedback loop between actors and audience. This idea is based on the works of biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Inspired by Maturana and Varela’s concept of *autopoiesis* (from Greek *auto* for self and *poiesis* for creation or production), Fischer-Lichte describes performances as self-creating systems that are the

1 “Die Aufführung entsteht als Resultat der Interaktion zwischen Darstellern und Zuschauern” (Fischer-Lichte 2004: 47). Works in other languages than English are used in the original language, but citations are given from published translations as referred to in the bibliography. In the above example, however, I have chosen to include my own translation of Fischer-Lichte’s *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004), because this very important definition of performance (*Aufführung*) is omitted in the recent English translation of the book, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008). Cf. Sauter 2000, Gade and Jerslev 2005, Roselt 2008.

product of their own operations. In Fischer-Lichte's terms, then, *autopoiesis* would mean that the interactive aesthetics of Waltz's *Insideout* enables a fundamentally open, unpredictable process to emerge (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 39).² This is only partly the case in Waltz's production, as we shall see in my analysis.

To begin with, Waltz's *Insideout* makes it necessary for me to explore the starting point of Fischer-Lichte's theory, namely the distinction between "performativity" (*Der Begriff des Performativen*) and "performance" (*Der Begriff der Aufführung*). When she develops these concepts, Fischer-Lichte draws an intellectual lineage from J.L. Austin's lectures about *How to Do Things With Words* (1962), to Judith Butler's essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988).³ In the course of my analysis, however, I will show why Fischer-Lichte's notion of performativity must be seen as a major departure from J.L. Austin's theories of speech acts. In fact, Fischer-Lichte's theory is based on an understanding of performativity that is pretty far from Austin's infamous remark about the theatre: "a performative utterance will, for example, be in a particular way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy" (Austin 1962: 21-22). It is exactly this idea of performance art as a "parasitic" or "pale" imitation of reality that Fischer-Lichte rightfully refuses. In many respects my analysis shares

2 According to Fischer-Lichte, the performative turn of the 1960s started when artists produced events that were not focused on the interpretation or representation of pre-existing works of art (e.g. the words written in the text by a playwright) but solely oriented towards interaction and participation. "The performance is regarded as art not because it enjoys the status of an artwork but because it takes place as an event" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 35).

3 For a more thorough discussion of this lineage, see J. Hillis Miller's contribution to the present publication: "Performativity₁/Performativity₂".

this critical approach to Austin's theory, but I do not think that Fischer-Lichte's concept of performance as liminality solves the fundamental problem of the distinction between "normal" and "parasitic" performatives. In the light of the fundamental differences between Austin and Fischer-Lichte, I think that the complex aesthetics of Waltz's *Insideout* can be seen as an attempt to challenge the traditional frames of theatrical performance. But unlike Fischer-Lichte, who tends to underplay the role of discursive, contextual frames of performativity in a performance, and who therefore understands performance art as a liminal state that negates the ontological opposition between art and reality, I aim to show how the structure of Waltz's performance can be seen as a play with some stable, but first and foremost with a set of interchangeable contextualising frames of discursive (and not of ontological) nature. Such frames are *e.g.* globalisation, individualisation and detraditionalisation. This means that Waltz establishes and plays with contextualising frames that make a certain type of performance possible – one that is open for certain specifications in form and content, but is nevertheless subject to incessant change through the actual unfolding of the performance's interaction between actors and audience. This play with frames produces a state of oscillation between immersion and reflexivity – or to put it metaphorically: the audience has the productive experience of being "inside" and "outside" at one and the same time.

Insideout – discursive frames

Insideout was produced with financial support from *Graz 2003 – Cultural Capital of Europe*, making it possible for Sasha Waltz and her company to expand the production with a long phase of research. The production began in 2001 with a period of thorough research based on a 400-page reader

called “Theory” that was sampled from “the most important scientific works on the topic (Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Schultze, Beck)” (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 7). These texts were made available to the dancers in both English and German, and then the process of collecting the material for the performance began with a series of interviews with the 13 dancers of the company conducted by the dramaturge of the production, Karl Stocker. On the basis of these interviews Stocker compiled a large textual material including the personal stories of the dancers, their social lives, their ethnic backgrounds, their perception of dance, love, family, work etc. In fact, the material was so comprehensive that it was later edited and published by Stocker in collaboration with two members of the company, Nadia Cusimano and Katia Schurl, in the book *Insideout* (2003).

In the introduction to the book, the premise is stated as follows:

The central topic of the investigation is the lifestyles of artists who come from different parts of the world and meet in Berlin in order to work together. Questions concerning the current importance of economic, cultural and symbolic capital as well as the individual adaptation of a “flexible” and “globalised” lifestyle constitute the focal point of the project; in short: what we are here concerned with is an analysis of the construction of “postmodern” identities. By looking at a specific group who work with their bodies in an aesthetically elaborated context we get interesting answers to social perspectives which soon may be considered universal (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 9).

It is worth noting the distinction made between the singular and the universal, between the specific stories of the dancers and more universal social perspectives. The book itself shows how Sasha Waltz and her company of dancers explore these social perspectives on an autobiographical level, and thus attempt to make these perspectives more concrete and com-

elling (for both readers and audience). The textual montage of Stocker, Cusimano and Schurl shows us how the personal biographies of the dancers are tied to private questions about social and individual values, life-styles and status symbols. The photos of friends, family, cars, houses, jewellery and dogs can be regarded as a disclosure of the private. On the other hand, they show us that the private stories and photographs are connected to more complex and far-reaching social perspectives. In this respect, the montage of text and photos follows the thoughts of Ulrich Beck when it is stated that individualisation “means detraditionalisation, but also the opposite: the ‘invention of tradition’. Idyllic concepts – grandma’s apple tart, forget-me-nots and communitarianism – are highly en vogue” (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 74). A sense of nostalgia is certainly invoked when one observes the many private photos in which the dancers have included short commentaries such as “my parents on holiday in Thailand. I love them very much. 1995” and “This is me with a shopping mall Santa Claus when I’m about 5 years old”, or handwritten notes such as “Dancing in the basement of my cousin’s house for the adults” and “I’m pregnant. 11th month. I’m very, very happy”. Here, as in many other sections of the book, the montage of text and images explores the longing for that idyllic place called “home”.⁴

Given the wide range of nationalities of the company of dancers and their working life, it seems only logical that the motif of a “flexible” and “globalised” identity is central to the discursive framing of the project. Interviews with the company’s dancers from Australia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Canada, Lithuania, New Zealand, Sweden and Spain

⁴ These quotations are all found in the chapter about home entitled: “In Italy they would have understood that it was a joke” (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 61-93).

form the textual basis of the performance. All of the dancers have similar stories, stories that in their own way deal with the consequences of modernity, *e.g.* individualisation, detraditionalisation, globalisation and reflexivity. It is, of course, problematic to generalise about the family life of the various dancers because of their differences in age, gender and nationality. The discourse of their stories, however, revolves around a series of binary oppositions, *e.g.* family vs. individuality, tradition vs. artistic freedom, and ethnicity vs. globalisation, which is also explored in the performance.

In the book, the biographies of the dancers are placed side by side with fragments of the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, Ulrich Beck and others, and in many respects the themes of the interviews echo the sociological theories that inspired them. However, this juxtaposition of interviews and theory pays little attention to the differences between the theoretical positions; rather the editors use fragments of sociological and philosophical observations to frame different aspects of the life world of the dancers, *e.g.* consequences of work in the new capitalism (Sennett), floating signs (Baudrillard), the pulse of fashion (Roland Barthes). One of the most important influences, I think, is Ulrich Beck's observations on modernity and globalisation. This becomes apparent when the editors inform us that: "The new 'homelessness', which was established by Ulrich Beck as an essential phenomenon of the globalisation of the individual, promotes the mutual influence of local and global issues" (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 61). Globalisation, we are told, "means: actions over distances – a new 'placelessness', which emerges through a transformation of time and space as a consequence of global communication and facilities of mass transportation" (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 66). This transformation of time and space also means that local and personal horizons of experience are broken up – a state of experience that is certainly invoked in the individual

accounts of the lives of the dancers. Many of them have broken with the more traditional cultural identity of their roots only to find themselves in a state of homelessness: living in a suitcase, missing friends and family, longing for home etc. This is an important leitmotif in *Insideout*, and the question of homelessness – the sense of being out of place – comes up in many shapes and sizes during the performance.

We are given some sort of insight into precisely what social perspectives are involved when the Chinese-Canadian dancer Laurie Young talks about her roots:

Well, I would never identify myself as a Hong Kong Chinese. I am first generation Chinese Canadian. Think Diaspora. I mean, I've only been to Hong Kong twice, and both times were for work purposes. [...] I grew up in the suburbs of Ottawa. Though Ottawa is the capital of Canada, and supports multiculturalism, it is still very white, especially in the suburbs. Aside from us, there were two or three other Asian families in the entire neighbourhood. One was 3rd generation Chinese Canadian, the others first generation. So I didn't grow up with Chinese friends. I find it very difficult to pinpoint myself to an "essentialist" notion of Chinese. By essentialist I suppose I mean what others may identify as "Chinese", mannerisms, language, culture, food etc. (Stocker, Cusimano, Schurl: 67).

The term diaspora (Greek for *scattering*) refers to a displaced and relocated collective of people. Young and her family share ethnic identity with the other Asian families who were either forced to leave or voluntarily left their native countries, and became residents of Ottawa. Her parents emigrated from Hong Kong independently of each other. They met in Canada. Thus, Laurie defines herself as first generation Chinese Canadian. Due to the permanent displacement experienced by Young and her family, she finds it very difficult to relate to an "essentialist" notion of Chinese. What follows is that Young's identity is more tied to her personal horizon of experience

than to her Chinese roots. If Young's personal account of her background is taken together with the other interviews, it becomes clear that the text explores the relationship between identity and roots on a very personal level. Indeed, most of the company seem to be in a permanent state of diaspora, given that they have moved away from their native countries to live and work in Berlin.

The textual montage establishes the leitmotifs of *Insideout* which through the aesthetic and discursive framing strategies of the performance become part of the dynamics of its performative actions. The textual montage, however, is not a mere "mimetic" representation or mirroring of the performative event. Its themes are relatively delimited and stable, but their constant iteration and refraction through the alternating theoretical frames of a series of modern thinkers open up their horizons and turn them "inside out" in multiple ways. Thus the themes are productively disseminated onto incessantly different contexts, pointing towards a past, a now and a future that will have to be made – and remade. The textual montage, then, is a strategically integral and actional component of the event that aesthetically and discursively keeps framing the production. I hope to show in the following sections that in this way the performance explores the relationship between art and life, the private and the public, in a way that both relies on and transcends Fischer-Lichte's notion of the performative turn and Judith Butler's theories of gender and identity. This relationship between identity and performative actions is explored in the different thematic sections of the performance based on the biographies of the 13 dancers, who were members of the dance ensemble of the Schaubühne at the time when the interviews took place.

The performance – mise en scène vs. autopoiesis

In the performance of *Insideout* (as performed in Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin in 2003), Waltz turns things – *i.e.* the discursive, contextualising frames – inside out in two ways: firstly, she transforms the halls of the theatre into an art exhibition in which the audience is forced to make choices. Secondly, she allows the dancers to interact with the audience in order to blur the distinction between them. There are no seats placed conveniently in front of a stage. In fact, one could say that the whole space of the installation is transformed into a stage, where many small pieces are performed simultaneously. The audience has to stroll through the installation, but they cannot see everything in this exhibition. They are – more or less – free to choose what sections they would like to see.

The space is built like a labyrinth that calls for a “moving” gaze, *i.e.* one in which the audience moves through the space of the installation. This opens certain possibilities for observation and makes others void. The architecture of the installations leaves little hope of a unified perspective, but presents the audience with a wide range of observational possibilities that they will have to explore in the space of the performance. The difference in audience positions, which follows from the structure of the space of the installation, also means that they will experience the performance very differently. Because of the construction of the space, the audience changes their perspective many times during the performance.

The structure of *Insideout* is based on meticulous and elaborate rehearsals that have shaped the staging of the material into a plan, the *mise en scène* (in German: *Inszenierung*): “the process of planning [...], testing, and determining strategies which aim at bringing forth the performance’s materiality” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 188). According to Fischer-Lichte, this process is most accurately captured in Martin Seel’s recent

definition of the term *mise en scène* as developed in the essay “Inszenieren als Erscheinenlassen” (2001). In this essay, Seel defines *mise en scène* as “the staging of presence. It is the conspicuous creation and emphasis of the presence of something which occurs here and now” (Seel 2001: 53; Fischer-Lichte 2008: 187). For Seel, the staging constitutes an intentional act, *i.e.* it is initiated and executed by someone who wants to present something for an audience. Moreover, it is a presentation that gives rise to a conspicuous spatial and temporal arrangement of elements that could have appeared in a different way.

The concept of *mise en scène* (to be distinguished from Fischer-Lichte’s use of the term performance) which Seel explores is similar to the notion of an event that takes place here and now, except that Seel’s concept of presentation is tied not to *autopoiesis* (self-creation) but to intentionality. That is to say, someone (Waltz) has arranged the presentation of the material with specific purposes in mind. Fischer-Lichte, on the other hand, sees the performance as a self-governing event (*Ereignis*) that transcends the intentions of the director. It is not viable, she argues, that what is planned and decided should repeat itself in every performance. Consequently, her concept of the performance (*Aufführung*) proceeds from a very useful distinction between staging (*Inszenierung*) and event (*Ereignis*), but it also seems to hold the latter in the highest regard as she primarily observes structure and planning as attempts to restrict the autopoietic feedback loop between actors and audience. The interaction, in other words, produces or transforms a situation that involves contingency.

On the one hand, Waltz’s *mise en scène* is followed very closely by the performers. On the other hand, however, it allows them to engage and interact with the audience. This basically means that there is no way of knowing how the audience will react to the performance; but the actions of the dancers, nevertheless, follow a structure that allows certain

sequences and scenes to be repeated every night. Although Waltz's *mise en scène* allows open, experimental spaces and unplanned behaviour, actions and events to occur during the performance, it also follows a carefully planned structure. Of course, no two evenings and no two audiences are ever exactly the same, but the material is nevertheless arranged and presented in a structure that is repeated in every performance. Although the material is based on improvisation, the actions of the performers follow a very tight schedule. For instance, the presence of digital clocks in all the rooms of the installation allows the dancers to follow the progression of the performance in accordance with the plan. They all follow specific routes in accordance with a clear-cut plan of actions, scenes, meetings and choreographies – like ants in an ant hill, with the entire collective seeming to know exactly what to do as they constantly move within the space of the installation.

At the beginning of the performance, one of the dancers authoritatively announces a series of prescriptive utterances in a megaphone: “No eating! No talking! No sitting! No singing! No waiting! No dancing! No smiling! No music! No interpreting!” These utterances are performative because the dancer is declaring that certain activities are prohibited (in the sense of “I prohibit any interpreting of the performance”) (Austin 1962; Benveniste 1971). The long chain of prescriptions, however, is brought to the point of absurdity. How, for example, can we avoid interpretation? Given that the audience is anticipating that someone will perform something, whether they will be singing or dancing, playing music or playing roles etc., the audience already suspects that most of the prescriptions will necessarily have to be broken. If – as Austin proposes – felicitous performatives rely on the intention and commitment of the speaker, it is quite obvious that these prescriptions are not to be taken too literally.

At first, then, the members of the audience are waiting for

something to happen, and as they start to wander in the vast space of the performance a sense of disorientation and anxiety starts to build. Eventually, two male dancers start a slow duet of lifts and rolls in the central “square” of the installation. In different sections of the installation, we find some of the dancers involved in long monologues about their childhood and families. At the same time, there is an Asian couple deeply involved in a tango-like *pas de deux* that they execute in different parts of the installation space. Here, as in many of the choreographies performed, the movements of the dancers are a *mélange* of modern dance and more traditional forms that embody different cultural styles (e.g. Argentinian tango and Chinese traditional dance). Each space offers a new tale, scene or meeting, where dancers and audience discover or pass each other by. Inside the refrigerator, for instance, one of the male dancers (Luc Dunberry) is dressed up for heavy winter as he talks about his homeland: “I’m from Canada,” he explains, “Ask people to come in. It’s nice and cold in here”.

In this particular episode, the dancer tries to seduce the audience into participation. However, the nature of the relationship between performers and audience changes many times during the performance: in some sequences the performers provoke and assault the audience with questions like “are you rich?” In other sequences they retreat into their own, private spaces where they perform personal actions (they comfort each other, engage in dialogues in their native tongue, dance, write, argue etc.) without any visible regard for the audience. At the climax of the performance, however, some of the dancers convince most of the audience to sit down in front of the display cases where other dancers are putting on a show about consumer culture. In other words: the performance changes from “theatre with the audience” to “theatre for the audience”, with the performers shouting brand names, presenting their personal belongings, and undressing in front of the audience.

A consistent feature of these scenes and encounters, as we have already surmised, is a discursive framing of the relationship between cultural roots and personal identity. Throughout the performance the audience can observe – or even immerse themselves in – the exploration of this theme. At one point, for example, members of the audience are framed by one of the dancers (Sasa Queliz) using sticky tape to create a small “stage” on the floor. In this situation the theatrical frames are inverted as she invites members of the audience to step onto the small stage and starts to interview them about their personal backgrounds. What emerges in these episodes is an intimate and private dialogue that is staged in front of other members of the audience.

Having tried this awkward situation myself, I can say that these dialogues involve an oscillation between immersion and reflexivity. On the one hand, I was soon immersed in the dialogue trying to talk about my roots without feeling too self-conscious. On the other hand, however, I was only too aware that other members of the audience were watching the whole episode. That is to say, in this dialogue the performer chooses to communicate about a specific theme (in this case: “home”), and chooses to do so in a manner that invites members of the audience to engage in a special way. You can either choose to understand the episode as an invitation to talk about your personal life. Or, and this is perhaps more likely, you can choose to understand it as an invitation to perform something in front of the audience.

Performative actions

“I was born in Toronto, Canada, in September 1973,” says Laurie Young. As the Chinese Canadian dancer Young performs her personal choreography in front of the audience, her voice sounds a little nervous and strained. We are at the

beginning of the performance, in a small space where Young is performing her own choreography. Meanwhile, in other parts of the installation, other dancers are performing similar scenes for different parts of the audience. In this assemblage section, entitled “15 minutes”, each member of the company of dancers presents their own story in a mixture of dance and dialogue.

The central theme of Young’s piece, which brings to mind Judith Butler’s influential work on “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988) and *Gender Trouble* (1990), explores the notion of a personal identity that is not based on a fixed set of categories such as race, gender, nationality etc. “I am Chinese but not from China. It sounds simple, but to me it’s a very complex identity. One that is always shifting,” Young explains. This is exactly the kind of actions and utterances that, according to Butler’s work, constitute performative actions: “Such acts, gestures, enactments,” Butler explains, “are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 2008: 185). If the gendered body, as Butler suggests, is performative, it basically means that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. In other words: through these performative actions and utterances Young might be said to present and produce her own identity in front of the audience. These actions and utterances, however, are questioned and problematised at the same time because they are all conditioned by the constantly changeable frames of the performance.

In the middle of Young’s short choreography, for instance, she suddenly stops to dance and starts to talk about her costume: “This dress used to belong to my mother, but it makes me look small,” she says. On the one hand, this utterance draws our attention to Young’s body: it is quite obvious that

her feathery figure doesn't fit the traditional Chinese dress (the programme tells us that she is 156 cm tall and weighs 45 kg). On the other hand, however, it also draws our attention to the performative nature of the scene, as the words, acts, gestures and enactments are staged as an expression of Young's own attempt to come to terms with her Chinese Canadian heritage. Her movements, for instance, are an elegant mixture of modern dance and gestures that one could easily associate with traditional Chinese dance. Young's movements, in other words, can be identified as *conforming* to certain iterable models (Derrida 1988: 18; Butler 2008: 185). In the view of Butler's concept of performativity, we could say that the choreography is staged as a struggle between Young's body and the dress of tradition that embodies her personal struggle with the family heirloom and the essentialist notion of being Chinese. A sense of uncertainty is thereby invoked: does this represent a conflict with her roots? Is this an honest confession by the dancer? Or is it just a conscious act to create a specific emotional response in the observer?

Young's sudden utterance about her dress heightens, I think, our awareness of the autobiographical nature of the material presented here. The dress takes on a more symbolic meaning: it is presented as a family heirloom that represents a nostalgic notion of "Chinese" mannerisms, language, culture, food etc. that does not suit Young's longing for personal and artistic freedom. Although the dress is too big for her figure, it is also too tight for her personal identity. Given her background and her work as a dancer who travels around the globe with a company that signifies cultural diversity and difference, it is easy for the audience to understand why she finds it so hard to identify herself with an "essentialist" notion of the Chinese. Nonetheless, one cannot help noticing a certain sense of ambivalence as the dress also represents something much more positive: family and home.

For Fischer-Lichte, following Butler, identity is closely tied to the question of performativity:

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are “non”-referential because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed stable identity exists that they could express. Expressivity thus stands in an oppositional relation to performativity. Bodily, performative acts do not express a pre-existing identity but engender identity through these very acts (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 27).

This is the basic insight into the nature of identity upon which Fischer-Lichte establishes her concepts of performativity and embodiment: “This specific materiality of the body emerges out of the repetition of certain gestures and movements; these acts generate the body as individually, sexually, ethnically and culturally marked” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 27; Butler 2008: 185). Young’s short choreography, for example, constitutes such an embodiment through her repetition of certain “Chinese” gestures and movements (*e.g.* the archetypical bow to the audience). In the choreography the dress is used in a similar fashion: in the iterative movements of Young’s dance the dress represents family, tradition and values.

What this implies is that her body and movements function as a medium of performative actions as she engenders her identity through these very acts. However, the underlying assumption that human beings have no inner essence, substance or being but become what they are through performative acts represents a major departure from Austin’s linguistic theory of performatives. Following J. Hillis Miller’s “Performativity₁/Performativity₂”, I think it is crucial that we draw a firm distinction between Butler’s ideas about gender as constructed by the repetition of social gender roles and Austin’s theory of performatives as a mode of speech act that is a way of

using words (and by extension, more widely: texts) to make something happen.

The difference between these theoretical approaches to performativity, as Miller convincingly suggests, has to do with the questions of subjectivity and contexts. Indeed, Austin's theory of speech acts presupposes a more stable kind of subjectivity than the one professed by Butler and Fischer-Lichte. Performatives, as we know, only have the feature of "doing-by-saying" when they are explicitly or implicitly expressed by verbs in the first-person singular.⁵ The initial examples in Austin's book all point to this: "I name this ship the Queen Elisabeth", "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow", "I now pronounce you man and wife" (Austin 1962: 5). For Austin, then, the performative act consists in what the speaker does in the utterance, but the act is also a question of context – in fact, Jacques Derrida has pointed out that Austin's analyses "at all times require a value of *context*, and even of a context exhaustively determined" (Derrida 1988: 14).

Following Austin's line of thought – but without reference to Derrida's critique – Fischer-Lichte also claims that other non-linguistic conditions must be satisfied if we are to speak of a "happy" or "successful" performative:

If, for example, the phrase "I now pronounce you man and wife" is not spoken by a registrar or a priest or any other explicitly authorized

5 According to Austin's first observations, performative statements are characterized by certain verbs spoken in the first person and the present tense, such as "I promise" or "I swear". Subsequently, however, he suggests that expressions such as "Go away" function in the same manner as "I order you to go away". Austin labels such expression as "implicit" performatives. This, however, creates a new problem, for almost any utterance can be seen as an implicit performative: for instance, a constative utterance such as "this is art" could easily be "performatively" recast to begin with "I swear" or "I declare".

person, then it does not constitute a real marriage (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 24-25).

The reason for this claim, I believe, is to be found in her idea about performance as a social act: “A performative utterance always addresses a community, represented by the people present in a given situation – it can therefore be regarded as a social act” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 25). Unlike Austin, who declares the performative utterance hollow or void if it is said by an actor on the stage, Fischer-Lichte bases her concepts of performativity and performance on the idea that “the collapse of the opposition between art and reality and of all binaries resulting from this opposition transfers the participants into a liminal state” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 176).

It appears to me, however, that this concept of a liminal state that occurs when one can no longer distinguish between art and reality does not solve the basic problem of Austin’s unjustified distinction between “normal” and “parasitic” performatives. It only replaces it with an equally problematic assumption about the emergence of “the real” in contemporary performance art. The stress given to this collapse, I think, has to do with her interest in one particular theme, namely the ethics of performance arts: “In the performances, then, aesthetics cannot be grasped without ethics. The ethical turns into a constitutive dimension of aesthetics” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 171). This claim is consistent with her advocacy for the transformative power of performance, which is tied closely to a preference for the politically and ethically engaged kinds of performance art. The difference between Austin and Fischer-Lichte can therefore be regarded as a struggle about the legitimacy of performative acts in theatre and performance art. For Fischer-Lichte, who views the performative turn as a significant departure from a conventional notion of the theatrical performance as a space of pretence, all performances are

inherently performative as they are embodiments of authentic and concrete actions. When, for instance, Laurie Young performs a short scene about her roots, she is not pretending to be someone else. For Fischer-Lichte, Young is “actually” performing her own biography – consequently, embodying her personal identity.⁶ But even beyond that – something which I hold to be crucial – *Insideout* at the same time questions the notions of identity and sameness by constantly changing the contextual frames of the performing embodiment.

Conclusions and perspectives

Waltz’s work teaches us a valuable lesson about the distinction between the performance (the event as it unfolds in the interaction between actors and audience) and the performative actions of the dancers (performers). In its attempt to explore the individual adaptation of a “flexible” and “globalised” lifestyle, *Insideout* establishes a series of discursive frames that is put to the test in the performance. Although the performance challenges the traditional notion of theatrical frames, and allows for open, experimental spaces and unplanned behaviour, actions and events to occur during the performance, the event is still governed by the dialectics of structure and contingency. On the one hand the performance is shaped by the *mise en scène* of the director. On the other hand, however, the autopoietic feedback loop between actors

6 Notice, for example, the very important claim in Fischer-Lichte’s reflections about the performance as event: “All performances are self-referential and constitute reality. When an actor playing Hamlet walks across the stage it primarily signifies the reality of the actor walking across the stage. The actor is not just pretending to walk. He is actually walking and changing reality through his act. The context alone allows the walk to acquire another meaning – for example Hamlet walking to Gertrude’s chamber” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 170).

and audience is an integral part of the performance – without interaction the installation does not attract the same attention from the audience and it would not have the same aesthetic effect – that shapes the singularity of each performance.

As a conclusion to my investigation, we are also able to recognise that the crucial difference between Fischer-Lichte's theory of performativity and J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts rests on two issues: for one thing, Fischer-Lichte assigns far more importance and validity to the theatrical utterance than Austin does. His theory stages the "I" and "you" of the speech situation and provides us with a comprehensive theory of linguistic utterances, but – for Fischer-Lichte – it lacks a more thorough examination of the non-linguistic conditions of the performative utterance.

In many respects, however, Fischer-Lichte's critique resembles that of French linguist Émile Benveniste, who supported Austin's theory in the essay "Analytical Philosophy and Language", but argued that a performative statement is nothing outside the circumstances that make it performative. A performative utterance, as Benveniste puts it, is an act of authority. Anybody, says Benveniste, can shout, "I declare a general mobilisation," but if the proper authority is lacking such an utterance is no more than words. Without authority, then, the performative utterance "reduces itself to futile clamor, childishness, or lunacy" (Benveniste 1971: 236). A meeting of an official nature, for instance, begins when the chairman declares that "the meeting is open". When this statement is uttered under the appropriate conditions (*e.g.* a situation where the audience knows that it is spoken by the chairman) it creates a new situation. The performative utterance, Benveniste continues, has the property of being unique: "It cannot be produced except in special circumstances, at one and only one time, at a definite date and place" (Benveniste 1971: 236). But despite his critical approach to Austin's theory, Benveniste sees no

reason for abandoning the distinction between performative and constative utterances. In fact, he finds that it is “justified and necessary,” as long as we maintain it within “the strict conditions of use that sanction it” (Benveniste 1971: 238).

However, in his essay “Signature Événement Contexte” from 1972 Jacques Derrida reveals a fundamental problem with this line of thought, when he subjects Austin’s distinction between “normal” and “parasitic” performatives to meticulous deconstruction. For one thing, Derrida argues that one essential aspect of the performative utterance seems to pass unnoticed in Austin’s theory, namely the question of repeatability: “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance,” Derrida asks (Derrida 1988: 18). A performative utterance could not open a meeting, launch a ship or seal a marriage if it is not identifiable as something that conforms to an “iterable model”. It must be “identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’,” Derrida explains (Derrida 1988: 18). This argument, as Marvin Carlson remarks in *Performance – A Critical Introduction*, “moves the concept of linguistic performance back into the realm of repeated (or restored) and contextualised activity that is so basic for performance theory” (Carlson 2004: 76).

Waltz’s *Insideout* shows us that the play with different contextualising frames (e.g. globalisation, individualisation and detraditionalisation) is an integral part of the performance. Its attempt to explore the individual adaptation of a “flexible” and “globalised” lifestyle can be seen in relation to Butler’s concept of performative acts and the concept of performativity in Fischer-Lichte’s *Ästhetik des Performativen*. For Fischer-Lichte, following Butler, performative actions do not express a pre-existing identity but engender identity through the bodily actions of the performers. In the view of the subsequent development of the concept of performativity by Butler and Derrida, however, it is perhaps somewhat

surprising that Fischer-Lichte does not pay more attention to the contextual discursive qualities – or the never saturated contextual frames – of performativity. Derrida’s critical reading of Austin’s theory, for instance, draws attention to the fact that performative utterances (and more widely: actions) must follow an iterable model – but also, and more importantly, that they also change their “use value” when they are iterated at different times and in different contexts. My analysis of *Insideout* confirms the importance of iterability and framing, and it shows that *Insideout* is a playful blend of relatively stable frames of sameness (the *mise en scène*) and (a limited set of) interchangeable discursive contextual frames that open up for a never closed or finalised *différance*, which is productively open both to the now and to the future, and that must be countersigned by the other, by the audience, to take performative effect. Consequently, the aesthetic strength of Waltz’s performance does not lie in the collapse in itself of the distinction between art and reality or its theoretical grounding. It emerges out of the sophisticated play with specific discursive frames that constantly redefines the otherwise static and ontological opposition between art and reality, and proves the ability of Waltz’s performance to engage the audience in the dynamic, aesthetic and performative investigation of lifestyles and identity which never gets closed off into sheer sameness, but is iterated as well as redirected as productive difference in every performance.

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Re-thinking the “Performative Turn”: Fashioned Bodies, Sartorial Semiotics and the Performance of Culture, 1900-1930

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In historiographies of modernism the opening decades of the twentieth century sometimes appear as the age of the object in the particular sense that this period “witnesses the birth and flowering of the social analysis of material culture”: systematic efforts, as in the work of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, to uncover the sociology and semiotics of matter; to “read through objects to the truth of the social totality” in which they exist (Mao 5). Along with this fascination with the object – whether as commodity, symbol or Thing – comes an interest in work, performances and acts: the work things perform in acting on subjects; the work subjects perform in their interactions with things (Brown 4-5).

The focus of this essay is a particular class of object involved in a range of performative relations: that of clothes and other sartorial items. The foundational assumption of the argument is that clothes matter in the construction (and reconstruction)

of a historical moment and its representations; that the relations of clothes to culture can be thought of as constitutive to the extent that clothing as embodied cultural practice contributes to bringing forth and performing culture. The performative dimensions of the sartorial object are grounded in its double semiotic function as system and event: as a symbolic system clothes may serve to interpellate and discipline, to signify the place of individual bodies in social, economic or sexual orders; as event they offer an opportunity, among other things, for individual performance in Butlerian terms; the practice of variance (citational, parodic, carnivalesque or other) within a set of discursive possibilities. Clothes are also objects of use tied to particular aesthetic and ideological contexts, imbued with a materiality that connects them simultaneously to a process of production and its technology, the history of everyday life, and the practices of the material *habitus*.

Set against this background my concern over the following pages will be with two historical moments, both of which may be defined as modern, when public debate surrounding the making and articulation of culture centres on the performative potential inherent in dressed bodies and sartorial discourse with the “total” approach to culture suggested above, though with radically opposed valuations of the idea of the performative as well as that of totality.¹

The performative turn

The first of these moments is engaged by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her 2005 study of twentieth-century performance cultures,

1 An expanded version of this argument is presented in Chapter Five of my book *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity*, Edinburgh University Press, 2009. The present essay is based on a paper read at the Bergen TAS workshop in 2007.

Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual. In this book Fischer-Lichte traces a transition, defining European arts and academia between the turn of the twentieth century and the First World War, from what she understands as predominantly “textual” to prevalently “performative” modes of cultural and artistic articulation. Performatives are understood in this context as acts that bring something into being; they are not representational or referential; what they bring forth “comes into being only by way of the performative act”; further, “they mean what they bring forth, and, in this way, constitute reality” (Fischer-Lichte 27). Rather than speech acts, Fischer-Lichte’s focus is on bodily acts: specifically the potential of bodily acts to bring forth a community, and “the potential of a collective to execute performative acts that... bring forth culture” (27; 32).

Among the premises for this analysis is the observation that, at the end of the nineteenth century, European culture conceptualised and represented itself as what Fischer-Lichte understands as a “text” culture, defined in contradistinction to “primitive”, “performative” cultures based on spectacle and ritual performance. The shift Fischer-Lichte accounts for involves a re-evaluation of the relations between “primitive” and “modern” cultures, but also, as she expertly shows, of “the relationship between individual and community in modern society, and the role and function of the human body with regard to culture” (Fischer-Lichte 13). Such re-evaluations were taking place across the humanities, in theatre studies, religious studies, anthropology and the classics, converging and connecting with certain pressing concerns about modern society expressed by contemporary social commentators: the increasing alienation and fragmentation of perspective following from the specialisation and division of labour; the potentially explosive conflict between the cult of individualism, on the one hand, and the growth of anonymous masses, on the other. The question, as posed for instance by Emile Durkheim

in 1898, was of how individual and community were interconnected in a society on the verge of disintegration, and what forms of communal integration might be entrusted to reverse and hopefully heal the disintegrating process. Fischer-Lichte's study demonstrates how the European élite responded to such urgent issues by rethinking classical culture as a model of performative community, turning to the performative mode of festival and mass spectacle, as with Max Reinhardt's Theatre of the Five Thousand and the reopening of the Olympic Games in 1896 – both large-scale spectacles presuming to recreate the communitarian spirit of the ancient rites. Parallel proclamations of the body, or the embodied mind, as the basis of culture, occurred through the trans-European *Nacktkultur* and *Lebensreform* movements, as Fischer-Lichte also shows.

Partly in extension, partly in contradistinction to the redefinitions Fischer-Lichte describes, in the contemporary writings of sociologists, anthropologists and social commentators, the dressed body figures at the centre of differentiations of modern from pre-modern culture, as well as attempts to suggest social strategies for integration. For sociologists like Herbert Spencer and Georg Simmel the key to the differences in social regulation between “primitive” monarchical regimes and modern democratic societies is provided by two radically opposed cultural practices: ceremonial and fashion. The performances of ceremonial culture – the ritual obeisances, the forms of address, the decorations and costumes – occur under compulsion as a compulsory form of co-operation. By contrast, the conformity that rules modern democratic societies operates as an entirely different mode of social control, the voluntary compromise between individual restraint and freedom, whereby the growth of individuality is held in check by the consensus of disembodied opinion. The name for this modern regulation is Fashion. For others, like the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, the difference between community and

society – *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – maps onto the different sartorial logics of the traditional, “timeless” *Tracht* and international, ephemeral fashion, the latter always a factor and symptom of the dissolution of *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies 337). Paradoxically, perhaps, the hope of overcoming the process of disintegration resides precisely in the spirit of modernity itself, in its civilising, forward movement. The hope, expressed by Tönnies, is that the civilising process will eventually bring forth a society “capable of producing a rational will”, liberating it equally from “the whims of fashion” and from ceremonial “superstition, ghosts, and magic” (Tönnies 340). What is envisaged at a more evolved stage of modernity, in other words, is the *Gesellschaft als Gemeinschaft* – released both from fashion as the principle of irrationality (in social regulation and cultural performance), and from those aspects of custom that are at odds with modern rationality.

Tönnies’s optimistic vision found its reflection in a range of contemporary aesthetic practices with the aim of effecting communal integration by a total aesthetic approach to all daily objects and acts, among them the anti-fashion designs proposed by Henry van de Velde. Lecturing and writing around 1900, van de Velde’s concern is “that the diverging demands of individuality and community come together today in our efforts to establish a readjustment of social conditions” (van de Velde 132). In the area of dress, he argues, these are not mutually exclusive demands: while “there are circumstances in human life in which everyone’s dress should be different – indoors, for example”, there are others, in the street, or at public events, in which dress should be alike, to prevent the aesthetic and social disorder created by a crowd or a social gathering dressed in a heterogeneous way. The stylisation imposed by fashion simply “follows its own fantasies” and is incapable of such harmonious integration; by contrast van de Velde’s artistic clothing has the scientific basis

of George H. Darwin's evolutionary theory of dress, effectively combining the principles of organicism, evolution and modern rationality (van de Velde 133).

Appropriations and re-deployments

What we have seen so far is an understanding of the relations between individual and community, body and mind, which places the subject – as performing body, *habitus* and sign – at the centre of debates about what it means to be modern; how to define modern sociality in distinction to ceremonial cultures; and how to perform that modernity in such a way that society, at least at particularly significant or critical moments, becomes a community. For the remainder of this essay I intend to engage a subsequent phase in the ongoing proclamation of the modern, one that continues but also radically re-contextualises and challenges the concerns that informed the performative turn. The two texts I have selected for particular attention are Leonard Woolf's *Quack, Quack* (1935) and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), two polemical essays, written at a time, the build-up to the second world war, when the disastrous aftermath of the modern romance with ritual and spectacle begins to enter the public consciousness with the performative interpellation and deployment of (dressed) bodies by the new totalitarian regimes – though equally a time when “the body” continues to be idealised in progressive circles which define the agents of democracy and peaceful community as embodied, ego-driven minds. Against this dual backdrop the Woolfs each present a text of radical cultural and political analysis – each concerned with the performances and symbols that bring the collective, the mass, into being; each addressing the possibility of preventing war by creating subjects capable of resisting the interpellation of ceremonies, rituals and symbols, whether of nationalism, pa-

triotism, or fascism. Significantly, both writers give particular emphasis to the semiotic and performative charge inherent in dressed bodies and vestimentary signs, presenting sophisticated analyses of such modes of signification, though with strikingly different conclusions. Where Leonard trusts in the capacity of the rational mind and a civilised discourse based on the constative to heal wounds of division and counteract the irrationality of performative culture, Virginia attends to gender as a fundamental line of cultural division, imposing its own limits on the notion of a civilised community and on the idea of a conclusive differentiation between rational and irrational, constative and performative.

Much has been written about Fascist and National Socialist cultural politics, with its nationalisation of the *Freikörperkultur*, its grand spectacles drawing on ceremonial culture, and its “pre-modern” staging of dressed bodies based on the communitarian ethos of the *Tracht* rather than the disintegrating tendencies of fashion. In Germany in the 1930s the Nazi propaganda machine invested heavily in sartorial regimes that would subsume German women into the *Einheitlichkeit* and *Gleichheit* of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, with organisational uniforms and the *Tracht* promoted in contradistinction to the artificiality and degeneration of “jewified”, international fashion (Guenther 98-99; 145). *Tracht* figured prominently in the carefully choreographed spectacles staged by the National Socialist Party as well as in a range of Party-sponsored occasions, historical German celebrations and folk festivals (Guenther 112). Organisational uniforms, such as the *Führer*-approved uniform of the *Bund deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls) expressed the Party’s demand for unity and commonality, while offering possibilities for distinction through an elaborate system of cords, braids and badges (Guenther 120-21). Such awareness of the performative force of dress was matched by the Italian fascist regime in its na-

tionalisation of the clothing industry as well as at the level of display and spectacle. The widespread use of uniforms created and displayed a disciplined social body, while dress based on rural tradition was enlisted to project an invigorated national identity – the “new Italians” of a “new Italy” – against the degenerate cosmopolitanism and international capitalism represented by (French-dominated) fashion (Paulicelli 51).

It is a reflection of the Woolfs’ analytic powers that they both represent and anticipate the effectiveness of the conscription of dressed bodies and the performative modality by totalitarian regimes. In making their arguments, however, Leonard and Virginia were also responding to a progressive community with which they were both affiliated, a cultural vanguard which quite consistently identifies modernity, democracy and pacifism with the liberated (nude) body and with the embodied mind. Founded on evolutionary ideas of civilisation, a belief in the connection between modern vitalism and rationality, as well as the logical evolution towards nudity and the reality principle of the body, this culture was given discursive and organisational support by writers like Havelock Ellis, J.C. Flügel, Gerald Heard and John Langdon Davies, as well as associations like the F.P.S.I., The Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, of which Leonard Woolf was one of six Vice-Presidents. The Federation’s purpose was to provide a common platform for groups with a shared commitment to “an all-round progressive programme” for social and economic reform. What was at stake was the organisation of a wealth of scattered and ineffectual initiatives directed towards “rational progress”, against the compact forces of reaction: “The chaos of international relations, the failure to balance production and consumption, the nationalist policies pursued by governments with their appeals to fear, greed and self-interest under the guise of patriotism”, and, ultimately, “the breakdown of civilization” (Joad 22). The

range of membership suggests a “total” modernising project based on a performative understanding of individuals as cultural and political agents: of subjects as embodied minds acting within specific spaces and environments; of culture and politics as pervading even the most trivial aspects of human life.

Among the contributors to the F.P.S.I. Manifesto was the “clothes psychologist” J.C. Flügel, with an essay entitled “A Psychology for Progressives: How Can They Become Effective?” Flügel’s project, in the essay as well as his *Psychology of Clothes* (published by the Woolfs at the Hogarth Press in 1930), was to theorise the connection between the progressive, pacifist mind and society’s regulation of dressed bodies. The underlying idea is that modernising the mind effectively depends on modernising the body. Hence the project of the clothes psychology, of describing how bodies and minds are fashioned by clothing, as well as how dressed bodies signify and perform within a culturo-symbolic order. Dress, as Flügel understands it, is a gendered discourse invested with narcissistic, exhibitionistic and phallic symbolic value. Remnants of primitive phallic display are still to be found among the sartorial practices of modern society, though they are largely limited to the anachronisms of ceremonial dress, military and ecclesiastical hierarchies, and academic robes. The route to modern bodies and progressive psychology as Flügel maps it goes via modes of dress which permit narcissistic sublimation while removing undue elements of corporeal discipline and primitive phallic display, modelled on the ego-liberating fashions of the “female sartorial emancipation” – a modern attitude to the relations between clothes and body “that appears to be quite foreign to the primitive mind” (1933: 225). Grounded in the ego and the reality principle of the body, Flügel’s modern subject is a rational, independent and democratic agent, capable of resisting the excessive confor-

mity of bourgeois fashion as well as the archaic remnants of a primitive culture built on unthinking obedience to rituals and symbols.²

Quack, Quack

If Fascist and National Socialist cultural politics are defined by a sophisticated understanding of iconography and performance in the interpellation and creation of a community, Leonard Woolf, in writing *Quack, Quack*, is concerned precisely with the “political magic” of the grand spectacle and the mass suggestion brought about by, and on, phenomenal bodies (Woolf, L. 37). *Quack, Quack* is a tract against what Leonard names “quackery”, the return in Western culture of the “superstitions of the savage”, of primitive, ceremonial cultures based on custom, rituals and taboos, and on the inspired claim to absolute truth of the priest or king. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, this cultural regression to primitive instincts and morality, as Leonard depicts it, has taken on increasing intensity since the 1880s, coinciding in that respect with Fischer-Lichte’s historiography of the performative turn. Leonard traces it through the Hegelians, Carlyle, Nietzsche and Bergson, to its culmination in fascist ideology: “the supreme example in modern times of the reversion to savagery and the belief in political magic” (Woolf, L. 37).

Juxtaposing photographs of Hitler and Mussolini with effigies of Polynesian war-gods, Leonard Woolf’s point is to show that the corporeal manifestation of inspiration (and its performative effect) is virtually identical in all cases, the sig-

2 Among Flügel’s proposals to this end is the establishment of a “Clothing Board” to deal with clothing according to principles of modernity such as “practical suitability”, “economic reasonableness”, and “the advances of modern science” (Flügel 1930, 219).

nificant point being “the psychological effect which the facial appearance is clearly meant to produce... the superhuman sternness of the god and the terror which he instils” (Woolf, L. 47). Hence, writes Leonard, “the descriptions by travellers of the behaviour and state of mind of the inspired leaders and their followers are almost exactly applicable to that of a fascist meeting addressed by a Mussolini, Hitler, Göring, or Göbbels”. In support of his claims, he quotes at length from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890):

As soon as the god had entered the king or priest, “the latter became violently agitated, and worked himself up to the highest pitch of apparent frenzy, the muscles of the limbs seemed convulsed, the body swelled, the countenance became terrific, the features distorted, and the eyes wild and strained” ... When the Polynesian had reached this state, “he often rolled on the earth, foaming at the mouth, as if labouring under the influence of the divinity by whom he was possessed, and, in shrill cries, and violent and often indistinct sounds, revealed the will of the god” ... The Polynesian Führer sometimes “continued for two or three days possessed by the spirit or deity; a piece of native cloth, of a peculiar kind, worn round one arm, was an indication of inspiration, or of the indwelling of the god with the individual who wore it” ... In Germany and Italy the inspiration of Hitler and Mussolini is permanent. Hence the wearing of a piece of cloth of a peculiar kind (e.g., inscribed with the swastika) has also become permanent and has extended from the God-inspired leader to the leader-inspired followers, for it indicates that the wearer has accepted the inspiration either directly or indirectly (Woolf, L. 45-47; internal quotations from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*).

The performative force of the inspired Führer depends on the audience’s belief in, and ratification of, the performance as emanating from a transcendent authority. Leonard’s juxtaposition of photographs is intended to demonstrate that Hitler and Mussolini establish the credibility, and thus the authority, of their performance by invoking, or citing, what is in effect

conventions of prophetic speech: the bodily marks and sartorial symbol of inspiration. Moreover, this juxtaposition serves to reveal how the vestimentary object takes on the function of a sign: able to circulate freely without the body of which it is the metonym, always capable of invoking its referent – the source of prophetic inspiration and its authority.

Frazer, as shown by Fischer-Lichte, is one of the agents in the transition from textual to performative conceptualisations of culture. *The Golden Bough* contributes to overturning the nineteenth-century distinctions between primitive and civilised, performative and textual in demonstrating that European culture had evolved from a culture based on sacrificial ritual, a performative modality, moreover, which still existed among the segments or layers that constituted modern culture. Another key figure in the performative (re)turn is Nietzsche, whose *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) was instrumental to the late-nineteenth century re-conceptualisation of theatre and ritual through the scandalous claim that the ancient Greek theatre originated in a Dionysian ritual which transformed performers as well as audience into an ecstatic community. Nietzsche's description of the transformative effects brought about by bodies in a state of ecstasy (Fischer-Lichte 39), is clearly reminiscent of Leonard's inspired bodies in *Quack, Quack*.

Nietzsche's as well as Frazer's thoughts on the ritual origins of culture were picked up and developed by the Classics scholar (and friend of Virginia Woolf) Jane Ellen Harrison and the so-called Cambridge Ritualists (Gilbert Murray and Francis MacDonalld Cornford). What is particularly interesting in their theory of ritual as physical, performative acts, is the idea of the ordinary rite as a communal presencing or bringing forth of the (Bergsonian) *durée* (Fischer-Lichte 41). Once more, this is what worries Leonard Woolf in *Quack, Quack*. For Leonard (who based much of his critique on

Karen Stephen's *The Misuse of Mind: A Study of Bergson's Attack on Intellectualism*) what a "civilised" man such as Bergson has in common with the fascists and the primitive "quacks" is a claim to inspiration combined with symbolic opacity: the fiction of synthetic intuitions communicable only by bodily performance or as visual and verbal symbols which work by their materiality and demand instinctive, emotional response. In conveying such intuitions, "the oracle itself has lost all perception of what is imagery and metaphor and simile and what is the truth which it is seeking to express through imagery, metaphor, or simile... the quack himself can no longer distinguish between the symbol and the thing symbolized" (Woolf, L. 133). There goes a line, as Leonard perceives it – a "wave of unreason" – from the performative culture of the savage to the embodied mode of knowing idealised by Bergson and the performative aesthetic of modernism (the opaque symbols which mean what they are); finally to the "political magic" of fascist mass spectacles, ceremonies and opaquely suggestive symbols (Woolf, L. 193). What is desperately called for at a moment which seems to be the crest of the wave, is the reinstatement of mind and the reinforcement of the lines of demarcation suspended in the performative turn: the boundaries between mind and body; textual and performative; rational and irrational; civilised and primitive; and ultimately, democracy and totalitarianism.

J.C. Flügel and Leonard Woolf both direct their analysis towards the relations between individual and society, attempting to find viable answers to the question of how democratic subjects are constituted. Their modernising projects spring from the conviction that the performative symbols of ceremonial culture uphold their authority by the combined forces of id and super-ego, hence their recommendations consist in liberating the conscious mind from the remnants of primitive, archaic instincts and the moral response of the super-ego.

While Leonard emphasises the education of the rational mind as a counter-measure to the Nazis' primary object of education, "the rearing of strong bodies" (Woolf, L. 81), Flügel is particularly concerned with the idea that modernising the mind effectively depends on modernising the body. As such he continues the emphasis given to the body as the basis of culture which Fischer-Lichte defines as the performative turn, though with the important difference that Flügel's priority is the conscious embodied mind rather than unconscious bodily processes, and that, like Leonard, he insists on the careful differentiation of the civilised from the primitive.

This, then, is the argumentative context into which Virginia throws her "revolutionary bomb of a book", in the words of a contemporary commentator (Bosanquet 402). *Three Guineas* has many points of contact with *The Psychology of Clothes* as well as *Quack, Quack*. It is a tract against war which addresses the temptations and dangers of culturo-symbolic interpellation and which conducts much of its analysis through the operations of sartorial regimes. Like Flügel's book it presents a gendered analysis of the relations between dressed bodies and the social order, but with different conclusions. Like *Quack, Quack*, it despairs at fascism's collective bodies, but disagrees with Leonard's diagnosis of symbolic processes and with the prescribed cure of education.

The questions Woolf puts forward for discussion in *Three Guineas* are "Why war?" and "What can be done to prevent it?" The answers she provides depend on an analogy between patriarchy and fascism; an understanding of the inextricable connectedness between the private and the public. One might say that Woolf – in an essay which juxtaposes photographs of academic, ecclesiastical and military ceremonies with photographs of war – takes the look of civilisation, its sartorial regimes, as a symptom of its pathology, subjecting it first to a semiotic, then to a psychoanalytic analysis which, in its

complexity and sheer audacity, is sophisticated, ironic, and sometimes amusing. She examines dress as it signifies and regulates the performance of culture, of gender and power within a patriarchal order. Significantly, Woolf's analysis does not make the Spencerian distinction between ceremonial and fashion, revealing instead that the distinction is inoperative in modern democracy because both are cases of "voluntary" conformity. Examining forms of seemingly voluntary cooperation, Woolf shows how individuals are systematically interpellated by ceremonies and symbols even of an "innocent" kind, revealing that the presence of ceremonial and its performative force in the midst of civilisation – as in the academic and ecclesiastical processions of educated men – amounts to more than the anachronisms or "archaic remnants" which Flügel suggests. On the one hand, ceremonial dress appears to be a highly regulated system in which the symbolic meaning of every "button, rosette and stripe" is unequivocal, signifier corresponding to signified in a hierarchy of power; at the same time, the ritual character of ceremonial has the effect of transposing the sign into the mystifying incarnation of the symbol, with the effect that what is enacted is not so much the relations and hierarchies of power as its blinding mystery and absolute logic. Ritual and its sartorial properties interpellate and discipline individual bodies, bringing forth a collective with performative, perlocutionary force:

Here you kneel; there you bow; here you advance in procession behind a man carrying a silver poker; here you mount a carved chair; here you appear to do homage to a piece of painted wood; here you abase yourselves before tables covered with richly worked tapestry. And whatever these ceremonies may mean you perform them always together, always in step, always in the uniform proper to the man and the occasion (Woolf, V. 24).

More radically, however, Woolf's ironic appropriation of current psychoanalytic terms allows her to point up the connection that exists between "the sartorial splendours of the educated man" and the sartorial politics of nationalism, militarism and fascism (Woolf, V. 25). In making the point that clothing – like trophies in primitive, ceremonial culture – has phallic value, signifying possession of the phallus as well as the fear of losing it, Woolf concurs with Flügel's clothes philosophy. Woolf's particular contribution, however, consists in tracing the origins and consequences of phallic law through a range of audacious juxtapositions. Thus, in her argument, the uniform of the fascist dictator, with its medals and mystic symbols, is essentially no different either in its psychological origin or its performative modality from the gold, the brass and the feathers that adorn educated men. In both cases a single pathology is at work: phallic fixation and castration fears.

In her search for origins, Woolf posits two foundational performative moments in Western culture, both speech acts which lay down a law: Creon's law in *The Antigone* and St Paul's law in his letter to the Corinthians – the foundational text for the ruling Western idea of chastity. Springing from the same source – phallic fixation – between them these moments establish two traditions; the traditions, respectively, of subjection and resistance; the enunciation of a decree and the speech act which refuses its authority. Woolf's essayist reflects at length on the subconscious motivations behind St Paul's "famous pronouncement upon the matter of veils", recognising its subconscious motivations in the castration fears "of the virile or dominant type, so familiar at present in Germany":

Chastity then as defined by St Paul is seen to be a complex conception, based upon the love of long hair; the love of subjection; the love of an

audience; the love of laying down the law, and, subconsciously, upon a very strong and natural desire that the woman's mind and body shall be reserved for the use of one man and one only (Woolf, V. 186-87).

Reflecting on the Pauline precept as a phallic scene of law allows Woolf to trace the history of the veil as a vestimentary sign of subjection, thus substituting a history of chastity for Flügel's narrative of female sartorial emancipation. Her concern, undoubtedly, is to show that the performative force of the Pauline argument, underscored by the ideological and material interests of patriarchy, still persists. Once more, clothes regimes that Flügel describes as remnants of a primitivism destined to be dispelled by modernity's liberating force are shown by Woolf to have continued actuality.

A similar inversion of terms and suspension of boundaries informs Woolf's other foundational moment in Western culture: the performative force of Creon's edict in *The Antigone*. As critics have pointed out, Sophocles' Antigone is perhaps "the principal character in our culture... who is defined, and who defines herself, in a speech act of refusal"; whose defiance of Creon's law, that is, consists not primarily in a physical act (of honouring her dead brother), but rather in the public proclamation of her action: "I say I did it; I do not disavow it!" (Gould 34; Sophocles 487).³ The significance of Woolf's invocation of this primary scene resides in the act of civil disobedience performed and proclaimed by a woman placed marginally with respect to the Polis. The significance is also that the force of Creon's command is caught up with the question of gender: the force with which he reaffirms and maintains his decree through the play originates in the horror of yielding to advice that coincides with that of a woman.

3 I am indebted to Timothy Gould's reading of *The Antigone* in "The Unhappy Performative" for this reading of the play.

Thus the play demonstrates the consequences of male vanity, with Creon being made to experience the destructive force not only of his own law, but also of forcefully refusing the persuasive speech of others.

It is instructive to compare Virginia's invocation of this scene of law to Leonard's appeal to Greek culture as the origin of civilisation in *Quack, Quack*. As we have seen, Leonard's argument with its distinctions between civilised and primitive, textual and performative, depends on resisting and effectively reversing the re-conceptualisations of Greek culture that empowered the performative turn: the re-evaluation of ritual carried out by Nietzsche, Harrison and the Cambridge Ritualists. The Greeks were the first to understand the obligations and standards of intellectual morality, insists Leonard; theirs is the moment when superstition was overcome. Where Leonard makes his appeal to classical Greek reason and civilisation, the point of Virginia's gendered analysis is to show the presence of unreason and division – the irrationality of masculine vanity, phallic law and its consequence of subjection – at the origin of culture, an origin, moreover, which makes the idea of a community (whether as *Gemeinschaft* or democratic *Gesellschaft*) an impossibility. Gender, then, is the fundamental question to be resolved.

It is the question of force that interests Woolf in her two foundational moments and in the performative in general: the history of force, its investments, its *modus operandi*, and its inextricable connectedness with subjection, and signs of subjection, such as the veil. Faced with the prospect of war, Leonard's concern was with the Nazi armband as the signifier of a performative mode of signification that created loyal subjects and automatised response. His recommended strategy for the resisting (pacifist) subject seemed to rest on a rhetoric of the constative and of subjecting assertions to the test of verification. In Leonard's thinking, transparent

reasoning and the tactic of setting sceptical reason against the perlocutionary force of symbols provide the only hope of redeeming civilisation from the inspired bodies of metaphysical and ideological quackery (and with them the useful bodies of the fascist machinery of war). It is hardly surprising that Virginia has a different conception of the traffics and complexities of signification than Leonard. Her analysis of how culture is founded and performed, brought forth and practised, allows her to see that the performative force of symbols will not be dispelled by decree of reason, civilisation or the ego, but also that the “reason” and “civilisation” of educated man exist on a continuum without safe boundaries. Thus the cultural critique of *Three Guineas* engages not only the enforced performance of totalitarian regimes, but equally various integrative projects of democratic societies, including progressive attempts to enlist the dressed body as a signifier and performer of modern rationality. Where Leonard juxtaposes two kinds of savagery, two primitive performative cultures, Virginia, as we have seen, reveals the presence of ceremonial, performative culture in the midst of civilisation. The politics that ensues from this analysis shares Leonard’s commitment to pacifism; where it differs is in its attention to regimes of gender as much as national politics.

War, Virginia Woolf argues, is the inevitable outcome of symbolic orders founded on the phallus; the means to prevent it she identifies in signifying practices – speech acts and cultural performances – intended to resist the phallic imperative. Little wonder, then, that the field of agency she defines for the resisting (female) subject is circumscribed by “mental chastity” (Woolf, V. 90): suggesting a need to remain chaste under the force of the law and the sign of subjection; to counter it, like Antigone, with speech acts of refusal – but also with jokes, parody, ridicule, irony; etiolations of the speech act’s performative force. Women, she says, should pronounce an

opinion upon outsides, because the outside is usually connected with the inside – which, presumably, amounts to saying that the fragment may provide access to the totality, the trivial to the serious, and the most naturalised everyday act to the system of cultural performance.

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Bazin, Bresson and Scorsese: Performative Power and the Impure Art of Cinema

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There must be an influx of performative power from the linguistic transactions involved in the act of reading into the realms of knowledge, politics, and history. Literature must be in some ways a cause and not merely an effect, if the study of literature is to be other than the relatively trivial study of one of the epiphenomena of society, part of the technological assimilation or assertion of mastery over all features of human life which is called the human sciences (Miller 1987: 5).

The power of causing some effects on human lives and minds that J. Hillis Miller suggests in *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) as the performative action of literature can also be ascribed to art in general and indeed to film, as the inheritor of many characteristics of the 19th century novel, which has often served as the object of contemporary literary theory focused on performativity. Unlike theatre, where the bodies and voices

of actors are present in the flesh, cinema¹ is based on the one-way communication that Raymond Williams identified in *Culture and Society* (1958) and in many essays, and that since the 1950's has been seen as typical of radio, television, and, we should now add, of all the most contemporary forms of technology. Hence, the virtual dimension of the screen is somewhat similar to the written text, exactly because of the fundamental absence of the human body.

I would say that, much more than in theatrical performances, the spectators of films are submitted to a high degree of simulation, a complex mental activity that is quite different from the naïve identification with the lives and stories of the represented characters.² As in the reading of the novel, the spectators deal with something as abstract as words, but, because of the power of images, they face something, so to speak, “larger than life”: the audio-visual nature of the medium is intimately connected with the possibility of stimulating the spectators’ senses, emotions and intelligence both in relationship with what is narrated, even if in a fragmented way, and with the medium itself. Simulation consists in the spectators’ response to all these stimuli. In the darkness, in front of the big screen, space and sound overcome the usual dimensions of everyday human exchanges.³ There is no doubt that the performative power of film can be extremely strong,

1 Cinema is the term used by André Bazin in the 1940's and 1950's. I use it as a synonym of film, which has three meanings: the art form, the medium, and the photographically based film (cinema, the art form in its traditional medium).

2 A number of analytical philosophers interested in aesthetic emotions have discussed simulation. See Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* (2001), Gregory Currie's *The Nature of Fiction* (1990) and Kendall L. Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of Representational Arts* (1990).

3 David Lynch likes to say that he wants his films to wrap the audience in music and images, and therefore let them have an experience at

even in an age in which we are so used to images that they have lost the dazzling effect of their first impact.⁴

The critic André Bazin, the founder of *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, was concerned with the question of the impact upon the spectator: the realism that he was looking for in films has nothing to do with any “mimetic” school, quite the contrary. I would argue that his notion of realism encompasses the understanding of film as a medium that is susceptible to being read, which appeals to the spectators’ minds, and therefore is capable of causing the effects Miller alludes to. Its aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions are but one: this is the lesson Bazin took from the form and content of what has been called Italian neo-realism.

In an essay on the 1941 film *Paisà* by Roberto Rossellini,⁵ Bazin points out that the Italian filmmaker shows several episodes of life during the Second World War in various regions and cities in Italy. Together with the political content of the film, Bazin stresses Rossellini’s way of filming: the fight against Fascism in the last episode is constructed with an extraordinary cohesion between the horizontal, flat landscape of the river Po and the bodies of the partisans crouched in the water and in the fluvial vegetation. The realistic dimension is not to be sought in the accuracy of the landscape nor in the historical “truth” of the details, but in the intellectual and

odds with normal life, closer to a dream, transforming matter and weight, injecting in the human mind all the potential of the virtual. See Lynch’s “The Subversion of the Senses” (2002).

4 In several of his essays – and especially in “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931, “Little History of Photography”) – Walter Benjamin recalled the shock caused by photography in viewers in the 19th century; at the same time he could predict the habit of the users of technology, who would lose the astonishment provoked by the first appearance of new techniques.

5 See Bazin’s “The Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation”, in *What is Cinema* (1971: 16-40).

emotional effects aroused in the spectators' minds by Rossellini's formal solutions. One could say, in the critical language of Miller, that Bazin was interested in the "influx of performative power" emanating from the "linguistic" transactions involved in the act of watching this film, "into the realms of knowledge, politics, and history".

The close reading of texts helps us focus on important passages in which textual action works at the level of both form and content. Although it is a different medium from literature, cinema can be read as a text. Bazin recognized both the specificity of cinematic language and the closeness of film to the novel because of its narrative flux and the importance of stylistic invention. Therefore, in order to capture the impact of images, he closely analyzed various shots, insisting on the consequences of the takes of the camera and on the unfolding of the sequences.⁶ The more a shot is carefully constructed, the more we are drawn to interpret and re-interpret it. Actually, we can say that interpretations are the outcome of textual action.

The close reading of some shots by Robert Bresson and Martin Scorsese will allow us to reflect upon performativity understood as the type of action that works of art can develop in the mind of the receiver, who is indeed active. In their films, perception, emotions and understanding are subtly stimulated to a high degree, differently from the physical and ephemeral reaction provoked by the frantic action punctuated by gunshots in films that only appeal to gut feelings.⁷

6 For example, Bazin described at length the last episode of *Paisà*, where, he argued, the horizontality of the landscape and of the human bodies absorbs in concrete external features the clandestine character of the partisans' combat and the difficulty of hiding in that landscape.

7 Obviously, I am suggesting here a difference between good artistic films and bad commercial films. Nevertheless I am not opposing popular culture and high culture, since, as stated by Bazin and the *Nouvelle Vague*, cinema is popular art, but it can reflect on impor-

But the close reading will also open up all the different types of performativity that these two filmmakers have brought about. There is a profound kinship between what is at stake in *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*, 1955), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *Gangs of New York* (2003) and what some of the critical discussion of performativity has revealed: theory and analysis cooperate, I would say, in an irregular way.

In *Signatures of the Visible* (1989), Fredric Jameson called the contemporary critical mode of thinking that does not follow orderly historical narratives or simple reportage an “alternate account” or “a structure of laterality”, in which peripheral or digressive elements are necessary in order to bring into focus central issues. This can happen in film, literature and theory (as in the styles of Roland Barthes or Walter Benjamin); all of them definitely put in jeopardy any simple idea of merely “using” or “applying” some theory to a work of art.⁸ In the following, this structure of laterality is what will direct my thinking about performativity, in which I will dwell on various “peripheral” reflections on formal impurity and space. Hopefully, these peripheral foci will shed light on my major concern with performative power and its different features.

tant ethical and political questions. François Truffaut viewed *The Big Heat* by Fritz Lang as a *film noir* that discusses in depth the problem of justice (see Truffaut’s “Aimer Fritz Lang” (1954: 52). Similarly, I will try to show that *Gangs of New York* is not a mere Hollywood film in which the representation of violence is gratuitous, but a film that is deeply concerned with major questions of form and content, reflections on history and on the medium itself.

8 “There is a crucial structure of laterality at work here [in *Blow-Up* by Antonioni] (demonstrable elsewhere in contemporary literature), by which perception or experience requires a kind of partial distraction, a lateral engagement or secondary, peripheral focus, in order to come into being in the first place” (Jameson 1990: 191).

My choice of Bresson is justified by the fact that Bazin himself enthusiastically commented on the work of this filmmaker and his very sober style. The choice of Scorsese and especially of *Gangs of New York* might be surprising: in general, his films with their quick rhythm of action and musical score seem so far away from the slowness of those by Bresson, and Scorsese's heroes are so different from the silent and almost mystical characters in Bresson's films. Nevertheless, there is an important link, both contextually and formally. Scorsese became acquainted with the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the filmmakers of *Nouvelle Vague* in the mid 60's, watched the films of Truffaut, Godard and Rohmer, and studied their theories when he was a film student at New York University. Indeed, Scorsese is close to the young group of *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, to their fondness for some American filmmakers and their understanding of cinema both as popular medium and true art: Scorsese has always admitted the importance of Truffaut for his way of handling the camera, and he has declared his admiration for Bresson.⁹

Besides the context of cultural exchanges, an important element connects the filmmakers to the problem of performative power sketched in the "dialogue" constructed between Miller and Bazin above. This further connecting element I am alluding to is the speech-act structuring of *A Man Escaped*,

9 Some of the scenes of his *Taxi Driver* (1975), whose scenario was originally written by Paul Schrader – a filmmaker and critic deeply influenced by Bresson – are inspired by the patient work of the protagonist of *A Man Escaped* and even more by the protagonist of *Pickpocket*: Travis, the taxi driver interpreted by Robert De Niro, who plans to kill the presidential candidate, is silently and like an artisan cutting and hammering pieces of wood and metal in his apartment in order to construct complicated systems for shooting with his guns. Moreover, the room in which he lives is very similar to the bare space – apartment or prison-cell – where the protagonists of Bresson operate. See *Scorsese by Scorsese* (1996: 66).

Pickpocket and *Gangs of New York*. My discussion, then, will be concerned both with the performative power of these works and with the performative sentences triggering the action – externally and internally – in these films. I will be reading Bresson through Bazin’s interpretation of his style, and I will see Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York* as acting out various types of performativity.

J.L. Austin’s theory of performative language is based precisely on words such as those used to make bets and promises, as well as to issue orders and legal formulas that are ways of doing things with words. In all the films I study here, a promise is made. These films thus foster reflection upon the meaning and the usage of key terms in the critical theory of the last few decades. The concept of performativity elaborated in Derrida’s and Miller’s deconstruction of Austin’s theory of speech acts stresses the importance of language and literature in the shaping of human reality. In the field of literary theory and cultural analysis a major consequence of their elaboration of that concept has been the renewal of the old Marxian debate on theory and practice. Thanks to the performative turn, literature and the arts are endowed with the recognition of the ability to move the reader or the spectator, as Miller suggested; art and literature are not simply an effect but also a cause. The perception of the artistic object cannot be reduced to pure, uninterested contemplation: we know how modern art has been defying classical aesthetic attitudes by challenging the opposition between utilitarian aims and disinterested enjoyment.

Actually, modern art is neither utilitarian nor contemplative – it calls for a participation whose consequences might be the “cause” that Miller talked about. I would add that the reverberations of that “cause” are not immediate in the sense that the historical avant-gardes both in art and in criticism thought they would be: they might take different temporali-

ties – a first set of reactions, and later on direct or lateral re-elaborations. If the reader or the spectator can approach art as a phenomenon reverberating with knowledge and history, this means that aesthetics (the perception of the artistic object), ethics and politics are not separated, although their actions might differ in detail and nuance. Performative power or textual action may have immediate as well as delayed effects.

Bazin, Bresson and the impurity of cinema

Robert Bresson is one of the filmmakers Bazin studied in order to discuss the problem of adaptation in film. To adapt means to translate something into something else, and an adaptation can be understood as a translation or a transaction from one genre or medium into another. The whole question is “laterally” connected with performativity: to adapt an artistic product from one medium to another – the passage from one text to another type of text – presupposes an already existing mutual adaptability of the media in question. Actually, it could even be said that a film, with all its different phases, from shooting to editing, and with the economic dimension of filmmaking, is the result of one of those sentences which could be added to the series of performative speech acts (promises, bets, contracts etc.).

Two articles by Bazin are crucial for the debate on adaptation: “Pour un cinéma impur” (“In Defence of Mixed Cinema”) and “*Le Journal d’un curé de campagne* et la stylistique de Robert Bresson” (“*Le Journal d’un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson”).¹⁰ Bazin challenged any

¹⁰ See (Bazin 1967: 53-75) and (125-143) respectively. These articles have been seminal for François Truffaut’s manifesto-like essay “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” (“A Certain Tendency of

simplistic understanding of adaptation, while emphasizing the mixed nature of film whose aim is to express human reality: the filmic image is, in his opinion, capable of capturing both the exterior and the interior worlds of human beings. And the interior is what matters most. As much as the other arts, film is impure, since it constantly takes various elements from several media. Could we conceive – Bazin argues in “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” – the painting of Michelangelo without sculpture, or the 17th century French novel without the experience of Racine’s theatre?

After the silent movie, cinema in the 1940’s turns increasingly towards the adaptation of novels; this shows its impure nature, which was evident also at its beginnings in its link with popular theatre, the vaudeville, musicals and circuses. Even so, the important question to ask is not how faithful the scenes of a given film are to the literary text, but what important literary formal innovations can be captured by films. In this respect, *Citizen Kane* is crucial for Bazin, since the fragmented and polyphonic character of the whole story is deeply informed by the narrative devices of Joyce, Faulkner and John Dos Passos. Linear narration is broken, and the point of view shifts constantly from one character to another, from a given moment in the past to the present, and vice-versa: numerous flashbacks of the same episode in the past as perceived by various characters cut the time flow into fragments, following the syncopated rhythm of memory and the flow of stream of consciousness. Like the novels by those writers, *Citizen Kane* is based on the fragmentation of time.

Bazin’s investigation is important for both the formal and

French Cinema”, *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, 1954: 16-29), where he attacks the naive idea of a faithful transposition of narratives from novels to film.

the historical analysis of the artistic object (aren't we always torn between the formal apprehension of art and the attempt to historicize both the artistic objects and our perspective in looking at them?) On the formal level, Bazin affirmed the freedom of the language of film, of its techniques and stylistic solutions. On the historical level, a new light was cast on the history of film, since he broke with the nostalgia for the golden age of the birth of the motion picture: unlike several contemporary critics, he expressed no regret for the fall of the initial "aura" of film before the new era of the talkies. In spite of what could be seen as his idealism or spiritualism, Bazin was also interested in questions of material means of production, since he stressed the converging of literature and film precisely in the new literary production of screen-play writing. In the early 1950's, one needed to have a good sociological grasp of reality and the role of arts in general in order to blur the hierarchy between literature and cinema and reject the vision of the superiority of the novel over film.

As much as he was refined in his analytical reading of so many films, Bazin has been concerned with sociological questions: he was aware of the importance of the mode of production in filmmaking, and pointed to the crucial divide between those filmmakers who hired screen-play writers, and those who, more to his liking, imagined their screen-plays and transformed them – we could actually say re-wrote them – while shooting.

Bazin therefore defended free adaptation, turning upside down the relationship between film and literature. He believed that the true work of adaptation consists in transposing some stylistic effects from literature to film (as opposed to the still current idea that adaptation transfers the content of a novel or a play into filmic images). In "*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson" (first published

in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in June 1951), the critic explained, through detailed analysis of sequences from Bernanos' 1936 novel and Bresson's film, how the latter ends up being more literary than the novel upon which it was based. It does so by reducing the visual elements of descriptions.

The final scene especially, which for more than a minute shows a thin grey cross, lets the voice-over narrate the death of the priest with no concession to the eyes: the details of the protagonist's tragic end are told by the voice-over, reading aloud a letter written to the Father Superior by the priest who assisted at that death. The last shot is extremely sober, with no concession to the desire of seeing events represented with many details. In Bazin's opinion, Bresson here reached the same intensity as Mallarmé, who refused any trace of "reportage", and aimed at the highest sphere of poetic language, dusting off all the weight of description as much as its illusion of reality. For Mallarmé, the bare reality of language was a more accurate form of reality than all the attempts to represent the world through descriptions.

As with Austin's speech acts and the subsequent debate within literary theory, Bresson's film is yet another attempt to investigate the relationship between reality and language, by way of the particular language that is film. His works succeeded and still succeed in affirming the power of film and its action upon the spectators' minds, pushing them to consider that this medium, too, just like literature – in the words of Miller – "must be in some ways a cause".

Quiet performative: minimalist gestures and actions

Bresson's films have a strong ethical commitment: morality has to do with values and not with norms. Michel, the protagonist of *Pickpocket*, challenges the norms of society: out-law, against the law, he wants to experience the full ex-

tent of his own values, however wrong they might be. To the commandment (both religious and societal): “do not steal,” he responds with his: “I will steal, I promise to myself that I will become a deft thief”. He reads Dostoevsky and wants to live in accordance with the philosophy of some of his characters. Indeed, the reading of novels had a crucial impact on his life. The story of *Pickpocket* consists in the wicked series of events stemming from an intention formulated as a solitary promise to the self in a nihilistic or self-destructive challenge: “I swear I will become a thief.”

A Man Escaped is also structured by speech acts: in both films an implacable bet or promise functions as the basis of all the events and the repetition of gestures typical of these films. In *A Man Escaped*, Jean Fontaine, imprisoned by the Nazis, is awaiting his execution after receiving the death penalty. He moves between that death-sentence and his promise to himself, to the boards of his prison-cell, and to the prisoners he manages to speak to during the collective rituals of washing and walking in the prison courtyard. “We condemn you to death” and “I promise I will escape” are the two phrases determining the whole film.

Those speech acts order the lives of the protagonists, but the performative power of Bresson’s films is also marked by the importance given to gestures. Gestures are the way in which we act out our will; they assure the fit between human will and reality, they are our minimal actions upon the world, and they obediently succumb to an aim. The protagonists of both *Pickpocket* and of *A Man Escaped* act with their hands, one following his decision to steal, the other his decision to escape from the Nazi prison. In the two films, as in so many Bresson movies, neither the characters nor the voice-over are very talkative. On the contrary, there are many long shots where the protagonists *perform* their activities solely with the use of their hands. It has been said that Bresson succeeded in

endowing film with the dimension of touching: the immediate effect of his style is the “close-to-life” participation of all the physical senses. In fact, because of the “un-psychological” acting, spectators do not identify with the human being, but capture all his gestures. The ethical and political dimensions are brought about by that participation, and not through many dialogues or extensive commentary.

In *Pickpocket* we feel the deftness of the hands in stealing from the bags or the jackets of the passers-by; we can sense the lightness of the hands and the fingers of professional thieves. In a central, long sequence starting in one of Paris’s railway stations, the protagonist and his accomplices on the train “work” at unfastening watches and bracelets, opening purses, sliding their fingers into people’s clothes, pretending to help them get on the train, and throwing their emptied wallets into the garbage.

The same is true for *A Man Escaped*: the spectator follows the patient movements of Jean Fontaine in his meticulous activity, day after day, of un-nailing the wooden door of his cell with a metal spoon. Several sequences show this work in his cell and its progression day by day. The sense of touch and that of hearing are continuously stimulated; like Fontaine, we hear a noise from outside the door, we hold our breath while he interrupts his work. The fear that a Nazi guard might suddenly open the door and discover what Fontaine is doing takes the concrete form of a movement frozen in the middle of a tiny, painstaking action: suddenly, the feeling of waiting inhabits the restricted space of the cell with its wall, mattress, dust and the splinters of wood accumulated by the grating of the spoon against the door boards.

The actors chosen by Bresson – they are never film stars – do not play in any expressive way: their faces and their features are almost motionless. Bresson firmly rejected any theatrical effect in his *cinématographe* (the name he gave to

film precisely in order to refuse any spectacular dimension of dramatic psychology). Nevertheless, there is a subtle psychological dimension, but of a different order: I would call it the concrete psychology of things, the way in which objects both resist and are bent by an act of will. The emotion of what is at stake in both films is not *expressed* through eyes, lips, face or words – the most obvious human ways of showing affective life. The emotion is *meant* in the matter, in the sounds of things, and, if there is some human presence, that presence is in gestures, not expressively directed to the unveiling of what is felt but concretely directed to the craft that connects human beings to things. Will, intention, intentionality and objects are condensed: when we see the details of the cell door, for example, we immediately grasp Fontaine’s intention: it is almost tangible, concrete, while the idea itself of evading is built little by little by wood, spoon, cloth and cords, noises and breathing.¹¹

Space and action in these films are often investigated in their minimal dimension: “There is just one point in space from where one thing, at a given moment, asks to be looked at” (Bresson 1993: 35). Space is more than geometry, it is matter, and a small corner of the ground or the wall is able to convey the whole relationship between human beings and space. Things are imbued with action and will. Bresson’s films are often in an area that is neither the rambunctious activity of what is called action-film, nor the nihilistic attitude of the complete suspension of action. Instead, they focus on a small-scale action where things call for human will to operate on or via them – barely, without hope or despair. It is impossible not to see how this minimalist filmic narration resembles some

11 In his *Notes sur le cinématographe*, Bresson wrote that “objects are much more important than people” and “events” (1993, my translation).

of the most experimental adventures of prose and drama in the modern period.

Gestures and objects in Bresson's films produce a kind of physical reality that is commanded by the inner voice of the protagonist. This voice is the quiet, silent speech act determining actions which are performed in order to achieve the fixed goal. In *Tropes, Parables, Performatives*, Miller recalls the weight of words in constructing whole worlds: "A true performative brings something into existence that has no basis except in the words, as when I sign a check and turn an almost worthless piece of paper into whatever value I have inscribed on the check, assuming the various contexts of this act are in a correct order" (Miller 1990: 139).¹² Within his Christian vision, Bresson proposed a way of rebelling against the laws of society (Nazi power and bourgeois society) through a promise that rejects that order but proceeds according to a precise ritual: Michael's learning and exercising of theft in *Pickpocket* and the accuracy in crafting and organizing the escape in *A Man Escaped*.

The case of Scorsese

Reading past and contemporary literary and artistic works means trying to find the spark which connects form with content. With our grip of the contemporary world we look for some understanding of the historical conditions in which a work has been produced; we combine the voice of something which is not "us" with that which is murmuring in our ears. The act of reading proves our will to *act* with words in the present, and reading is in this sense a true performative: it gives real existence to books, artistic objects, films. Like a

¹² Miller adds that things might work even if the context is not right, as in the case of counterfeit money or bad cheques.

novel, a film comes into life when we *read* it and *re-read* it: we negotiate between the attempt to capture the ideas it embodies and the attempt to express our concerns through our reading of that precise object. Theory and analysis go hand in hand, one is feeding the other. The tension between some assumptions inherited from the 1960's and 1970's, and the need to view old and new works – canonical as well as non-canonical ones – in a new light, allow for endless re-readings.

As I have already suggested – like the two films by Bresson discussed above, *Gangs of New York* can be a good example for reflecting on performative power and performativity, and for several reasons. The performative power of art affecting us in our relationship with knowledge, history and politics has to do with space. Don't we apprehend space? How can we imagine human history without the topography of places where things happened and people lived? Isn't the term of politics itself endowed with a spatial organization: that of the city, as the etymology of the Greek word *polis* suggests?

Film is a medium founded on our perception of time and space; actually it changed our perceptive habits. A film necessarily unfolds along a sequential path that is not dissimilar to the novel's denouement; and, at a more frantic pace than the novel, the film combines its account of the time represented (a whole life, a year, a day etc.) and of "existential" time (the internalization of the *temps vécu*) with the compelling quantification of the real time of the shots and the film.¹³ But films can also challenge our perception of space, contradicting the major elements of Euclid's geometry. The close-up, just to give an example, jeopardizes any evidence that the whole is greater than the part. The movement of the camera, the use

13 See the essential volumes by Gilles Deleuze: *L'Image-mouvement* (1991) and *L'Image-temps* (1994). In English: *Cinema 1* (1986) and *Cinema 2* (1989).

of special effects, the various types of shots, and the rhythm of editing have such an impact on our perception of space and time that we can say that cinema is responsible for a new way of perceiving that is now integrated into our eyes. Film has in some ways forged our sense of sight, pushing the retina to such speed that the power of abstraction is included in our grasping of images and our experience of concrete objects.¹⁴

I will here argue that *Gangs of New York* elaborates space and time or that combined space-time element which, according to Deleuze, is typical of film, and the more so since the challenges of the camera intervene in a film which apparently carries the most classical structure of the linear flow of events, from the childhood of the young protagonist to his adult life, from the disappearance of the gang led by his father, the Dead Rabbits, to the protagonist's return to Lower Manhattan and to his slow and patient construction of his revenge against the man who killed his father.

As in classic historical novels, this personal story is framed by History, by the Secession War and the draft in the city of New York during the years of Tammany Hall. Obviously, *Gangs of New York* aims at realizing one of the most "Hollywood" of genres: historical fiction.¹⁵ All the ingredients of the Hollywood "canon" are there: famous actors (Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Day-Lewis, Jim Broadbent, Brendan Gleeson etc.), a huge budget, costumes, and powerful machinery for the reconstitution of historical places in the Cinecittà Studios in Rome. Nevertheless, the film is also anti-Hollywood in terms of the use of the camera, the construction of space, and what can be called cinematic thought.

14 See Paul Virilio: *Esthétique de la disparition* (1998) and *La vitesse de libération* (1995). In English: *The Paul Virilio Reader* (2004).

15 Scorsese had already tried the staging of New York upper class life at the end of the 19th century with *The Age of Innocence* (1993), an adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel.

In a beautiful shot in the first part of the film, Scorsese shows the body of the leader of the Irish Catholic Dead Rabbits, Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson), killed by the leader of the rival Protestant gang, the Natives, Bill the Butcher or the Cutter (Daniel Day-Lewis). He is lying on a cart that his people move away from the site where the battle took place, Paradise Square. On the ground of the square the snow is red with blood, and the faces of the Dead Rabbits are disfigured by the signs of the combat and the sadness of defeat. Then the frame widens, more and more, until people and objects lose their individuality to give rise to a vision that comes from above, showing the pattern of streets and houses of the whole neighbourhood called the Five Points. The frame widens yet again, including the roofs and the urban grid, and we see the whole City of Manhattan, as in a map; and the moving space becomes time, the time of some transformation of the city, until we read: "16 years later," and we hear the voice-over preaching forgiveness while Vallon's son (Leonardo DiCaprio) stands to receive the farewell from his orphan institution at Hellgate. The same technique of widening and transforming the image is used at the end of the film, when a final sequence accumulates the epochs of New York from the 1860's until the 20th and the beginning of the 21th centuries, in which we can see the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

Among the many examples of the treatment of space, it is worthwhile to recall the very beginning of *Gangs of New York*, when, in front of a black screen, we first hear the noise of a razor on skin, and then we see, from below, the face of a man – Priest Vallon. He is shaving, on purpose cuts his cheek, and hands the blade stained with his blood to his son. This perspective from below is in fact that of a child's gaze: his son is looking up at him just before the battle with the Natives. The physical space and the symbolic implications are but one: after the few words exchanged in the shaving scene, the boy

follows his father in a sort of long martial walk through the dark labyrinth where the Dead Rabbits live, the so-called Old Brewery.

Then father, son and the people of the gang get out onto Paradise Square. Several shots during the ferocious battle show that Vallon's son is looking at the whole event, and then looks at his dying father. That gaze of the child looking up in the initial shaving scene is first outside the screen, then included in the image of Vallon's arm stretching out towards him; this gesture will determine the life of the young protagonist, later called Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), when, after several years at Hellgate House of Reform, an institution for orphans, he returns anonymously to the Five Points (where Bill the Butcher has been the absolute boss for a long time). The day of the battle in which his father was knifed to death is imprinted forever in his mind: Amsterdam's determination to kill his father's murderer is hosted in the image of the initial gaze and its spatial installation.

Film can operate powerfully, on a narrative level and on a meta-discursive one, playing with the converging of genres, and of the senses – sight, hearing, touching. Thanks to its fundamental impurity at all levels, cinema reaches a grandiose synaesthesia of several senses and of the mind, because the effect on the spectator comes from both what is shown and what is not shown, from inside and outside the frame. Films can be like novels, plays, poems, paintings and operas. But where a novel needs explanations by the narrator or analysis by the characters, dialogue or monologue, film can synthesize with just one shot, punching into the guts and the brains of the spectators, who do not even have the time to adjust to what they are feeling in one scene before they are introduced to something else, forced continuously to correct the information given by an image with the following one – quickly, more quickly than the wink of the eye. And where theatre cannot

but accept the full presence of the body on stage, and a relative stillness in spite of the movements of the actors and the change of décor, film can cut, fragment, displace, combine, move up and down, and track on one side and on the other, from below and from above. Everything is possible for the camera and endless are and have been its effects. Scorsese wants to use all the power of the camera.

Besides the performative power of affecting our knowledge of space, *Gangs of New York* contains various forms of performative speech acts and performance arts (in the literal sense). The first striking speech act happens during the beginning of the battle between the two rival gangs – corresponding to one of Austin’s examples: “I declare war”. The Dead Rabbits and the Natives are face to face, their respective bosses in the middle of the groups, as if they were displaying themselves on a stage, in this case Paradise Square. Its space is indeed opened up by a slow and vast wide-angle lens movement, as if the curtains had been lifted for the beginning of the show allowing the vision of the whole space. After the first brief exchange, in which Priest Vallon recalls the promise of a battle, Bill the Butcher pronounces those words that are able to do things: “On my challenge, by the ancient laws of combat, we have met at this chosen ground to set, for good and all, who holds way over the Five Points...”. The Irish Catholic leader of the other gang pronounces in his turn: “I accept the challenge”, and the battle starts.

All the most basic and classic conditions of a speech act are fulfilled: the presence of the two parties and of testimonies, and the ceremonial character of the whole action. The combat cannot be understood without this collective ritual which has to take place somewhere. I would say that this scene is so deeply rooted in a social setting with the pronouncement of some kind of law that it recalls the inaugural reflection on speech acts by the philosopher who was the

forerunner of Austin and Searle: Adolf Reinach (1883-1917), who contributed to the understanding of the link between language and action. In *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes* (*The Apriori Foundations of Civil Law*, 1913), he criticized Hume's vision of the promise as being confined to the mere expression of an act of will on the part of the person who declares his intention to act in favour of the addressee of the promise. Reinach believed that the main problem of this type of utterance is how it can create a mutual obligation between the two parties in the burg – in a precise physical and social space. In other terms, Reinach displaced the centre of the problem from the question of personal will to the social structure required for the promise. The two-way structure is important as the frame in which juridical activities take place.

This is also clear for Austin: on the one hand there is the a-priori need for figures to have the authority to declare certain things, and on the other there is the need for an audience to receive and accept those utterances (as Austin says: speech acts require uptake) in a ritual ceremony and in an appropriate spatial setting functioning as the place where the promise between the two parties occurs. Most of Austin's performative speech acts presuppose an addressee, and they require that the addressee understands what the speaker is doing. Austin gives the example of some rare speech acts which are not directly addressed to anyone, for example when a government speaker institutes a law by saying: "I hereby promulgate the following law". Nevertheless, one could argue differently. It is true that the promulgator of a law does not need to be addressing the interlocutors, but the addressees *are* an essential logical counterpart. What would the enacting of a law in a desert be, even if pronounced by a state officer, if no one was there? Or in a destroyed country where no citizens any longer existed?

Performing history, the past and the present

Indeed, the scene of the battle between the two gangs in Scorsese's film stages the exchange between the two parties and the presence of the community (or communities) witnessing the declaration of combat. The fight is made possible by that mutually agreed promise in front of witnesses. We could also notice that this unambiguous and immediate social involvement in the name of the "ancient law" is contrasted with the other speech act that unfolds the historical events in the film: the abolition of slavery and the subsequent Civil War. Scorsese shows two cases of promulgation of law and declaration of war. He also shows that the supposed addressees are not always ready to accept such decisions, thereby showing how difficult it can be for performative utterances to become reality. The film shows the period in which the Abolition of Slavery is declared by the Government. But the juridical act does not necessarily imply its "cultural" acceptance: *Gangs of New York* testifies to the brutal racist response to the Abolition. The same is true for the Draft: a revolt defied state authority during the New York Draft Riots of July 13 to July 16, 1863, when people expressed their refusal of the war.

Scorsese shows important cultural changes in the 19th century in the United States: the end of the ancient code of honour of the gangs and the beginning of the new legalized violence of the state. In spite of their brutality, the local battles between the two New York gangs were based on a mutual agreement: as it appears in the first scenes of the film, the Natives and the Dead Rabbits fight on Paradise Square after the open declaration of war pronounced by Father Vallon and Bill the Butcher. Everybody in the two groups participates in the events decided by their chiefs. But the modern, presidential or governmental decisions are depicted through social

disharmony, leading to the 1863 Riots and their repression in blood.

What is the challenge, the performative power, of the huge historical fiction of *Gangs of New York*, a film which encountered much criticism and disappointed the lovers of coherent story-telling?¹⁶ I would say that the function of the promise is to hold all together – history and myth, the past and the present – while a mainstream historical movie would aim at historical accuracy or at the spectacular Hollywood-like construction. Scorsese, in my view, has at least a triple intent. He wants to represent History as the history of a nation (Abolition, the draft for the Civil War, and the making of the United States), in the line of political history based on great events. But Scorsese also wants to account for local history: the history of the gangs in Manhattan and their presence in the life of the city, as a chapter of cultural history stressing the role of groups and small communities, their everyday life and their religious beliefs (the opposition between Catholic and Protestant groups is important to the gangs in the book by Herbert Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, which had been an inspiration to the director since the early 1970's, when he first read it¹⁷).

However, Scorsese's aim is not simply the erudite depiction of New York in the 19th century. He also wants to explain the United States' past as the making of the law through corruption, so to speak the legal corruption of Tammany Hall's politics. He reads the past through the eyes of the

16 As Pete Hamill put it in a review in *The Daily News*: "For all that, this movie is an honorable – if misguided – attempt to re-create a lost world. But it is, after all, a movie. It will, in the end, be judged as art, not history" (Hamill 2002). A more positive review: Todd McCarthy, "Gangs of New York", *Variety* (2002).

17 See Martin Scorsese et al. *Gangs of New York. Making the Movie* (2003: 8-9).

present, through the fresh memory of September 11, 2001 in Manhattan – a memory which is concretized in the dust and debris accompanying the fight between Bill the Butcher and Amsterdam in the midst of the anti-draft riots. Scorsese accentuates the multi-cultural elements, increasing, for example, the real historical numbers of the Chinese population in New York. What question can be more pertinent today than the problems embedded in the construction of a national identity? What perspective could be more up to date than multiculturalism? Past and present nourish each other; quite un-canonically, Scorsese combines the battle scenes in the reconstructed Paradise Square around 1850 with a complex editing of contemporary music.

The screening of violence, which has so often been criticized, transcends the accuracy of costumes and types of arms used by the rival gangs or by the National Army in the mid 19th century: it tells us about the horror of any war; it is a way of writing a pacifist message, at our tormented beginning of the 21st century, through the emphasis of an audio-visual construction of the fight. At the same time, Scorsese is conscious of the history of cinema, and the infinite representations of violence that cinema has been showing since its beginnings. The close reading of some postures and movements in the first battle between the Dead Rabbits and the Natives would show many similarities between the famous battle on ice in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevski* (1938), and that of the snow-covered Paradise Square.

A single long shot of more than four minutes could exemplify the broadness of Scorsese's intent and his ability to hold together many elements belonging both to the sphere of fiction and to that of history (and to those complex historical threads that I mentioned). On the side of fiction, in a scene before his revenge and betrayal of Bill the Butcher, Amsterdam is already "under his wing", he works for the

big boss, and actually enjoys his activity of collecting the money from boxing bets, while the match is starting in the middle of a noisy crowd. Fiction is coloured with historical elements: criminal life in Lower Manhattan was in fact organized and regulated by the historical Bill the Butcher (the nickname of William Poole, the leader of the Bowery Boys gang). The politician William Tweed, the boss of Tammany Hall (the society controlling all the activities and businesses of the Democratic Party), tries to get hold of the area dominated by the Butcher in order to get votes from the Irish immigrants who are constantly arriving from Europe. Scorsese represents the passage from the criminal gang power to the corrupted political power of William Tweed. In a sequence continuing the boxing episode, in which Tweed unsuccessfully tries to intervene by banning public bets and games, we can see Bill the Butcher and William Tweed on the harbour pier engaged in a discussion ending up with the Butcher's refusal to cooperate with Tammany Hall.

The camera first follows Bill the Butcher walking away with Amsterdam, and suddenly, without any cuts, it hurries back towards the street where we see immigrants called by state employees to sign up for the draft. The real reason for entering the Army is the hope of being fed: we hear and see two immigrant soldiers getting on the boat. Then, from the street, without editing, the camera moves with a broad movement towards the boat and the sea. We keep hearing the conversation about food when the camera quickly plunges down, towards the shore where many wooden coffins are lined up on the ground. Up-and-down camera movements swing from the shore to the ship, following a crane which puts down a coffin.

While we still see that coffin, Scorsese uses another of his particular film techniques: we already hear a voice that belongs to the following sequence, that of the actor playing

in a staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This powerful stylistic solution offers the continuity of the sound-track in the cut of two different shots, and succeeds in embracing fiction (the relationship between a boss and a favourite, and the tension between two bosses), local history (street life and crowds), and national history (draft and turmoil about the Abolition). Space and time are many-layered and many-faceted, and are acted out as sequences of performative events, from the call to the Draft to the scenes in the theatre. Textual action is multiplied.

In *Gangs of New York*, we should not forget the presence of what could be called “the Hollywood gloss”: *i.e.* the love-story and the stereotypical treatment of the main female character (Jenny, the thief, interpreted by Cameron Diaz). Then, almost like in a Balzac novel, there is the “type” of the boss: Bill the Butcher is corrupt, abusive, racist and vulgar as well as being cruel and sentimental, and faithful to a forlorn and boastful sense of honour. But Scorsese adds yet another dimension to his historical research, the mythical one: as in epics and novels, his heroes are moved by revenge. This mythical dimension bounces into another myth, confirming the tie between literature and cinema: revenge constitutes the main theme for so many gangster and western movies. This theme plunges *Gangs of New York* into the heart of the history of cinema, but it is also a bridge to another medium: the theatre, where revenge is a classic theme – what could be more Shakespearian? “Very Shakespearian”: this is in fact the phrase one of the characters pronounces when he understands that Amsterdam is the son of the Priest Vallon, at the crucial moment in the film when Amsterdam prevents the attempt to murder Bill the Butcher (in order to make sure that he himself will be the one to kill him).

We can now understand the presence of so many *performances* in this film: people freely improvising dances in the

street or in the tavern, a ball organized by the Reformers, popular sports, such as boxing and animal fights (with “performative” bets!), circus and theatre shows. And there are always crowds, in the streets, the theatres, the taverns (representing the crowd still remains a challenge for filmmakers). The theatre performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is interrupted by the racist reactions of the audience, among whom there is the “nationalist” boss of the Natives, and by the attempt to murder Bill the Butcher. In another major circus-like performance we see Bill’s knife number with Jenny in the Chinese Pagoda, when Bill has already been informed about Amsterdam’s plan to kill him.

As suggested above, textual action can go in the direction of the content – the spectator has to reflect on racism, the War, justice, violence, revenge etc. But textual action also activates the medium itself. All of these performances in this film by Scorsese are dictated by something stronger than the logic of narration: they are on the level of meta-language, they have a meta-filmic flavor. They are allegories of film as an art whose beginnings were marked by popular theatre and musical. All the performances in *Gangs of New York* allegorize film as a “profoundly impure” art form, to use one of Bazin’s terms again.

Filmmakers contemplate their medium and reflect on its nature and history. This can be done directly by quoting scenes from other films, or just by alluding to them, or by transforming them more or less ironically, or by emphasizing some cinematic effects that have been used already. After having refined all these modes in his various films, Scorsese shows here that film can embrace all of the other arts thanks to the power of the camera shooting, editing, cutting, magnifying, multiplying, fragmenting, or “amplifying” the *mise en scène* of the theatre, of musicals, circuses, and shows of any kind.

Silent and spoken performative actions

It is time now to return to the gaze of the child during the first minutes of *Gangs of New York*: that gaze embodies a speech act, words which are half-spoken, that *will* speak silently – and *do*. We have seen how that gaze condenses the physical and symbolic dimensions of space. The child's gaze in the shaving scene will be transformed and take the shape of an act of will, obeying the words pronounced later on, during the battle, by the dying Vallon: "Oh, my son. Don't, never look away". These words echo the imperative "don't" pronounced by Vallon while he is shaving, when his son tries to wipe off the blood from the razor. They are a command and a call for the mutual obligation between father and son, embodying the small community of the Dead Rabbits gang. In fact, the Priest's son *will* never look away from that blood. A silent promise is uttered by those childish eyes and through the portion of space that they see while looking at his father in the Old Brewery where the Dead Rabbits live. Hidden, continuously nourished in his heart, secret, and finally revealed only to one or two people – one single speech act, readable in the child's gaze, and obeying his father's imperative utterance, relentlessly holds the whole film with all its performative speech acts and theatrical performances.

From that gaze is projected a long-term action that will be constructed throughout the film: taking revenge for the killing of his father. But another important element has to be stressed, as well: the words of promise are never pronounced by Amsterdam himself. Even so, they are always present – in his gestures, in the events of his life, in the expression on his face: "I swear I will revenge my father's death". And nothing will stop this promise from becoming an act. Unexpectedly, in spite of the noise, movements, actions and dialogues of this historical film, in spite of the hustle and bustle of so many

people, characters and adventures – the silent performative words embodied in Amsterdam’s mind and life recall the performatives in Bresson’s films, the secret pacts made with themselves which the protagonists of *A Man Escaped* and *Pickpocket* obey, turning their promise into their slow and patient action.

The spectator feels the intensity of Amsterdam’s promise in the quick move of the boy who, at the end of the battle, takes the knife from his dead father’s chest, runs back to the Old Brewery, and hides that precious token in the soil. Amsterdam will get back to his buried knife and dig it out years later, after his long stay at the Hellgate House of Reform, as a young adult who scorns the teachings of the Church. Quitting Hellgate, Amsterdam throws away the Bible he has received from the bridge, while we hear the voice-over of the Reverend exhorting to the detachment from all human passions: “The Lord has forgiven you, you must also forgive”. But the Christian commandment cannot weaken the words that father Vallon imparted to his son sixteen years earlier: “Don’t, never look away”. Nothing can break the mute, sworn bond between the living and the dead, silently witnessed by the collective blood of the battle. Neither time, nor love, nor friendship, nor pleasure, nor power, nothing can break the obligation of keeping one’s own word, of obeying the pact of the wild justice of revenge. In this movie, the silent speech act of what belongs to “the ancient laws of combat” stands like the memory of a pre-modern type of world and of art, as savage as feelings in a Greek tragedy, or in what can be seen as its counterpart in film: the classical Western movie.

Just like “I will steal” or “I will escape from prison” in Bresson’s movies, the words “I swear I will take revenge” constitute the performative sentence directing the course of the life of the protagonist, creating action, installing space and directing the performative power of the reading of these films

towards a reflection on law, norms and values. As much as the Rossellini film that André Bazin discussed at length, the showing and seeing of these films puts at stake our knowledge and understanding of the world, and this calls for the ethical and political aspects of aesthetic experience. But textual action also means that these films elaborate elements of the history of various arts and of the medium itself. The camera, the shot, the editing – all are the tools of the textual action of the film: the converging of genres or impurity is its method, as seen by Bazin. We might regard the terms performative power and textual action as synonyms, or, so to speak, we might put one (performative power) on the horizontal line of our relationship to the world as being informed by our relationship to literature, art and cinema, and the other (textual action) on the vertical line of meta-language and of the consciousness of the medium as expressed by some filmic techniques or stylistic solutions.

Concepts and notions are like stones thrown into water; they go deep down and move the surface with concentric circles. I have not tried the impossible task of fixing the mobile notions of textual action and/or performative power in rigid definitions, as if they were secured by the long and complex debate on performativity. But, inspired by some elements of that debate, I have tried to capture these notions laterally, so to speak “in action”. They are triggered by the epigraph from Miller, implied in Bazin’s concept of realism, conjugated, as a verb can be conjugated, by the performative speech acts, in the most Austinian sense, determining the events in the films I have chosen, and finally, in *Gangs of New York*, multiplied by all the performative layers created, by words, space, theatrical setting and gazes.

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PART 2:
EXPLORATIONS

Topography and Textual Action in the Urban Prose of Balzac and Breton

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Honoré de Balzac is normally taken to be the first novelist to bring the art of fiction into close contact with real, everyday contemporary life. It could be maintained, however, that Balzac's prose tends to work in the opposite direction as well, producing a kind of *magic of everyday life*. Actually, in some of its important dimensions Balzac's Paris is quite as hallucinatory as the Paris of André Breton, who, as a true surrealist, wanted to blur or overcome the distinctions between life and art in order to bring forth a new kind of everyday life – “the dazzling everyday” (*le merveilleux quotidien*).

This can be substantiated by studying the topographies of the city and the theme of love in some representative selections from the urban prose of the two writers.¹ Paris is the

1 The following pages constitute a preliminary presentation of some aspects of a project in progress whose aim is to study “the surrealism of Realism” and “the realism of Surrealism” in works by Balzac and Breton.

setting of Balzac's most important narratives. Likewise, in what has been named Breton's trilogy – *Nadja* (1928/1964), *Les Vases communicants* (1932/1955) and *L'Amour fou* (1937) – Paris is the predominant space, even though sections 5 and 6 of *L'Amour fou* take place in Tenerife and Bretagne respectively. As for the theme of love, it is undoubtedly the very source of creativity in Breton's prose as well as in some of his best poems; whereas in most of Balzac's Parisian narratives love is, as it were, both the focus of a certain deceptive hallucinatory force and the object of critical observation.

The predominant focus in my brief section on Balzac will be on the labyrinthine aspects of his urban spaces as they appear in two short early novels; while Breton's trilogy, and in particular a section from *L'Amour fou*, will be studied more extensively, with a special emphasis on the relations between city, love and creativity or textual action.

The labyrinths of Balzac's urban spaces

All Balzac's great novels – *Le Père Goriot*, *Illusions perdues*, *Les Parents pauvres*, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* – are urban novels set in the fascinating and terrifying cityscapes of Paris. However, before the publication of the first of these great novels (*Le Père Goriot*, 1835), Balzac in 1833 and 1834 wrote three shorter narratives which he decided to publish under one somewhat mystifying title *Histoire des Treize* [The Thirteen] – mystifying because the secret society of criminal heroes referred to by this title does not play the important role that the title would suggest. What all the three novels investigate, however, are secrets of a particular kind, illicit or perverted love (between man and woman, between women, and between father and daughter). They mostly take place in an urban space where realism

often shades into surrealism and where the descriptions of streets, buildings and people strike us by their fantastic, even hallucinatory qualities.

Two of these narratives, *Ferragus* and *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, start with an introduction or prologue dedicated to Paris. In *Ferragus*, this introduction is primarily a description of *streets*, which from the very beginning are presented in a curious anthropomorphic way with sociological and moral qualities proper to human beings becoming the qualities of the streets as well:

Certain streets in Paris are as degraded as a man covered with infamy; also, there are noble streets, streets simply respectable, young streets on the morality of which the public has not yet formed an opinion; also cut-throat streets, streets older than the age of the oldest dowagers, estimable streets, streets always clean, streets always dirty, working, laboring, and mercantile streets. In short, the streets of Paris have every human quality, and impress us, by what we must call their physiognomy, with certain ideas against which we are defenceless (*Ferragus, Chief of the Devorants*, online).²

This more or less organic relationship between sociology, morality and the physical surroundings is rapidly transformed, when the city is turned into a monstrous animal, and then into the even more disquieting metapoetic image of a “mon-

2 “Il est dans Paris certaines rues déshonorées autant que peut l'être un homme coupable d'infamie; puis il existe des rues nobles, puis des rues simplement honnêtes, puis de jeunes rues sur la moralité desquelles le public ne s'est pas encore formé d'opinion; puis des rues assassines, des rues plus vieilles que les vieilles douarières ne sont vieilles, des rues estimables, des rues toujours propres, des rues toujours sales, des rues ouvrières, travailleuses, mercantiles. Enfin, les rues de Paris ont des qualités humaines, et nous imprimant par leur physionomie certaines idées contre lesquelles nous sommes sans défense” (*Ferragus* 793).

strous marvel” and a “great courtesan” carrying in her body “a hundred thousand tales”:

Imperceptibly, the articulations begin to crack; motion communicates itself; the street speaks. By mid-day, all is alive; the chimneys smoke, the monster eats; then he roars, and his thousand paws begin to ramp. Splendid spectacle! [...]

There are a few amateurs who never go their way heedlessly; who savor their Paris, so to speak; who know its physiognomy so well that they see every wart, and pimple, and redness. To others, Paris is always that monstrous marvel, that amazing assemblage of activities, of schemes, of thoughts; the city of a hundred thousand tales, the head of the universe. But to those few, Paris is sad or gay, ugly or beautiful, living or dead; to them Paris is a creature; every man, every fraction of a house is a lobe of the cellular tissue of that great courtesan whose head and heart and fantastic customs they know so well.³

Gradually the introduction now blends into the narrative proper, which follows a young man pursuing a mysterious young woman. Secretly he loves this woman, Clémence, who is married to a successful broker, Monsieur Jules; but her unexpected presence in one of the poorest and shabbiest quarters of the city triggers a sense of mystery in him which makes

3 “Insensiblement les articulations craquent, le mouvement se communique, la rue parle. À midi, tout est vivant, les cheminées fument, le monstre mange, puis il rugit, puis ses mille pattes s’agitent. Beau spectacle! [...] Il est un petit nombre d’amateurs, de gens qui ne marchent jamais en écervelés, qui dégustent leur Paris, qui en possèdent si bien la psysionomie qu’ils y voient une verrue, un bouton, une rougeur. Pour les autres, Paris est toujours cette monstrueuse merveille, étonnant assemblage de mouvements, de machines et de pensées, la ville aux cent mille romans, la tête du monde. Mais, pour ceux-là, Paris est triste ou gai, laid ou beau, vivant ou mort; pour eux, Paris est une créature; chaque homme, chaque fraction de maison est un lobe du tissu cellulaire de cette grande courtisane de laquelle ils connaissent parfaitement la tête, le cœur et les mœurs fantasques” (794-795).

him follow her through the labyrinths of old Paris. From then on, the entire novel becomes labyrinthine as well, a tale of horrors and dangerous secrets, the revelation of which has to be paid for by the death of Clémence.

It is quite logical, then, that the narrative which started with the description of some Parisian streets where the mortality “is double that of others” should end in the city of death itself, the necropole, when Monsieur Jules is looking for his wife’s grave through the labyrinths of the cemetery of Père-Lachaise. Here, the chaotic life of the terrible organism called Paris is finally brought to rest in the institutionalized and petrified order of death – but it is still a gloomy and enigmatic place despite its microscopic dimensions, a place to get lost in, even though its anthropomorphic likeness is preserved in the most indestructible of all the human qualities in *La Comédie humaine* – vanity:

It is a forlorn comedy! It is another Paris, with its streets, its signs, its industries, and its lodgings; but a Paris seen through the diminishing end of an opera-glass, a microscopic Paris reduced to the littleness of shadows, spectres, dead men, a human race which no longer has anything great about it, except its vanity.⁴

The introduction to *La Fille aux yeux d’or* has a similar structure. It starts with a brutal description of the population of Paris as a mass of creatures living under the sign of death, corruption and decay:

4 “C’est une infâme comédie! c’est encore tout Paris avec ses rues, ses enseignes, ses industries, ses hôtels; mais vu par le verre dégrossissant de la lorgnette, un Paris microscopique, réduit aux petites dimensions des ombres, des larves, des morts, un genre humain qui n’a plus rien de grand que sa vanité” (898).

Is not Paris a vast field in perpetual turmoil from a storm of interests beneath which are whirled along a crop of human beings, who are, more often than not, reaped by death, only to be born again as pinched as ever, men whose twisted and contorted faces give out at every pore the instinct, the desire, the poisons with which their brains are pregnant; not faces so much as masks; masks of weakness, masks of strength, masks of misery, masks of joy, masks of hypocrisy; all alike worn and stamped with the indelible signs of a panting cupidity? What is it they want? Gold or pleasure? (*The Girl with the Golden Eyes*, online).⁵

This opening image of a whole population marked by a terrible self-consuming desire – a recurring theme in Balzac’s work – then becomes the starting point of another detailed description of the labyrinths of Paris, this time more or less exactly modelled upon Dante’s *Inferno*. The narrator takes on the role of Vergil and leads us through five spheres, from bottom up, in a kind of sociological mapping of the material and moral life conditions of the different social classes. First, we are introduced to the workers and the artisans at the bottom level of this urban inferno; then we continue upwards through the sphere of the lower middle class with its merchants and clerks, arriving at the business sphere which “moves and agitates, as by some acrid and bitter intestinal process, the crowd of lawyers, doctors, notaries, councilors, business men, bankers, big merchants, speculators, and

5 “Paris n’est-il pas un vaste champ incessamment remué par une tempête d’intérêts sous laquelle tourbillonne une moisson d’hommes que la mort fauche plus souvent qu’ailleurs et qui renaissent toujours aussi serrés, dont les visages contournés, tordus, rendent par tous les pores l’esprit, les désirs, les poisons dont sont engrossés leurs cerveaux; non pas des visages, mais bien des masques: masques de faiblesse, masques de force, masques de misère, masques de joie, masques d’hypocrisie; tous exténués, tous empreints des signes ineffaçables d’une haletante avidité? Que veulent-ils? De l’or, ou du plaisir?” (*La Fille aux yeux d’or* 1093).

magistrates.”⁶ And the narrator adds: “Here are to be found even more causes of moral and physical destruction than elsewhere.”⁷ The fourth sphere is occupied by the world of the artists, whereas the top level is (of course) the sphere of the aristocracy – the rich people and their empty, unreal and vanity-ridden lives: “But let us turn to the vast saloons, gilded and airy; the hotels in their gardens, the rich, indolent, happy moneyed world. There the faces are lined and scarred with vanity. There nothing is real. To seek for pleasure is it not to find *ennui*?”⁸

However, the metaphor of Inferno is not the only one in this surreal description of urban space. As we are approaching the upper social tiers of Paris, the modern Hell with its worlds of aristocrats and artists, we are brought back to the organic and feminine metaphors from the prologue of *Ferragus*. In this new context, however, they are richer in positive, meta-aesthetic connotations. Now they offer a successive metaphorical transformation taking us from the image of “a queen, who, being always with child, has desires of irresistible fury”, to those of “a brain which perishes⁹ of genius”, and of “a perpetually creative artist”. The whole sequence ends in the immensely expanding, dynamic and liberating poetico-political image of Paris as “a sublime vessel”:

6 “[...] se remue et s’agite, par un âcre et fielleux mouvement intestinal, la foule des avoués, médecins, notaires, avocats, gens d’affaires, banquiers, gros commerçants, spéculateurs, magistrats” (*ibid.* 1046).

7 “Là, se rencontrent encore plus de causes pour la destruction physique et morale que partout ailleurs” (*loc. cit.*).

8 “Mais abordons les grands salons aérés et dorés, les hôtels à jardins, le monde riche, oisif, heureux, renté. Les figures y sont étioilées et rongées par la vanité. Là rien de réel. Chercher le plaisir, n’est-ce pas trouver l’ennui?” (1050).

9 This translation of the French verb “crève” is somewhat misleading. “Crevre” actually describes something that is bursting or cracking because of excessive inner pressure or tension.

Is not Paris a sublime vessel laden with intelligence? Yes, her arms are one of those oracles which fatality sometimes allows. The CITY OF PARIS has her great mast, all of bronze, carved with victories, and for watchman Napoleon. The barque may roll and pitch, but she cleaves the world, illuminates it through the hundred mouths of her tribunes, ploughs the seas of science, rides with full sail, cries from the height of her tops, with the voice of her scientists and artists: “Onward, advance! Follow me!”¹⁰

And yet this description of a Paris full of contrasts, a Paris of death mixed with life, of gloomy infernal claustrophobia blended with liberating expansion, is not the only purpose of the introduction. Its function as a prologue to the story about the girl with the golden eyes is located elsewhere. In fact, behind the multifaced surface of the city, there are hidden enigmas, enigmatic points of fascination, small colonies of exotic and enticing women “who live in Oriental fashion and can preserve their beauty; but these women rarely show themselves on foot in the streets, they lie hid like rare plants who only unfold their petals at certain hours, and constitute veritable exotic exceptions.”¹¹ In a way that is similar to the prologue of *Ferragus*, the introduction is actually constructed so as to lead us step by step to the beginning of the story

10 “Paris n’est-il pas un sublime vaisseau chargé d’intelligence? Oui, ses armes sont un de ces oracles que se permet quelquefois la fatalité. La VILLE DE PARIS a son grand mât tout de bronze, sculpté de victoires, et pour vigie Napoléon. Cette nauf a bien son tangage et son roulis; mais elle sillonne le monde, y fait feu par les cent bouches de ses tribunes, laboure les mers scientifiques, y vogue à pleines voiles, crie du haut de ses huniers par la voix de ses savants et de ses artistes: En avant, marchez! suivez-moi!” (1051-1052).

11 “de petites peuplades heureuses qui vivent à l’orientale, et peuvent conserver leur beauté; mais ces femmes se montrent rarement à pied dans les rues, elles demeurent cachées, comme des plantes rares qui ne déploient leur pétales qu’à certaines heures, et qui constituent de véritables exceptions exotiques” (1053).

proper, which originates, as in *Ferragus*, from a kind of furtive encounter between a man and a woman – that of the hero, Henri de Marsay, and one of these hidden beauties, Paquita, the bewitching girl with the golden eyes: “If this hurried glance at the population of Paris has enabled us to conceive the rarity of a Raphaëlesque face, and the passionate admiration which such an one must inspire at the first sight, the prime interest of our history will have been justified.”¹² Their mutual attraction triggers a story about sexual perversion, incestuous passion, jealousy and murder in one of Balzac’s most horrifying tales, which gives a particularly spooky twist to the leitmotif of “gold and pleasure” in the introduction.

In other words, Balzac’s urban space becomes the arena of both expected and unexpected encounters that give birth to powerful experiences of “mad love”. In the Paris stories of Breton this is repeated, as we shall see, albeit in a different form and with different significations. In Balzac, the mad passion is always a madness of perversion and, ultimately, of death. The corresponding passion in Breton’s stories, however, is far more innocent and “romantic” (in the everyday sense of the word), although the expression “mad love” was coined by Breton.

Breton’s trilogy: A presentation

In Breton’s case, my aim is to show how the topographical aspects on several levels of his prose come to be integrated in a particular kind of writerly or textual action which also, as in Balzac’s texts, evolves around love encounters, but of a

12 “Si ce coup d’œil rapidement jeté sur la population de Paris a fait concevoir la rareté d’une figure raphaëlesque, et l’admiration passionnée qu’elle y doit inspirer à première vue, le principal intérêt de notre histoire se trouvera justifié” (1054).

different nature. In a more traditional vocabulary, one could talk about an ongoing transformation – by way of the installation of topographies – of mimetic and expressive writing into a specific kind of *textual action*, which is then theorized on a metalevel of the text.

Breton's trilogy has often been qualified both as autobiographies and as "surrealist novels", but even more often as "anti-novels" in accordance with Breton's own scepticism towards the novel as a literary genre. His attitude reflects the "anti-literary" intentions of an avantgarde movement, which nevertheless, and paradoxically, still produced as its most important means of expression and investigation something that we call literature. In *Nadja* as well as in *Les Vases communicants* and in *L'Amour fou* there is, as Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron observes, "a propensity to describe and to narrate." But this tendency is always controlled by reflection, and it is not allowed to be absorbed by aesthetic intentions: "narration and description are always [...] reassumed secondarily for another *function*, or coloured by the oblique light of some emotion."¹³

Pointing to "another function", Chénieux-Gendron has in mind the traditional relationship between life and work, between the autobiographical and the textual as the main target of the transformative processes of Breton's writing. Even though the autobiographical elements are fundamental in all of the three books that make up the trilogy, and even though Breton himself on several occasions (both in *Nadja* and in *L'Amour fou*) emphasizes his will to describe people and events as objectively as possible, his intention is not to produce a documentary or naturalistic picture of "real life".

13 "Toujours [...] la narration et la description sont résumées secondairement pour une autre *fonction*, ou colorées par la lumière oblique d'une affectivité" (Chénieux-Gendron 151; my translation).

On the contrary, Breton acts in concert with the general aims of Surrealism when he sets out to investigate how everyday life can be transformed by a variety of different means, most importantly by introspection (dreams as well as reflection) and by writing (be it automatic, or controlled by reflection). Breton's autobiographical narratives are not written with the intention of opening peepholes into the private life of a surrealist writer, but are more like arenas where experimental forms of life and textual action evolve in parallel series.

Love, encounter, textual action

Even though *Nadja*, *Les Vases communicants* and *L'Amour fou* are centered around different phases and aspects of Breton's love life, the place that *love* occupies in Breton's private life is less important than the place it occupies in the philosophy and in the textual and aesthetic practice of Surrealism as a doctrine and a movement. Most importantly, as in Balzac the experience of love is closely related to the *encounter*, understood as chance events which open fundamentally new possibilities for human existence. Erotic encounters as well as other kinds of encounters are, however, spatial phenomena insofar as they "happen" unexpectedly at specific locations. Therefore love belongs to the topography of Breton's prose because it always appears as an unexpected encounter whose condition of possibility are the topographies of the modern city. Both in *Nadja* and in *L'Amour fou* it is during his aimless explorations of the labyrinths of Paris that Breton encounters the women who play the main role in the books. In *Les Vases communicants*, where Breton lives through a state of existential crisis when an unhappy love relationship is brought to an end, we follow him along the streets of Paris looking for new magic encounters (which, however, never happen).

Passionate love is not the only kind of encounter that possesses magical qualities in Breton's work. In Section Three of *L'Amour fou* we find Breton and his friend, the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, at the Flea Market in search of those small and fascinating objects which the surrealists cherished so much – the so-called *trouvailles* or *objets trouvés* (found objects) – “objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse – at least in the sense I give to the word and which I prefer”, as Breton states in *Nadja* (52).¹⁴ Two such objects attract their attention: “a half-mask of metal striking in its rigidity as well as in its forceful adaptation to a necessity unknown to us” (28),¹⁵ and “a large wooden spoon [...] whose handle, when it rested on its convex part, rose from a little shoe that was part of it” (30).¹⁶ The point is not only that these objects are “encountered” at the Flea Market, that is, in a space particularly designed as a gigantic meeting-place for just this sort of “old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse” objects. The heart of the matter is the mental action triggered by these external objects when interpreted by Breton (using the model of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*) as catalysts for the inner processes of both Giacometti and himself. In this respect, Section Three of *L'Amour fou* anticipates some of the fundamental mechanisms of Section Four, to which I will turn shortly. It is also worth noticing that the interpretation of the objects marks

14 “[...] objets qu'on ne trouve nulle part ailleurs, démodés, fragmentés, inutilisables, presque incompréhensibles, pervers enfin au sens où je l'entends et où je l'aime” (*Œuvres complètes*, t. I 676).

15 “[...] un demi-masque de métal frappant de rigidité en même temps que de force d'adaptation à une nécessité de nous inconnue” (699).

16 “[...] une grande cuiller [...] dont le manche, lorsqu'elle reposait sur sa partie convexe, s'élevait de la hauteur d'un petit soulier faisant corps avec elle” (700).

the point where the text about Giacometti and Breton at the Flea Market ceases to be a narrative and enters a different register – that of textual action.

The topographical dimension of Breton's text is constituted by typically mimetic modes of representation like narration and description, and the main pattern of this topography is based on the chance encounter. Compared to Balzac, Breton expands the meaning of chance encounters from persons and passions to include things and events in the surroundings as well, thus integrating love into the more general dynamics governing the sensuous aesthetic experience as a whole. But how will the dynamics of encounter-based patterns operate as an important transformative factor in Breton's writing by suspending the mimetic force of the text and release this other force, which I refer to as "textual action" (in this volume also referred to as performative language or performativity)?

Important and illuminating things have been written about the role and the meaning of the encounter in Surrealism, both by Ferdinand Alquié (1955: 132-149) and by Maurice Blanchot (in his great essay "Le demain joueur", written on the occasion of Breton's death in 1966 and later incorporated in *L'Entretien infini* [The Infinite Conversation] from 1969). In Breton's work the idea of the encounter is closely related to his speculations on *objective chance* [*le hasard objectif*], whose Hegelian references make it, so to speak, the philosophical counterpart of the topographical figure and the experience of the encounter. These connections and ramifications within complex fields of surrealist speculation, textual practice and life experiments would certainly merit a special investigation, since the effort, suggested by the concept of objective chance, to transcend our normal ideas of causality and linearity forms an integral part of the entire surrealist utopia.

Here, I will merely touch upon these general aspects. They are related to what I have called *textual actions*, a term I pre-

fer over “performatives”. From a semantic point of view the two expressions have more or less the same meaning, namely the idea that language not only “expresses” and “represents” things, but also “performs”. However (and now I disregard the meaning of the adjective/noun nexus “performative” / “performance” in modern art and theatre studies), a “performative” has heavy connotations to J.L. Austin’s (and his followers’) speech-act theory. In my opinion (and I am not the only one to be of this opinion), Austin and other speech-act philosophers fail to illuminate how language *works* when it “performs”, that is, when it operates in a productive or creative manner. In Austin’s view, the language in texts of fiction and of theatre performances, is in particular ways a “hollow”, “void” or “parasitic” kind of language, and for that reason is explicitly excluded from any theory of speech acts (Austin 22). Moreover, when literary critics or theorists (like Richard Ohmann, who stands close to John Searle in this respect) adopt speech act theories for their own purposes, this normally happens within the framework of a mimetic theory where “a literary work purportedly imitates (or reports) a series of speech acts, which in fact have no other existence” (Ohmann 14). Neither Austin and his followers, nor Ohmann and his theoretical relatives open up the possibility of investigating the particular kind of “illocutionary force” which has been traditionally referred to by concepts like “creativity”, and which certainly implies that literature has some kind of impact or perlocutionary effect on “real life”. (Here, both realists and surrealists would agree.) My predilection for the term “textual action”, helps me to avoid the traditional connotations of the word “performative” and move towards a more dynamic theory of the literary text than that contained in an aesthetics of mimetic representation.

A surrealist love story

The dynamic textual action is crucial in Section Four of *L'Amour fou*, which in its original publication in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (1935) was called “La Nuit du tournesol” [The Night of the Sunflower]. This text offers an excellent miniature of Breton’s prose style, combining different kinds of discourses or textual registers – narration, reflexion, imagery and lyricism – in a typical way. The narrative part of the section may be considered its backbone; it tells the story of the meeting between Breton and Jacqueline Lamba in a café on the evening of May 29, 1934 and of what happened during the rest of the night. Among other things, this meeting is also an experience of “convulsive beauty”, which is the subject of Section One, and which is also the theme of the final passages of *Nadja*:

I had already seen her here two or three times, her coming announced before I saw her each time by an undefinable quiver moving from one pair of shoulders to the next,¹⁷ from the door of this café towards me. For me this motion itself, which, as it is disturbing to a common assembly, quickly assumes a hostile character, has always, whether in art or in life, signalled the presence of the *beautiful*. And I can certainly say that here, on the twenty-ninth of May 1934, this woman was *scandalously* beautiful (*Mad Love* 41).¹⁸

17 This translation of “d’épaule à épaule” should be corrected to “from shoulder to shoulder”.

18 “Je l’avais déjà vu [l’être] pénétrer deux ou trois fois dans ce lieu: il m’avait à chaque fois été annoncé, avant de s’offrir à mon regard, par je ne sais quel mouvement de saisissement d’épaule à épaule ondulant jusqu’à moi à travers cette salle de café depuis la porte. Ce mouvement, dans la mesure même où, agitant une assistance vulgaire, il prend très vite un caractère hostile, que ce soit dans la vie ou dans l’art, m’a toujours averti de la présence du *beau*. Et je puis bien dire qu’à cette place, le 29 mai 1934, cette femme était *scandaleusement* belle” (*L’Amour fou* 713).

They do not speak to each other in the café, but Breton waits for her outside. They agree on another *rendez-vous* in another café, later, at midnight, after she has finished her performance in a swimming act in a nearby music-hall. Breton reports nothing from the two hours spent in the “Café des Oiseaux”, but jumps directly to the story of their long walk through central Paris, from Montmartre to the southern parts of the Quartier Latin where she lives, passing by the Halles, the Tour Saint-Jacques and the Quai des Fleurs on the Île de la Cité. The preliminary end of the story is expressed in the laconic ending of the chapter: “The following August 14, I married the all-powerful commander of the night of the sunflower” (67).¹⁹

Both in detail and as a whole, this sounds like a romance or a fairy tale, starting with the magical meeting which could have been a love at first sight ending with the proverbial marriage, had it not been the third or fourth time that Breton noticed the woman in the very same café. Still, the way the woman is characterized in the punchline (“the all-powerful commander of the night of the sunflower”) indicates the extent to which the whole story is embedded in a romantic tradition of philosophy of love, which, by the way, is also evident in the first section of the book, the section on “convulsive beauty”.

But this trivial romance plot is just a point of departure. From its very beginning the story of “The Night of the Sunflower” is presented as a report from a typical surrealist adventure. Here, chance and coincidence are supposed to reveal hidden causalities and finalities, and the parallel series of the subjective and the objective, the inner and the outer world are suddenly experienced in mutual attraction, merging or in-

19 “Le 14 août suivant, j’épousais la toute-puissante ordonnatrice de la nuit du tournesol” (735).

tertwinning in a surrealist topography. The long and difficult reflection on the relentless, even logical necessity of irrational events in the life of individual subjects, which opens Section Four and follows the narration as a shadow growing larger and larger, constitutes the real context of the rather flat love story, and contributes profoundly to its actual meaning. This impression is reinforced when we look at the secondary and altogether passive role played by the woman. In spite of her being hailed as “the all-powerful commander”, her part is not all that important. Even when the nocturnal events are being recounted and reconsidered, the focus is exclusively on the emotions and the thoughts of the first-person character. Initially his uncertainty and weakness are emphasized, then gradually the feeling of having perhaps at last met “the woman still unmet, the woman to come amid the prairies. Are you, at last, this woman? Is it only today you were to come?” (49-51).²⁰

As might be expected, on this point Breton and his philosophy of love is exposed to a certain ideological criticism for being sexist and male-dominated. Such criticism, justified as it may be, is not my concern here. Central to my argument is that while structures such as these where a first-person narrator both narrates and reflects upon events in his life as a first-person character are commonplace in narrative texts, Breton’s particular tenacity (also in time) in textually labouring on and reworking the blend of narration and subjective reflection, stands out. I see it as a powerful and continuous, textually ongoing work to get beyond what “objectively” and “mimetically happened” and into a new, dynamic state of being. Before proceeding to more detailed textual examples, let

20 “[...] la femme encore inconnue, la femme à venir, entre les prairies. Est-ce enfin vous cette femme, est-ce seulement aujourd’hui que vous deviez venir?” (720-721).

us recall as an indicator of that insisting tenacity that except for the two last sections, each part of *L'Amour fou* consists of autonomous texts written at different times and published separately,²¹ eventually to be integrated into the same book. While they are all told (or written) retrospectively, they report and reflect on events and states of mind from the same period of life of the first-person subject in question. The last chapter makes an exception, opening up for a possible, thematized new future. It consists of a letter written by Breton to his and Jacqueline Lamba's daughter Aube, and is inscribed in a different temporality, since it is supposed to be read by Aube in 1952 (even though the book of which the letter is a part was published in 1937).

Textual action and the dynamics of desire

Of particular interest in these texts, then, is the way in which the painstakingly objective style of outer and inner mimesis is set in motion, as it were, thus contributing dynamically to the creation of the meaning that the recounted events are supposed to contain.

This may seem to differ from Breton's own intentions. He states at the beginning of Section Four that Surrealism has always suggested that such facts – relating to some intimate circumstances of one's life – should be written like a medical report, “with no incident omitted, no name altered, lest the arbitrary make its appearance.”²² He adds that “[t]he revelation of the immediate, bewildering irrationality of certain events requires the most severe authentication of the human

21 Section Six was also published separately shortly before the publication of the book, although it was written as a sequel to the foregoing texts.

22 “Pas un incident ne peut être omis, pas même un nom ne peut être modifié sans que rentre aussitôt l'arbitraire” (710).

document conveying them” (39).²³ But a closer look at the way “The Night of the Sunflower” is presented demonstrates not only that he is very selective as to what he reports (as I have already indicated, we learn nothing about the contents of their conversations in the café and during the nightly walk from Montmartre to the Quartier Latin, and consequently nothing about the way she experiences the whole thing). We are also struck by the curious way in which Breton’s language at certain moments lets the mimetic facts of the story begin to live their own life, creating a kind of “hallucination of words” which reminds us more of Rimbaud’s poetic experiments than of the more “mimetic” character of Balzac’s hallucinated Parisian cityscapes.

This is seen very clearly in the episode which provided the text with its original title. Breton and his female companion have just left the Halles and are approaching the Seine passing the Tour Saint-Jacques. The passage starts, typically, with a meta-reflection on the necessity of another language than “the language [we] have been taught”, if we are to hear and understand “the voice of unreason” and be released from the quotidian logic of linearity which prevents us from experiencing “tomorrow” as something other, something radically new – “entirely and mysteriously separated from yesterday”. This availability [*disponibilité*], this complete openness to the future and its possibilities, is a core theme in Surrealism. Breton writes at the beginning of Section Three of *L’Amour fou*:

Still today I am only counting on what comes of my own openness, my eagerness to wander *in search* of everything, which, I am confident, keeps me in mysterious communication with other open beings, as if we

23 “La mise en évidence de l’irrationalité immédiate, confondante, de certains événements nécessite la stricte authenticité du document humain qui les enregistre” (*loc.cit.*).

were suddenly called to assemble. I would like my life to leave after it no other murmur than that of a watchman's song, of a song to while away the waiting. Independent of what happens and what does not happen, the wait itself is magnificent (25).²⁴

This is exactly what Breton is trying to perform. Through writing, the facticity of the event that takes place during "the night of the sunflower" is to be turned into the dynamics of the wait (which is also the dynamics of desire: "Behind ourselves, we must *not let the paths of desire become overgrown*", he has written just a few lines above).²⁵

Returning to Breton's narrative, we notice how the style passes from report and reflection to indirect dialogue and apostrophy:

I was near you again my beautiful wanderer, and you showed me, in passing, the Tour Saint-Jacques under its pale scaffolding, rendering it for some time now the world's greatest monument to the hidden. You know how I loved that tower: yet I see now again a whole violent existence forming around it to include us, to contain wildness itself in its gallop of clouds about us:

In Paris the Tour Saint-Jacques swaying
Like a sunflower,^{26*}

24 "Aujourd'hui encore je n'attends rien que de ma seule disponibilité, que de cette soif d'errer à *la rencontre* de tout, dont je m'assure qu'elle me maintient en communication mystérieuse avec les autres êtres disponibles, comme si nous étions appelés à nous réunir soudain. J'aimerais que ma vie ne laissât après elle d'autre murmure que celui d'une chanson de guetteur, d'une chanson pour tromper l'attente. Indépendamment de ce qui arrive, n'arrive pas, c'est l'attente qui est magnifique" (697).

25 "Il s'agit de *ne pas*, derrière soi, *laisser s'embroussaller les chemins du désir*."

26 * See *Le revolver à cheveux blancs* (Denoël et Steele ed.). [Breton's note.]

I said, I thought rather obscurely, in a poem, and I have understood since then that this wavering of the tower was above all my own hesitation between the two French meanings of the word *tourne-sol*, designating at the same time this kind of helianthus, also known as the great sun, and the reactive agent used in chemistry, usually as a blue litmus paper reddening at the contact of an acid. Still, the meeting of the two meanings in this fashion portrays correctly the complex conception I form of the tower, of its somber magnificence, like that of the flower rising like it, quite alone upon a more or less impoverished corner of the earth, and of the rather troubling circumstances which presided over its construction, to which, clearly, the age-old dream of the transmutation of metals is closely linked (47).²⁷

Breton is addressing his companion just like he will be addressing the earth and the night at the end of the text:

27 “J’étais de nouveau près de vous, ma belle vagabonde, et vous me montriez en passant la tour Saint-Jacques sous son voile pâle d’échafaudages qui, depuis des années maintenant, contribue à en faire plus encore le grand monument du monde à l’irrévélé. Vous aviez beau savoir que j’aimais cette tour, je revois encore à ce moment toute une existence violente s’organiser autour d’elle pour nous comprendre, pour contenir l’éperdu dans son galop nuageux autour de nous:

*A Paris la tour Saint-Jacques chancelante
Pareille à un tourne-sol*

ai-je dit assez obscurément pour moi dans un poème, et j’ai compris depuis que le balancement de la tour était surtout le mien entre les deux sens en français du mot *tourne-sol*, qui désigne à la fois cette espèce d’hélianthe, connue aussi sous le nom de grand soleil et le réactif utilisé en chimie, le plus souvent sous la forme d’un papier bleu qui rougit au contact des acides. Toujours est-il que le rapprochement ainsi opéré rend un compte satisfaisant de l’idée complexe que je me fais de la tour, tant de sa sombre magnificence assez comparable à celle de la fleur qui se dresse généralement comme elle, très seule, sur un coin de terre plus ou moins ingrat que des circonstances assez troubles qui ont présidé à son édification et auxquelles on sait que le rêve millénaire de la transmutation des métaux est étroitement lié” (716).

I succumb to the wonderful dizziness these places inspire in me, places where everything I have best known began. I have, suddenly, disposed of the previous reductive representations which had been threatening me just now; I am free from everything that could persuade me that it is impossible to distinguish my affective self from yesterday's character. Let this curtain of shadows be lifted and let me be led fearlessly toward the light! Turn, oh sun, and you, oh great night, banish from my heart everything that is not faith in my new star! (47-48).²⁸

The effect of this change of style is, on the one hand, to give past events an intensified presence in the moment of writing. This goes for both the intimate presence of the woman whose breast he felt pressing against his body a little earlier (“I was near you *again* [my italics]...”), as well as for the enigmatic nearness of the veiled tower, “the world's great monument to the hidden”, which she showed him, knowing “in vain”²⁹ that he loved it. In that respect the apostrophe contributes to the traditional rhetorical effect that Aristotle named *enargeia* or “actualization”.

On the other hand, the introduction of a dialogic mode culminating in the repeated use of the imperative mode at

28 “Je cède à l'adorable vertige auquel m'inclinent peut-être ces lieux où tout ce que j'aurai le mieux connu a commencé. J'en suis quitte brusquement avec ces représentations antérieures qui menaçaient tout à l'heure de me réduire, je me sens libéré de ces liens qui me faisaient croire encore à l'impossibilité de me dépouiller, sur le plan affectif, de mon personnage de la veille. Que ce rideau d'ombres s'écarte et que je me laisse conduire sans crainte vers la lumière! Tourne, sol, et toi, grande nuit, chasse de mon cœur tout ce qui n'est pas la foi en mon étoile nouvelle!” (720).

29 The rather cryptic expression in the original text (“Vous aviez beau savoir que j'aimais cette tour”) is translated in a way that simply omits the problem (“You know how I loved that tower”).

the end of the text (“Turn, oh sun [/soil],³⁰ and you, oh great night ...”), also marks the change from what speech-act theory would call a constative to a performative mode. This culminates in the final imperative where the power of language is mobilized to resemble the archetypal creative gesture of language: let there be light! We also notice how the language and the attitude of the medical observer are replaced by the figure and the gestures of the poet: “[...] I see now again a whole violent existence forming around it to include us, to contain wildness itself in its gallop of clouds about us [...]” What *happens* is that the dialogue (which is also a rhetorical device based upon the poetic figure of invocation) triggers a poetic vision or a poetic imagery of violence and dynamism which, in turn, creates an association to a “real” poem, “Vigilance”, written by Breton himself several years earlier and included in the collection of poems called *Le Revolver aux cheveux blancs* (1932).

Uncertain at first about the meaning of the opening lines of this poem, Breton tells us that he had eventually come to understand the poetic comparison of the tower with a swaying sunflower as the expression of his own hesitation between the two very different meanings of the French word *tournesol* – sunflower and a particular reactive agent used in chemistry. Now, in the moment of writing “The Night of the Sunflower”, the meanings of the word are applied not only to the shape of the tower (as in the original poem), but also to “the rather troubling circumstances which presided over its construction, to which, clearly, the age-old dream of the transmutation of metals is closely linked.”

Here, Breton is hinting at the role played by the 14th cen-

30 The pun on the French word *tournesol* is of course impossible to translate; the word *sol* means “earth” or “soil”, whereas the etymology of French *soleil* goes back to classical Latin *sol*, “sun”.

tury alchemist Nicolas Flamel in the reconstruction of the old church Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, of which the tower is the only remaining part in Breton's Paris. Later in Section Four, the name of Flamel will be brought more explicitly into the text. But by this triple reference to writing, architecture and alchemy Breton not only emphasizes the parallel between the dream of transmutation that fuelled the activities of the alchemists and the kind of fundamental transformation which the surrealists dreamed of. He also reminds us implicitly of Rimbaud's "Alchemy of the Word" ("Alchimie du verbe") and his revolutionary transformation of poetic language – another of Surrealism's most important sources of influence.³¹

The consequence of all this is the dizziness which concludes the text ("I succumb to the wonderful dizziness these places inspire in me ..."), culminating in the cosmic dizziness of the final invocation: "Tourne, sol, et toi, grande nuit ...!" ("Turn, oh sun [soil], and you, oh great night...!"). Adding to all of this is the use of the present tense, which does not allow us to decide whether Breton as a character just feels dizzy in the middle of his nocturnal walk, or whether the wonderful dizziness is also an ever-present dimension of the moment and the movement of writing.

The feedback loop of textuality and life

However, the very special transmutation of lived experience into textual action – of the night of Paris into "The Night

³¹ Rimbaud is not the only poetic reference in this little text. The final invocation of "mon étoile nouvelle" makes us think of Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia*, which, in its first parts, describes Gérard's desperate wanderings through the streets of Paris in search of his "étoile", the dead and mythified Aurélia. (Great thanks to Patrizia Lombardo for reminding me of this allusion to a poetology of love which had an important influence on Breton and the other surrealists.)

of the Sunflower” – is only at its beginning here. Actually, it also works the other way round – from text to life. “One of the first mornings following this long night walk in Paris”, Breton tells us a couple of pages later (53), he comes to think about another of his earlier poems which he “did not like [...] and never had”, a poem produced by the method of automatic writing in August, 1923, and published in the collection *Clair de terre* the same year, that is, eleven years before “The Night of the Sunflower”. The title of this early poem is “Tournesol”. It presents us with a woman travelling “through the Halles at summerfall”; and the more Breton reflects on the series of surrealistic images out of which the poem is woven, the more clearly he comes to regard it as “a prophetic poem” (61): “I believe it is possible to confront the purely imaginary adventure which is framed in the poem and the later realization – impressive in its rigor – of this adventure in life itself” (57).³²

I shall not dwell on the several pages of “explications de texte” that follow, where Breton tries to show in what “prophetic” ways this text is related to the events of the real “Night of the Sunflower”. Neither shall I dig into the aspects of Breton’s explanations that may look rather supernatural to a rational mind. Yet Breton’s main point deserves to be mentioned, however briefly: in his mind this coincidence between poetry and life manifests the surrealist idea of a communication between subject and object, inner and outer worlds, imagination and facts, which is deeper than those which are available through the everyday logic of time, space, causality and linearity. “The greatest weakness in contemporary

32 “je crois possible de confronter l’aventure purement imaginaire qui a pour cadre le poème ci-dessus et l’accomplissement tardif, mais combien impressionnant par sa rigueur, de cette aventure sur le plan de la vie” (725).

thought”, Breton writes early in Section Four, just before he begins his story of “The Night of the Sunflower”,

seems to me to reside in the extravagant reverence for what we know compared with what we do not yet know. In order to show how it is obeying in this way its fundamental hatred of effort,³³ it is more useful than usual to cite the testimony of Hegel: “The spirit is kept wakeful and lively only by its need to develop in relation to objects insofar as there remains in them something mysterious to be revealed”. We can surmise from this that we should not denounce, under any pretext, what may seem completely odd, if it is reliably verified (40-41).³⁴

Breton’s challenge may seem difficult to meet – even for people (like me) who still get their kicks from surrealist texts and from the philosophy of Surrealism (if something like that really exists). How is it possible to believe so strongly in the idea of another logic governing the relationship between subject and object, imagination and life, as to turn one’s own life into an existential laboratory for the discovery of its laws? Still we have to admit – and appreciate – that traces of this other logic make the texts and the writing of the surrealists so special, so moving (in the literal sense of the word), so “performative”.

33 This translation is rather misleading (cf. the original in note 34). A more verbatim translation would be: “In order to persuade it [contemporary thought] to follow in this respect only its fundamental hatred of effort [...]”.

34 “La plus grande faiblesse de la pensée contemporaine me paraît résider dans la surestimation extravagante du connu par rapport à ce qui reste à connaître. Pour la convaincre en cela de n’obéir qu’à sa haine fondamentale de l’effort, il est plus utile que jamais d’en appeler au témoignage de Hegel: ‘L’esprit n’est tenu en éveil et vivement sollicité par le besoin de se développer en présence des objets qu’autant qu’il reste en eux quelque chose de mystérieux qui n’a pas encore été révélé.’ Il est permis d’en déduire que l’étrangeté totale, pourvu qu’elle ressorte de constatations vérifiables, ne peut sous aucun prétexte être dénoncée” (712).

Breton concludes “The Night of the Sunflower” by inviting the reader to go back to the “remarkably alert and mysterious scene” which concludes the theoretical reflections on “convulsive beauty” in Section One. Here, on April 20, 1934, having lunch in a little restaurant “rather unfortunately situated near the entrance of a cemetery”, Breton overhears a brief dialogue between the dishwasher and the waitress, the dishwasher announcing: “Ici, l’Ondine”, and the waitress answering: “Ah! Oui, on le fait ici, l’On dîne!” At the end of the story of “The Night of the Sunflower” this little word play (*ondine*, which is the French word for water-nymph, and *on dîne*, one dines) becomes so to speak the call of language itself, ordering the water-nymph Jacqueline to present herself to future events: “It is as if the only naiad, the only living mermaid in this tale [...] had been able to do nothing but answer the call. A further proof of it is that she tried during this period to rent an apartment in the house just across from the restaurant in question here, on the avenue Rachel” (67).³⁵

Here, Breton himself aims at nothing else than to present an odd fact in the language of a “medical report”. Making it a part of something that is also a textual adventure, however, he is doing what the text shows that he does most of the time, namely transforming some medical auto-biographical report into textual action, in order to demonstrate how texts, images and unexpected encounters inform our lives – independently of any causal, teleological and rational explanations.

35 “Tout se passe comme si la seule naïade, la seule ondine vivante de cette histoire [...] n’avait pu faire autrement que se rendre à cette sommation et une autre preuve en est qu’elle tenta à cette époque de louer un appartement dans la maison faisant rigoureusement face au restaurant dont il s’agit, avenue Rachel” (735).

A brief concluding remark

If this comparative approach could have been stretched a little further to cover the relationship between the topographical patterns of the city and the unfolding and unveiling of secret *affaires du cœur* in both Balzac and Breton, it might have been possible to show that whereas Balzac's realism strikes us by its strong ingredient of something for which "surrealism" might be the proper word, the purported surrealism of Breton's urban prose contains a larger portion of realism (and romanticism) than is usually accepted.

This is still an unproven hypothesis. What can be indicated on the basis of the sketchy readings contained on the preceding pages is, I think, that the representation of space in Balzac as well as in Breton enters into a productive relationship with the dynamics of so-called descriptive writing. It is through this kind of productive relationship between topography and language that writing "performs" and becomes "textual action".

From this viewpoint it may be held that Balzac's descriptions of Parisian labyrinths are no less "performative" or creative than the writing of Breton's meditations on his love journey through central Paris during "the night of the sunflower". Breton's prose, in spite of its tendency towards intricate speculation and free, poetic associations, is always dependent upon the real-life experience that the writer at once tries to render, reflect upon and transform, and it never attains the dictatorial freedom of automatic writing and surrealist poetry. Balzac's descriptions, on the other hand, are "readable" in a way that surrealist poetry seldom is. But their readability reaches us through the meandering dynamics of anthropomorphisms, *topoi*, literary allusions and metaphorical transformations which, by turning the printed pages into forcefully dense textual spaces, demonstrate that in strong imaginative writing topography is always action unfolded.

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Producing “...images we never saw before we remembered them”.

Memory as Textual Action
in Walter Benjamin’s *Berliner
Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*

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The importance of thinking about the production of human experience in terms of performativity can clearly be seen in Walter Benjamin’s reflections on modernity, as well as in his epistemology, in particular. In many respects his theory of memory and cognition of life echoes today’s discussions on the performative aspect of texts and language. For this reason his well-known thoughts on the crisis of experience and loss of traditional forms of mediation should be regarded not as a manifestation of a nostalgic vision of history, but, on the contrary, as a starting point for a constructive endeavour to produce experience under new historical conditions. In the 1930’s Benjamin was occupied with the writing of three important works: *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (*Berlin Childhood Around 1900*), *Das Passagen-Werk*

(*The Arcades Project*), and a book on Baudelaire, *Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus (Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism)*. All three are part of a great effort to construct historical insight, both by reflecting on the problem of cognition and by creating new forms of writing and representation. To Benjamin, however, generating knowledge is not only a question of representing or interpreting the world, but also a way of intervening in it. His object is to initiate a kind of revolution in the intellectual field and transform the culture's self-conception. In order to produce a modern form of experience, the dominant ideological patterns have to be destroyed, something which requires a violent intervention in the field of knowledge. The true historian is therefore supposed to act through language, by tearing down the conventional image of the past, reading it afresh and thereby actualizing it. These ideas are most clearly put across in *The Arcades Project* and the historical-philosophical theses.

In this sense Benjamin, as an heir of Marx, is trying to act culturally by doing things with words. In an essay on Marx and Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller emphasizes the performative aspect of interpretation in Marx: "No reader of *Capital* can doubt that Marx's goal is not just neutral description. He wants to use his 'critique of political economy' to promise strategies of action that will change the system or foresee its inevitable change" (2002: 7-8). Or, as Marx puts it in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (online). Linguistic and other forms of representation are to be seen not as a passive reflection or reproduction of life, but as a way of constructing cultural images that interfere in the world and create new realities, Miller continues.

My aim in the following is to examine the role of memory in Benjamin's effort to construct new cultural images. Remem-

brance plays a major part in his epistemology, and he deals with it both in *The Arcades Project*, where it is considered in a social or collective context, and in *Berlin Childhood*, a counterpart to the work on Paris, where memory is treated on the level of an individual. My reading will be limited to the childhood memories, and I will focus on how remembrance, when formulated linguistically, is presented as a form of intellectual or textual action producing new images of the past and intervening in the present. Studying the childhood memories from the perspective of the performative will hopefully allow for a more dynamic approach to Benjamin, one which avoids the pitfall of reading him only as a melancholic mourning the past.¹ First, I will look at remembrance as both a destructive and a constructive force, and I will consider how it works through the reading of the urban space. Second, I will discuss the importance of the child, and the role of a poetic dimension in recollection. In *Berlin Childhood*, the memory images do not reproduce the past, but are, nevertheless, supposed to be imbued with the child's attitude and re-enact aspects of his relation to the world. So my intention here is to explore Benjamin's particular way of dealing with the idea of how one can do things with words.

The aesthetic dimension

As is well known, art and literature are essential to Benjamin's thinking, and an aesthetic aspect also has to be taken into consideration in connection with his reflections on memory. In order for remembrance to be able to interfere in the ordinary representation of the past and create a true transformation, a poetic or aesthetic dimension has to be involved. In German:

1 See for instance Bernd Witte, "Bilder der Erinnerung. Walter Benjamins *Berliner Kindheit*" (2001).

die Veränderung has to include *eine Verwandlung*. In his book *Det utsatte nærvær* (1992) (“Deferred presence/Presence at risk”), the Norwegian scholar Dag Andersson writes that Benjamin’s conception of revolutionary action does not coincide with the common understanding of political activity. He breaks with “the horizon which sees *praxis* as a project seeking to accomplish a historical goal” (1992: 275).² This requires a transforming gesture transcending the political scene of conflicts, meanings and intentions, because a revolution that only concerns itself with politics in the ordinary sense will inevitably lead to the repetition of the same, and that is *dass es so weiter geht* – the permanent disaster (GS V: 592; 1999: 473). In this perspective the performative aspect may also be seen as a sudden breakthrough in the meaning construct of something that is not linked to meaning, but transcends subjectivity and intention, and opens cognition to other aspects of life. It is a question of disrupting the relation between words, knowledge and life, created by a culture dominated by commercialization and the logic of the market.

My treatment of the aesthetic dimension in *Berlin Childhood* will partly be done in the light of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière and his reflections on aesthetics and politics. This might seem odd, since Rancière himself has not commented on any rapport between Benjamin and his own ideas. On the contrary, when he mentions the German philosopher, it is often with a certain reserve.³ Neverthe-

2 When only references to the original are given, the translations are mine.

3 In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, for instance, he is negative in regards to Benjamin’s argument concerning the mechanical arts and the masses. He contests the claim that the mechanical arts make the anonymous masses visible due to technological reproduction, disapproving of the way Benjamin deduces aesthetic and political properties of film and photography from their technical properties. To Rancière, the mechanical arts do not as such result in a change of the aesthetic

less, Rancière seems to overlook some aspects of Benjamin's thinking which are closer to his own thoughts on politics and aesthetics, especially Benjamin's concern about aesthetic experience. So in spite of obvious differences, there is, in my view, also a certain affinity between the two philosophers. Even though they focus on different aspects, both of them see a political potential in art and literature, and to both aesthetics plays an active part outside the realm of art because it reshapes the sensible and transforms the ordinary modes of seeing, doing and making.⁴ Rancière's considerations on the politics of literature, in particular, may shed light on Benjamin's emphasis on the poetic side of remembrance. He claims that the political aspect of literature is a result neither of the engagement of the author, nor of the message or the way social structures and classes are depicted in a work. Literature is rather political as literature, since literarity allows for new ways of reading the social body. So the issue does not involve choosing between politics and literary purity. However, the purity of literature must not be understood, as is often done in modernism, as a specific use of language, distinguished from everyday use and linked to

paradigm, since the new "aesthetic regime of art" (which he treats in opposition to the earlier "ethical regime of images" and "representative regime of art") had already broken down the hierarchies of genres and subject matters of the old representative regime in art and literature in the 19th century, long before the mechanical art forms came into being (2009: 18).

- 4 It seems to me that Rancière concentrates more on how the social world is seen differently when the aesthetic regime of art replaces the representative regime in the 19th century. To him both Balzac and Flaubert embody a new democratic vision of society and their way of writing represents a literary openness to the lower classes. In the essay on the mechanical arts Benjamin is also interested in the effects of art on the masses, but in *Berlin Childhood* he is more concerned with the epistemological aspect of aesthetic experience and less on the social consequences.

intransitivity and the materiality of signs as such. To Rancière the materiality of language is important, but literarity cannot be defined in terms of language alone, since it is literature's way of intervening in the existing division of the perceptible world and of creating new modes of seeing and hearing (2007: 22). Politics is a means of distributing or sharing the sensible world, and this is exactly what literature and art do, but in their own way, through the formal means available to them.

The politics of art sets aside the usual points of reference and displaces or tears down everyday experience, Rancière writes in "L'esthétique comme politique" (*Malaise dans l'esthétique* 2004). With reference to Schiller's essay on the aesthetic education of man, he associates the politics of art with play (41ff). Free play is an activity without any external purpose; it does away with knowledge related to the subject, thus escaping intention, will and desire. It also implies a revolution in the sensual existence and a kind of sensorium exempt from dominance and rational control. By putting an end to the hegemony of form over materiality and the control of intelligence over the senses, it suggests another way of sensing the world, and creates a new region of being where the dichotomy between active thought and passive sensible matter is suspended (2009: 27). Rancière calls this poetics of the aesthetic regime *metapolitics*, the aim of which is to leave the political dissent by moving from the stage of democracy, state and government to subterranean infra-scenes where these categories are suspended (2007: 30), and another relation between life and language may appear. As a result, art and literature cannot contribute directly to the political struggle for freedom, but have their own politics and their own forms opposed to the subjects and conflicts taking place on the political stage. So according to Rancière, Schiller's model is political in the sense that it is an invention

of sensible forms and material structures of a future to come (2009: 29), and “the aesthetic regime of literature” may hence call to mind a new art of living and a new form of community, as a sort of anticipation of a different social configuration.

Benjamin’s epistemology is informed by a similar idea, and *Berlin Childhood* may be read as an argument for a poetic dimension in thinking, which in this text is associated with childhood and the child’s way of approaching things. So, in spite of the fact that it is a kind of autobiography, it concerns Benjamin’s broader political enterprise as well and is deeply rooted in his philosophy. The process from “Berliner Chronik”, the first version of the memories, to *Berlin Childhood* also shows that he gradually detaches himself from his personal past in order to give it a broader meaning and integrate it in his theoretical project. In a letter to his friend Jean Selz, he states:

Since my arrival I have been working on a series of notes [...] It is a sort of childhood memories but without any emphasis on the individual or familiar. A sort of a child’s tête-à-tête with the city of Berlin around 1900.⁵

Memory

In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin makes it quite clear that remembrance must not be understood as reproduction. Criticizing the hermeneutics of *Einfühlung* (empathy), he claims that returning to the past or identifying with *wie es eigentlich*

5 “Depuis mon arrivée j’ai beaucoup travaillé à une série de notes [...]. C’est une sorte de souvenirs d’enfance mais exempte de tout accent trop individuel ou familial. Une sorte de tête-à-tête d’un enfant avec la ville de Berlin aux environs de 1900” (Anmerkungen zu “Berliner Chronik”, GS VI: 799).

gewesen ist is an impossible enterprise. Memory is not reconstruction, but *construction* (GS V: 587; 1999: 470), and the workings of remembrance are as important as the actual past event. In an essay on Proust, “Zum Bilde Prousts” (“The Image of Proust”), he writes the following:

We know that in his work Proust did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. And yet even this statement is imprecise and far too crude. For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of his recollection (1968: 202).⁶

And in “Berliner Chronik” Benjamin notes that the image of the past only exists in the medium of the writer’s present: “Language has unmistakably meant that memory is not an instrument of insight into the past, but the stage of the past”.⁷ That is why the images of memory are productive, performative, and “...images we never saw before we remembered them”,⁸ as he puts it in a comment on Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*. Recollection, when written down, is a form of textual action, unfolding a new staging of the past and composing new experience.

6 “Man weiss, dass Proust nicht ein Leben wie es gewesen ist in seine Werke beschrieben hat, sondern ein Leben, so wie der, der’s erlebt hat, dieses Leben erinnert. Und doch ist auch das noch unscharf und bei weitem zu grob gesagt. Denn hier spielt für den erinnernden Autor die Hauptrolle gar nicht, was er erlebt hat, sondern das Weben seiner Erinnerung, die Penelopearbeit des Eingedenkens” (GS II: 311).

7 “Die Sprache hat es unmissverständlich bedeutet, dass das Gedächtnis nicht ein Instrument zur Erkundung der Vergangenheit ist, sondern deren Schauplatz” (GS VI: 486).

8 “...Bilder, die wir nie sahen, ehe wir uns ihrer erinnerten” (Anmerkungen zu “Zum Bilde Prousts”, GS II: 1064).

The picture of Berlin staged in Benjamin's text is clearly distinct from more traditional representations of a big city. The German scholar Bernd Witte writes that hardly does a book with the name of a town in the title visualize so little of that town's architecture or cultural and social life as *Berlin Childhood* (2001). Benjamin describes neither the city nor its inhabitants; he does not give a panorama or a view of the whole, but presents the German capital the way it appears to a little boy, fragmented and labyrinthine. The child moves about in some urban locations situated in the western part of Berlin. They are not important historical sites, but minor places of daily life: his parents' and his grandmother's apartments, a few streets, squares and an arcade, a market hall, Siegestsäule, Tiergarten, the Zoo, the school, the summer residence in Babelsberg. All these places are seen from two angles. From the first angle objects, sites and people appear under the sign of death. In the piece "Mummerehlen" Benjamin writes: "Like a mollusk in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear" (2006a: 98).⁹ The recollecting adult tries to listen to the echo of the child, but the child itself is gone. However, it is not only the little boy who has disappeared, but also the Berlin he tries to grasp, wiped out by the Nazis and their destruction of German culture.

Adorno writes that Hitler's Third Reich casts a shadow over Benjamin's childhood memories: "The air around the scenes, which are on the verge of awakening in Benjamin's presentation, is mortal. The glance of the doomed looks at them, and he perceives them as a doomed man" (GS 20: 171). Benjamin lives in exile in Paris, he cannot return to

9 "hauste wie ein Weichtier in der Muschel in der neunzehnten Jahrhundert, das nun hohl wie eine leere Muschel vor mir liegt. Ich halte sie ans Ohr" (GS VII: 417).

Germany, and the Berlin culture he grew up in has vanished. Witte writes that the urban scenes of *Berlin Childhood* are like a stage, in the sense Benjamin elaborates in his book on the German Trauerspiel of the Baroque, which means that “...the temporal movement is captured in a spatial image”.¹⁰ History has wandered into space, and in the Berlin memories this has a dual aspect. Benjamin produces instant pictures of a childhood; but at the same time he shows the historical precondition for the loss of this childhood and the urban culture linked to it. On the stage, or in the memory images, we see glimpses of the world of a child from a well-to-do bourgeois Jewish-German family in Berlin around 1900, but at the same time it is a kind of tragedy, consummating the extinction of this form of life (Witte). The destruction of the past is inscribed in memory’s presentation of the urban space.

Death is alluded to in many texts in *Berlin Childhood*. In the first piece, “Loggias”, the veranda of the apartment is presented as the cradle where the city of Berlin puts its new citizen. But at the end of the text the loggia is transformed into a tomb destined for the boy: “The child [...] dwells in his loggia [...] as in a mausoleum long intended just for him” (2006a: 42).¹¹ According to Witte, the fact that the loggia is on the limit of the apartment also suggests that it is a room without any practical purpose. Here they store old knick-knacks, a china vase, a bronze statue, a hanging lamp etc., and the loggia is only in use on Sundays, for reading. And what do they read? *Romeo and Juliet*, again a reminder of death and tombs. The text “Kaiserpanorama” (“Imperial Panorama”)

10 “...der zeitliche Bewegungsvorgang in einem Raumbild eingefangen ist” (Benjamin quoted by Witte).

11 “Das Kind jedoch [...] hält sich [...] auf seiner Loggia wie einem längst ihm zgedachten Mausoleum auf” (GS VII: 388).

indicates a similar aspect of the child belonging to an outdated world, because these panoramas were out of fashion when Benjamin visited them as a boy: “The art forms that survived here all died out with the coming of the twentieth century. At its inception, they found their last audience in children” (44).¹² It is as if the child already belongs to a forgotten past. In addition Benjamin describes how the light sometimes did not function in the imperial panorama, so that the colours in the picture faded and the landscape “...lay, quite silent under its ashen sky” (44),¹³ revealing a world destined to die out. Other fragments of *Berlin Childhood* also depict the little boy on the threshold of the adult world of oblivion; the school years, in particular, represent his trajectory in life. “Zu spät gekommen” (“Tardy Arrival”) is about the boy who is late for school, arriving after the roll-call. When he enters the classroom, they have already called his name, taken it away from him and listed it in the official records of bureaucracy. The child was not present; he was left behind, and more so as time passes mercilessly, which is brought to mind by the strokes of the school bell.

In “Berliner Chronik” Benjamin directly expresses how the images of the past do not give a new lease on life to the people close to him, but show them as dead, or as ghosts sneaking around in the streets of Berlin:

The air of the city, which is invoked here, allows them only a brief, shadowy existence. They steal along the walls like beggars, appear ghostlike in their windows, only to withdraw, smell around the thresholds like a

12 “Die Künste, die hier überdauerten, sind mit dem zwanzigsten Jahrhundert ausgestorben. Als es einsetzte, hatten sie in den Kindern ihr letztes Publikum” (GS VII: 388).

13 “...lag [...] unter ihrem Aschenhimmel verschwiegen da” (GS VII: 389).

genius loci, and when they fill a whole quarter with their name[s], it is in the way the name of the dead is on his tombstone.¹⁴

The city is presented as a graveyard, and that is why Witte calls Benjamin's Berlin a *necropolis* (2001), a city inhabited by the dead, and seen in the light of death and the awareness of loss and oblivion.

The devastating aspect of *Berlin Childhood* corresponds to a melancholic vision of the city. The melancholic, reducing the world to sheer materiality, sees no life in it and empties the world of meaningful content. According to Benjamin, the destructive gesture is nevertheless a necessary precondition if the construction of experience is to interfere in doxa's meaningful representation of life, because it wipes out the conventional images of the past and brings experience to a sort of point zero. This may lead to an awareness of the crisis of experience, it becomes *erfahrbar*, or possible to apprehend. In a way, modernity is marked not by a lack of experience but rather by the excess of it, the world being invaded by an overproduction of images, meanings and impressions. As Benjamin points out in the essay "Erfahrung und Armut" ("Experience and Scarcity"):

The scarcity of experience: one must not understand this as if people long for new experiences. No, they want to free themselves from experiences, and they long for a world in which they can assert their barrenness, the exterior as well as the interior one, so intensely and clearly that

¹⁴ "Die Luft der Stadt, die hier beschworen wird, gönnt ihnen nur ein kurzes, schattenhaftes Dasein. Sie stehlen sich an ihren Mauern hin wie Bettler, tauchen in ihren Fenstern geisterhaft empor, um zu verschwinden, wittern um Schwellen wie ein Genius loci und wenn sie selbst ganze Viertel mit ihre[n] Namen erfüllen so ist es auf die Art, wie der des Toten den Denkstein auf seinem Grabe" (GS VI, 488-489).

something decent might come out of it. They are not always ignorant or inexperienced either, but often it is the other way round; they have “devoured” all of it, “the culture”, and the “human being”, and that has made them tired and more than contented.¹⁵

By saying that “something decent” might come out of the acknowledgment of the scarcity, Benjamin suggests that the point zero of experience allows for new ways of perceiving and seeing the world. The destructive character, described in the essay by the same name, “Der destruktive Charakter”, brings this positive aspect of annihilation into the open. He is a cheerful cousin of the melancholic and is not destructive for the sake of devastation, but in order to seek a potential in the ruins:

The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. [...] Because he sees ways everywhere, he always positions himself at cross-roads. No moment can know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it (1979: 158-159).¹⁶

15 “Erfahrungsarmut: das muss man nicht so verstehen, als ob die Menschen sich nach neuer Erfahrung sehnten. Nein, sie sehnen sich nach einer Umwelt, in der sie ihre Armut, die äussere und schliesslich auch die innere, so rein und deutlich zur Geltung bringen können, dass etwas Anständiges dabei herauskommt. Sie sind auch nicht immer unwissend oder unerfahren. Oft kann man das Umgekehrte sagen: Sie haben das alles ‘gefressen’, ‘die Kultur’ und den ‘Menschen’ und sie sind übersatt daran geworden und müde” (GS II: 218).

16 “Der destructive Charakter sieht nichts Dauerndes. Aber eben darum sieht er überall Wege. [...] Weil er überall Wege sieht, steht er selber immer am Kreuzweg. Kein Augenblick kann wissen, was der nächste bringt. Das Bestehende legt er in Trümmer, nicht um der Trümmer, sondern um des Weges willen, der sich durch sie hindurchzieht” (GS IV: 397).

Stripping things and places of culturally produced and projected meanings and reducing them to pure materiality open a possibility for seeing them not only as signs but as material objects imbued with a potential for new interpretations.

The language of things

The necropolis is, therefore, only one aspect of Benjamin's ambiguous picture of Berlin, since there is also a second angle from which it can be viewed. For the "aesthetic regime of literature" is at work in the staging of the urban landscape, which involves giving some kind of afterlife to the dead and making a way through the ruins of the past. According to Rancière, literature (that is in the modern era, after the fall of the classical representative regime of literature) tries to free itself from the intentions, desires and speech acts of the subject by approaching the language of objects. Literature puts forward a different regime of signification where the writer not only produces meaning in the traditional sense, but is more like a geologist or a paleontologist reading imprints left by fossils on stones and thus making them witnesses of natural history. In a similar way, literature unfolds and interprets the signs written on things, and on the body of language, Rancière states (2007: 24). One might call it a physiognomic reading, a deciphering of the face of the world and the words.

His main example is Balzac and the antiquity store in *La Peau de chagrin*; Cuvier is the true poet, reconstructing a world from a fossil, he writes (2009: 37). In a very Benjaminian spirit he claims that modernity is characterized by an enormous accumulation of objects, which have fallen out of use and lost their value. The modern world is not only the grey and rational world of the market, but also a state where anything, when out of circulation, dead and meaningless in a sense, may become a cipher of lived life and a hieroglyph

of civilization (2007: 28). According to Rancière, this entails a blurring of the limit between the signs of literature and those of the phenomena of civilization (2009: 37), since the literary reading of ordinary objects also has its bearing on historians and the interpretation of social life.¹⁷ The design of *The Arcades Project* is precisely to interpret modernity by reading the physiognomy of figures, objects, architecture and texts created by the metropolis Paris. As Adorno puts it: “Benjamin is absorbed in reality as if it were a palimpsest” (GS 11: 573). This implies liberating things from the sense given to them by practical use and seeing them as material objects intertwined with culture. Hence new images of the past may be erected.

In *Berlin Childhood* the recollecting writer also deciphers the physiognomy of urban space. At first, Benjamin planned to make a kind of biographical topography, plotting out on a map of Berlin the places that had been important to him and thus showing how his life was integrated in space and the tangible aspect of the city. This plan did not materialize, however, probably because he did not want to write a biography. Nevertheless, the idea of the child having left traces in the environment is crucial in *Berlin Childhood*. When the adult listens to the empty mollusk of the 19th century, it is not in order to get in contact with his past self, but rather to decipher traces left in places, streets and parks by the little boy. This is related to another aspect of language, where the ordinary categories are suspended, and the relation between words and objects is not a question of reference, but rather of material signs of lived experience. It is mainly in the piece about the Tiergarten that Benjamin deals with the theme of memory. As there is an implicit allusion to his friend Franz

17 In this connection Rancière actually very briefly mentions Benjamin's readings of the Parisien arcades (2007: 31).

Hessel, the text suggests an affinity between the writer who recollects the past and the flâneur. Benjamin writes that he returns to Tiergarten with a local guide showing him the way to the past. Hessel had written a book called *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929) (“Promenades in Berlin”), reviewed by Benjamin in the article “Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs” (“The Return of the Flâneur”).

The flâneur is a very important urban figure in Benjamin’s writings on Baudelaire and Paris, a figure created by the French capital in the nineteenth century. Benjamin, working out his own idea of the flâneur, finds him resuscitated in Berlin after World War I. To him the flâneur is an outsider, protesting against the hectic life of the city by walking slowly in the streets, taking a bath in the crowd and studying the physiognomies of the passers-by. However, his most important attribute is the capacity to invest the city with *aura* and a poetic dimension. Benjamin defines the aura as “a unique apparition of a distance” (2006b: 204),¹⁸ and compares it to the human glance. Perceiving the aura of an object means giving it the potential to open its eyes and look back at the observer. In a note to the essay “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”) he writes: “This conferred power is a wellspring of poetry. Whenever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance” (2006b: 289).¹⁹ Benjamin’s notion of the aura is polysemic and multifaceted, and an auratic experience may occur in several areas: in art, in language, in nature and in relation to cultural products and manufactured items. In a historical perspective aura means

18 “einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne” (“Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, GS I: 647).

19 “Diese Belehnung ist ein Quellpunkt der Poesie. Wo der Mensch, das Tier oder ein Unbeseeltes, vom Dichter so belehnt, seinen Blick aufschlägt, zieht es diesen in die Ferne;” (GS I: 647).

the perception of imprints of earlier life on objects, places or landscapes. So the flâneur, capable of investing aura, is a reader of signals from the past in the urban space.

In “Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs” Benjamin states that unlike the visitor, a flâneur walking about in his home town primarily relates to a temporal distance; and reading with his memory, he endows the modern city with aura. Recollection is here not only cognitive, but linked to the body and the senses. The flâneur is in “an anamnestic intoxication” (1999: 417);²⁰ the soles of his shoes remember, and the streets lead him into a vanished time, Benjamin writes (416). But, of course, he never gets there. So the attitude of the flâneur is dual. On the one hand, he is passive and receptive, and like the collector, another significant figure in Benjamin’s universe, he frees things from their ordinary meaning and the curse of being useful. On the other hand, he is productive, because he makes new images of the past by animating and conferring aura on them. This is what the local guide in Tiergarten does; he pays attention to details in the park and deciphers signs left by the child. In his review of *Spazieren in Berlin* Benjamin writes that Hessel is not a simple narrator, telling some story, but he recounts what he hears when listening to Berlin, and that is the echo of what the city told the child (GS III: 194). Hessel has the ability to see thresholds where they otherwise are overlooked, because he listens to the language of things and transforms Berlin into a landscape where everything, even the most insignificant object, may become an enigma and look back from a distance. In “Tiergarten” there is also an allusion to the French surrealist Louis Aragon and his book *Le Paysan de Paris*, since the local guide and flâneur is called a peasant from Berlin. Benjamin was very much inspired by Aragon’s book, particularly the

20 “Jener anamnestiche Rausch, in dem der Flaneur durch die Stadt zieht” (GS V: 525).

surrealist's evocation of *le merveilleux du quotidien* and his capacity to see mysteries in the ordinary life of the city.

So the image of Berlin is equivocal. Seen from the melancholic perspective it is a necropolis, dead, and victim to the destructive time of aging. But, at the same time, there is a countercurrent transforming the necropolis into an urban landscape of hieroglyphs, and working against the devastations of time by transfiguring the city into a texture of signals reminding us of a forgotten past. It is a way of making the silent witnesses of history talk. Hence, the poetic aspect of recollection makes it possible to perceive what is distant differently, transcending the deadening images of ordinary memory and saving the past from conformism. As in Proust, remembrance in *Berlin Childhood* is a form of awakening from the conventional image, which erases previous life, by closing it down, so to speak, and leaving it behind. As textual action memory reopens the past again. By way of "the aesthetic regime", it leaves the scene of the social order governed by practical purposes to enter a region where the urban space is transformed into a palimpsest, and where parks, streets and sites may speak and bear witness of the child.

The child

But why is the little boy so important? Benjamin was very interested in the world of childhood; he collected toys and wrote about theatre and readers for children. In a letter to Adorno he notes that the origin of his theory on experience is a childhood memory, and according to him the youngster's attitude and perception ought to be incorporated in philosophical reflection, as it represents a kind of correction of our way of dealing with the world. He writes that "[t]he charm of children consists above all in a corrective to the social order, one of the hints we receive of 'undisciplined happiness'"

(1994: 7). An important premise in the autobiography is that the child's tête-à-tête with the city is an encounter with the forms of experience produced by commodity society and the rationality linked to the market and the commercialisation of life. Berlin appears as a city of modernity, and the environment of the little boy is determined by the logic of capitalism. However, he perceives this world in his own manner, because he is not subject to the same extent to the instrumental ways of functional life.

To determine Benjamin's notion of *praxis* more accurately, Dag Andersson makes reference to children's play. "Play is not a project", he writes. "The toy is not an object to the child, but a part of him outside himself. The other is not to be overcome as something different, but enters into the activity, the play, like the child himself" (1992: 277). It is a question of a mimetic attitude, in the sense of making oneself like something. In the piece "Mummerehlen", Benjamin writes that, because of the old compulsion to imitate, stronger in children than in grown-ups, he imitated everything around him as a boy. So he started to resemble lodgings, furniture and clothes. The child does not manipulate or form his surroundings to fit his own purpose, but interacts with the material world in a mutual relationship. Like art and Schiller's free play, his approach to the world is a model of another kind of *praxis*. Therefore he is a disturbing element in the practical life of the adult.

The child's troublesome behaviour is depicted in the last piece of *Berlin Childhood*, "Das bucklichte Männlein" ("The Little Hunchback"), a text on a children's song about a little hunchback who always gets in the way in the house and breaks things.²¹ He is a strange and intriguing figure in the eyes of the boy, but the dwarf is also related to him, because

21 My reading of *Berliner Kindheit* is here inspired by Anna Stüssi (1977).

when he breaks a glass or a plate, his mother says: “Greetings from Mr. Clumsy...” (2006a: 121)²² as if it was a greeting from the little hunchback. In the adult world the child is a clumsy foreign body disturbing the order of the household. Oblivious of his self, he gets absorbed in the surroundings and daily chores. Any act is more than a trifling practice to him; fetching wine or making soup or the bed are also filled with secrets he wants to examine. And so he is forgetful and slow, offering resistance to the domestic work. The child resembles Odradek in Kafka’s story about the concern of the housefather, or the boy in a poem by Brecht who did not want to wash, “Vom Kind, das sich nicht waschen wollte”. Benjamin comments on this as follows:

The reader recalls the dirty child and asks: perhaps he rubs himself with ashes, because society does not want to use his passion for filth? Maybe to be a stumbling block and put obstacles to the social order, as a vague reminder – not unlike the little hunchback in the old song, who brings the well-organized household out of joint?²³

The child’s resistance to the order of things is due to his way of relating to the world, his lack of control and his inclination to get lost in objects and surroundings.

As I mentioned above, according to Rancière the aesthetic regime stages the unfolding and interpretation of signs written on objects, places and language. But it may also entail an

22 “Ungeschick lässt grüssen...” (GS VII: 430).

23 “Der Leser denkt an das Schmutzkind zurück und fragt sich: beschmiert er sich vielleicht nur darum mit Aschen, weil die Gesellschaft seine Leidenschaft für den Schmutz keiner nützlichen und guten Verwendung zuführt? nur, um als ein Stein des Anstosses, als eine dunkle Mahnung ihrer Ordnung im Weg zu stehen (dem bucklichten Männlein nicht unähnlich, das im alten Lied des wohlbestellte Hauswesen aus den Fugen bringt)?” (“Kommentare zu Gedichten von Brecht”, GS II: 565).

opposite quality and a reaction to the feverish hermeneutic activity of deciphering, a form of sense experience exempt from signs, meanings and interpretations. In the essay “La mise à mort de Madame Bovary” (2007), Rancière discusses this in relation to Flaubert’s *beau style*, which, in his view, is not primarily a way of making the description of trivialities beautiful, but “an absolute way of seeing” (Flaubert quoted by Rancière 2007: 70), where things are released from the useful and desirable and expand in a sensorium of pure perceptions, detached from the subject and ordinary experience. He refers to the numerous descriptions of small momentary sense impressions in *Madame Bovary*: a strand of hair, a ray of sun in a drop of water, a grain of sand whipped by the wind, a dust cloud whirled up by a carriage, all of them having a strong effect on Emma. Rancière calls them the impersonal or pre-individual forms of life or micro-events taking part in a flow of perceptions. Emma, however, and this is her incorrect way of mixing life and literature, links them to her own objects of desire: religion, Léon or Rodolphe, and so she transports them onto the stage of subjects, objects and fixed identities. This theme is radicalized in Proust, Rancière notes, where a similar *solidification* takes place. Marcel falls in love with Albertine because she is part of “a movable stain of colour on the shore” (75) – the ungraspable gang of girls on the beach, always on the move and never at rest. They represent a mobile complex of sense impressions which is impossible to pin down. But when Marcel gets to know the girls, he learns to distinguish between them as individual figures, and first his love shifts from one to the other, before he singles out Albertine as his object of desire. But according to Rancière, Proust, as a writer, moves in the opposite direction, because he makes the stain on the shore more floating, ungraspable and impersonal, by letting it enter the endless transformations of textual metaphors.

In *Berlin Childhood*, the child takes part in a similar kind

of pre-conceptual sense experience. He does not see things as fixed entities, but senses a flow of fragments, sections, bits and micro-events. When the recollecting adult listens to the empty mollusk of the 19th century, where he dwelt as a little boy, he can hear vestiges of these sense perceptions:

...the brief clatter of the antracite as it falls from the coal scuttle into a cast-iron stove, the dull pop of the flame as it ignites in the gas mantle, and the clinking of the lampshade on its brass ring when a vehicle passes by on the street. And other sounds as well, like the jingling of the basket of keys, or the ringing of the two bells at the front and back steps. And, finally, there is a little nursery rhyme. "Listen to my tale of the mummerehlen" (2006a: 98).²⁴

But the boy never gets to know what the story was about. By ending the list of sounds with a line from the nursery rhyme, Benjamin suggests that the child's floating way of sensing leads to the inexplicable. To him the word *Mummerehlen* is incomprehensible; in fact, it is a distortion of *Muhme Rehlen*, aunt Rehlen, which he misunderstands. However, it resembles *Mummerei*, which means masquerade, and *vermummen*, to wrap up, disguise, or put on a mask. So by misunderstanding the word the child distorts and disguises it, making it impenetrable and nebulous, and thus creating a gap in meaningful language and a threshold to something indefinable. Rancière writes that the micro-events taking place in the depiction of

24 "...das kurze Rasseln des Anthrazits, das aus dem Blechbehälter in einen Eisenofen fällt, es ist der dumpfe Knall, mit dem die Flamme des Gasstrumpfs sich entzündet, und das Klirren der Lampenglocke auf dem Messingreifen, wenn auf der Strasse ein Gefährt vorbeikommt. Noch andere Geräusche, wie das Scheppern des Schlüsselkorbs, die beiden Klingeln an der Vorder- und Hintertreppe: endlich ist auch ein kleiner Kindervers dabei. 'Ich will dir was erzählen von der Mummerehlen'" (GS VII: 417).

Emma's desires and disillusionments form "small gaps" in the text where "one may catch sight of abysses" (Flaubert quoted by Ranci re 2007: 74), and they make it possible to hear the redeeming music of the impersonal. In a similar way, hearing the echo of the child or seeing traces left by him in the urban space means being reminded of the pre-conceptual sense impressions opening the rigid aspect of fixed concepts and identities. It is a question of escaping the scene of dissent, subjects, intentions and meanings and breathing the air of unintentionality. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes that what makes us happy about works of art is the sudden feeling of having escaped (1997: 15).

The boy's floating experience makes him vulnerable and clumsy, but precisely because of that, the city lets him see secrets and promises that are accessible just to him. In "Berliner Chronik" Benjamin writes about the child's *Ohnmacht vor der Stadt* – his helplessness vis-à-vis the city, also a central theme in the piece about Tiergarten, where he used to play as a boy. He describes the park as a labyrinth where he always got lost among the paths, flowerbeds, ponds and watercourses, and he plays on the words *Tiergarten* and *Irrgarten* (labyrinth). For that reason the park is full of secrets, the goldfish in the pond, the kiosk in toy-block style hidden behind the bushes, and the statues of Friedrich Wilhelm and K nigin Luise on their elevated pedestals, which he never gets close to. Tiergarten makes promises it fails to keep: "And so this park, which, unlike every other, seemed open to children, was for me, as a rule, distorted by difficulties and impracticalities" (2006a: 54-55).²⁵ To the little boy the city of Berlin, like the park, is a place of unfulfilled promises.

25 "Und so war dieser Park, der wie kein anderer den Kindern offen scheint, auch sonst f r mich mit Schwierigem, Undurchf hrbarem vestellt" (GS VII: 394).

Very many of the texts in *Berlin Childhood* show him in a similar position of being on the track of something that remains hidden and inaccessible. The child lives in the margins of the world governed by the logic of practical life: corridors, stairways, passages – all resembling in-between rooms. The loggia, for instance, is situated on the border between the apartment and the city of Berlin, and here he receives signals from the surroundings: “For everything in the courtyard became a sign or a hint to me” (2006a: 39).²⁶ To the boy the things and places of Berlin are thresholds to the unknown, and he is constantly on the verge of something, or in front of a door that might open but never does. What he is waiting for is deferred indefinitely. The result is that the recollecting adult discovers signs of a forgotten promise and a past future, but a future that never materialized and is still far away. He finds the expecting boy and an attitude open to *das Kommende*. In Baudelaire the child’s receptiveness and wonder vis-à-vis the world represents the opposite of the melancholic *ennui* and indifference. The first stanza of “Le Voyage”, the last poem of *Les Fleurs du mal*, indicates this contrast between the child and the grown-up:

Pour l’enfant, amoureux des cartes et d’estampes,
L’univers est égal à son vaste appétit.
Ah! Que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!
Aux yeux des souvenirs que le monde est petit! (129).²⁷

Benjamin comments on these lines in the following way: “The dream about the distant belongs to childhood. The traveller

²⁶ “Denn alles wurde mir im Hof zum Wink” (GS VII: 386).

²⁷ “For the child, in love with maps and prints,/The universe is equal to his huge appetite./Ah, how large the world is under the lamplight!/ In the eyes of memory, how small the world is!” (Baudelaire 1992: 95).

has seen the far away, but he has lost faith in it”.²⁸ Accordingly, the remembrance of the child means constructing images that may call to mind the child’s curiosity, expectations and hopes; his “Hoffnung im Vergangenen” (“Hope in the Past”), as Peter Szondi named his essay on this theme in *Berlin Childhood*.

In “Réécrire la modernité” (1988) Jean-François Lyotard claims that his notion of *réécriture*, rewriting, applies to both *Berlin Childhood* and Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, although he does not give details as to how. But the relevance is clear. According to him, rewriting does not mean repeating or copying the past, but is more like trying to think what was hidden to us at the time. It is hidden not only because of the prejudices of the past, but also because of the progressive dimension of time, the fact that we always look ahead at what is going to happen, in projects, programmes and prospects – the one-way street of progress, in other words, which the child has to pass through. In his book on speech acts, following Derrida’s argument, J. Hillis Miller emphasizes that speech acts always are included in a temporal movement of repetition or reiteration. Any utterance can break out of its original circumstance and be repeated in new contexts; and these new contexts may let us see meanings and aspects of the utterance that exceed the intention of the subject expressing it in the first place. Miller writes that this is the emancipating potential of the speech act, since new possibilities and meanings may come about, and may interfere in the new context (2001: 76). Benjamin’s theory of memory may be considered a particular exploration of this idea *avant la lettre*, recollec-

28 “Der Traum von der Ferne gehört der Kindheit an. Der Reisende hat das Entfernte gesehen, aber den Glauben an die Ferne hat er verloren” (Anmerkungen zu “Charles Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus”, GS I: 1148).

tion being a reiteration of a past event, transforming it and creating other possible options or alternatives.

Hence, *réécriture* or recollection in *Berlin Childhood* has a double gesture. It gestures backwards, because it means being responsive to the ways of the child, which were overlooked and left behind by “the train of history”, and forwards, because the rewriting is a new construction opening the presence to the future of the past. So remembrance as textual action is also an intervention into the present state of affairs and is going on here and now. Benjamin’s notion of *actualization* points to that. Actualizing the past means offering a chance to the ignored and neglected, that which has been put off and has not yet come into existence. In this sense, the memory image is, as a performative, an event; it breaks through the conformist representation of the past and, in a glimpse, it is reminiscent of *das Kommende*, which the child, and *die Schwellenkundigen*, those who are patient and know about thresholds, are still waiting for.

In his book on Benjamin Dag Andersson plays on the word *utsatt* in Norwegian, which means both deferred and at risk or in danger, and he emphasizes that not only are the child’s hopes and expectations suspended – his capacity to see gaps and thresholds in places, words and objects is also threatened by oblivion. That is why remembrance plays such an essential part in Benjamin’s effort to produce new experience. Although Benjamin stresses the constructive aspect of memory, he is not a radical constructivist, in the sense that cultural meaning is seen exclusively as a result of linguistic or human action. To him remembrance is not a question of subjective projection, but includes openness to the material world, and an interaction between present and past through materiality. A reading of signs written in urban space and on the body of words and objects, and a sensibility towards the child are equally involved. This requires both receptiveness, an ability to lis-

ten to the signals from the past, and an active construction of images that are relevant to the present. In this respect, memory, as textual action, re-enacts or imitates the child's way of handling things, and it resembles Schiller's aesthetic state where passive sense reception merges with intellectual activity. As a model for a different way of sensing, childhood is therefore a necessary preschool to philosophical reflection, and for that reason Benjamin begins his *Berlin Childhood* by associating the child with his own thinking:

The caryatides that supported the loggia on the floor above ours have slipped away from their post for a moment to sing a lullaby beside the cradle – a song containing little of what later awaited me, but nonetheless sounding the theme through which the air of the courtyards has forever remained intoxicating to me. [...] and it is precisely this air that sustains the images and allegories which preside over my thinking, just as the caryatides, from the heights of their loggias, preside over the courtyards of Berlin's West End (2006a: 39).²⁹

Hence, to be truly performative recollection has to be imbued with the air from the childhood courtyards. Only by echoing the song of a promised future will memory be able to interfere in the conventional representations of the past and present and create cultural images capable of changing the dominating ways of seeing, doing and making.

29 “Die Karyatiden, die die Loggia des nächsten Stockwerks trugen, mochten ihren Platz für einen Augenblick verlassen haben, um an dieser Wiege ein Lied zu singen, das wenig von dem enthielt, was mich für später erwartete, dafür jedoch den Spruch, durch den die Luft der Höfe mir auf immer berauschend blieb. [...] und es ist eben diese Luft, in der die Bilder und Allegorien stehen, die über meinem Denken herrschen wie die Karyatiden auf der Loggiahöhe über die Höfe [sic] des Berliner Westens” (GS VII: 386).

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Virginia Woolf and the Ambiguities of Domestic Space

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In 1904 Virginia Stephen (later Woolf) and her sister Vanessa moved from their childhood home 22 Hyde Park Gate to 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, where they set up house with their two brothers, Thoby and Adrian. Their new address became the centre of the circle of people known as the Bloomsbury group. Woolf's autobiographical texts give a vivid picture of what the change of address involved. Two of those texts, "22 Hyde Park Gate" and "Old Bloomsbury", were written in the years 1920-22; while the third, "Sketch of the Past", was written between April 1939 and November 1940, only a few months before she died.¹

In this article I investigate the role of domestic space in Woolf's *œuvre*. "Space" is a common denominator for different aspects of Woolf's work: in terms of the argument I am making, it concerns specific rooms and domestic ar-

¹ All of the quotations from these three texts are from *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2002.

rangements, it concerns the intertwined connections between private and public life, and it inevitably involves literary techniques and themes. Here, I will limit my perspective to exploring how Woolf's particular spatial sensibility underpins the convergence of aesthetics and everyday life which is at work in her memoirs, and further refined in a modernist novel like *To the Lighthouse*. Both are indebted to the works and aesthetic thinking developed by Bloomsbury, that of the painter and art critic Roger Fry in particular. I seek to unveil Woolf's textual action as an ongoing dialogue with spatial aspects of her Victorian past as well as with those of her contemporaries, a dialogue which involves gender and sexual relations as reflected in the ambiguities of domestic space.

Houses of the past

The geographical distance between 22 Hyde Park Gate and 46 Gordon Square is not huge, but in almost all other respects there is a world of difference. As we shall see in the following, moving from one place to another may equal liberation, and Woolf captures the change in the image of "the tree which glistens after rain like the body of a seal." The association with nature and the animal world is linked to the freshness of the new house: "The light and the air after the rich red gloom of Hyde Park were a revelation" (46). The emphasis on light and air is significant; it is precisely the architecture, design, and colours of the new house which in Woolf's argument are made to engender new thoughts and new life:

To make it all newer and fresher, the house had been completely done up. Needless to say the Watts-Venetian tradition of red plush and black paint had been reversed; we had entered the Sargent-Furse era; white and green chintzes were everywhere; and instead of Morris wall-papers with their intricate patterns we decorated our walls with washes of

plain distemper. We were full of experiments and reforms. We were going to be without table napkins, we were to have (large supplies of) Bromo instead; we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial (46-47).

The emphasis is on the new and different, synonyms in Woolf's description of the change in the two sisters' lives. Crucial is the way she interprets the interior in terms of style and art history – the move from dark colours (“red plush and dark paint”) to light (“washes of plain distemper”) – and thus implicitly makes a link between life and art. Throwing away napkins and drinking coffee instead of tea may sound superficial, but in fact it involves entering a new era where the intention clearly is to abolish restrictions of Victorian home life. This attempt to ally changes in interior design with an aim for a new life is typical of the way her argument works. (Gordon Square in) Bloomsbury epitomizes the start of a new era, and Vanessa Bell, who herself made a little sketch of the past late in life, confirms her sister's view:

It was a bit cold perhaps, but it was exhilarating to have left the house in which had been so much gloom and depression, to have come to these white walls, large windows opening on to trees and lawns, to have one's own rooms, be master of one's own time, have all the things in fact which come as a matter of course to many of the young today but so seldom then to young women at least (1995: 104).

In her diary from 1918 Woolf notes that “the gulf which we crossed between Kensington & Bloomsbury was the gulf between respectable mummified humbly & life crude & impertinent perhaps, but living” (Rosenbaum 1995: 58).

In reality, the gulf was harder to cross than she anticipates here, and the tension between Victorian domesticity and the

wish for changes pervades much of her work. Woolf, canonized as a literary modernist, is not first and foremost associated with the domestic, but from the very start of her writing career she sets out to unveil the connections “between women and the domestic space that contains them” (Blair 2007: 2).

Bloomsbury must therefore be confronted with the place which forms its backdrop: 22 Hyde Park Gate. The overall impression given in Woolf’s memoirs is of a heavy, dark, overloaded home, steeped in Victorian society and values. A sense of suffocation and suppression characterizes her composition of the past. The house is large but narrow and dark, situated in a *cul-de-sac* which “led nowhere”, and summed up in the word *cage* (123). The dining room is described as “very Victorian ...; with a complete set of chairs carved in oak; high-backed; with red plush panels” (124). The most striking feature in Woolf’s description, however, and testimony to her way of visualizing the past, is how she locates the rooms and their main objects like totem poles for fundamental domestic activities, thereby turning the well-known Victorian home into an anthropological space:

The tea table rather than the dinner table was the centre of Victorian family life – in our family at least. Savages I suppose have some tree, or fire place, round which they congregate; the round table marked that focal, that sacred spot in our house. It was the centre, the heart of the family. It was the centre to which the sons returned from their work in the evening; the hearth whose fire was tended by the mother, pouring out tea. In the same way the double bedded bedroom on the first floor was the sexual centre; the birth centre, the death centre of the house. It was not a large room; but its walls must be soaked, if walls take pictures and board up what is done and said with all that was most intense, of all that makes the most private being, of family life. In that bed four children were begotten; there they were born; there first mother died; then father died, with a picture of mother hanging in front of him (125).

The tea table and the parents' bedroom are in different ways centre of a home with clear labour and gender divisions. The layout of the house is subject to strict social rules concerning hierarchy, status, gender and class. The division is reinforced by the marked difference between upstairs and downstairs: "Downstairs there was pure convention; upstairs pure intellect. But there was no connection between them" (158). In addition there was an attic and a basement which housed servants (cf. Light 2008). Her mother reigned downstairs, whereas her increasingly deaf father was based upstairs. The sisters Virginia and Vanessa had their own "close conspiracy": "In that world of many men, coming and going, in that big house of innumerable rooms, we formed our private nucleus" (146).

Woolf emphasizes how certain domestic arrangements are crucial for a certain amount of privacy and independence. Rooms have social implications, and in order to function they need to allow for different inhabitants' needs. Thus the black folding doors in the drawing room, a common Victorian device, are emphasised as crucial: "How could family life have been carried on without them? As soon dispense with water-closets or bathrooms as with folding doors in a family of nine men and women ..." (31).

In her adult memoirs Woolf is ironic rather than nostalgic, her tone is one of distance rather than one of intimacy. When stating the difference between now and then, it is the present which informs the past rather than vice versa. In the notes preceding "Sketch of the Past" she says that "this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (2008: ix). It is worth noting that in her diary from the time she actually regretted moving from the house. In Alison Light's precise summary:

In her telling of it leaving Hyde Park Gate was a story of emancipation, of escape from the grip of the patriarchal family and a flight into modern individuality. But her memoirs took years to write and remained unfinished and unpublished in her lifetime. The story she told was the product of constant revision (2008: 45-46).

Indeed, Virginia Woolf's autobiographical texts demonstrate how she thinks in terms of rooms and places. All three texts reminiscence on what we may call the importance of *where*, that is, the significance of various houses – their rooms, decorations and design – for social intercourse. For Bloomsbury “domestic existence and aesthetic creativity reinforce one another,” Christopher Reed writes (2004: 184), and those words apply to Woolf as well.

As I will return to below, her way of thinking in terms of domestic architecture is indebted to Roger Fry. The new thoughts and ideas – sexual, social or aesthetic – are closely interwoven with the places in which they are formulated. By confronting two pivotal addresses, 22 Hyde Park Gate and 46 Gordon Square, she is able to enter history by way of specific spatial layouts. “For Virginia Woolf the past was a house,” as Alison Light formulates it (2008: 9). Integrated in these “spatial” memories are other writers and artists, primarily Roger Fry, the painter Duncan Grant, the writers Clive Bell and Lytton Strachey, and of course Virginia's sister Vanessa, herself a painter, and as a stark contrast, her half brothers George and Gerald Duckworth.

Philosophers from Martin Heidegger to Gaston Bachelard have seen dwelling as the fundamental human condition, and Bachelard's phenomenological study *La poétique de l'espace* (1958) is a major work on the significance of house and home. Its driving force is nostalgia for the happy dwelling, analyzed through readings of poetry. In contrast, one might say that Woolf's memories of her childhood home are far from

images of harmonious dwelling, her mixture of the everyday and the funny with the darker currents of home life is poignant. Nevertheless, a certain elegaic tone pervades both her autobiographical writings and the images of the past which are so vivid in her fiction. Woolf's ambiguous relation to the domestic space of her past (steeped in the nineteenth rather than the twentieth century), can be understood in accordance with Walter Benjamin's writings on the city and its interiors. It is precisely the *ambiguity* of dwelling which is his point of departure. He sees the nineteenth-century's addiction to dwelling (*Gebäude*) as a craving for a safe interior, a shelter, but also as its opposite: confinement and suffocation. Individuals in their dwellings, like instruments embedded in their velvet case, contribute to the illusionary and phantasmagorical state of the interior (Benjamin 1982: 292). In Woolf's case this can be seen as a drive towards childhood's maternal home, like the one we see in the opening of *To the Lighthouse*, but in memoirs as well as in fiction it is a worn and shaky house embodying a home easily threatened by disharmony.

In many ways Woolf's descriptions of her own late-Victorian childhood home are fundamentally ambiguous; she is steeped in the Victorian while trying to free herself from it, seeking escape while feeling the burden of family, gender and (lack of) education. Crucial to her descriptions is her recurrent employment of spatial images, "a room of one's own" being of course the most famous, an image to be understood both metaphorically and literally. In her childhood memories there are signs of unsettledness and entrapment, even of danger, intertwined with the seemingly harmless descriptions of domestic arrangements. There is a double tonality of "homely" and "unhomely" in her texts, the opposition being well covered in the two German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* – the latter of course a central Freudian term known in English as *the uncanny*. As we shall see, the Victorian domesticity seen

through Woolf's twentieth-century eyes involves obvious uncanny aspects, not surprisingly connected to sexuality.

Sexuality and social culture

"Everything was on trial", Woolf claims in her memoirs, and this proves to have been especially true of sexual and gender relations. Characteristic of Woolf's method is the way she integrates questions of social, sexual and aesthetic identity in order to negotiate inherited conventions. Her memoirs include two scenes involving a man entering a room and introducing sex into it: one is linked to Gordon Square and is presented in "Old Bloomsbury", the other concerns her half brother and is part of the earlier memoir "22 Hyde Park Gate". Let us first turn to the Gordon Square scene, often referred to as symbolic of a break with Victorian moral and social codes:

Suddenly the door opened and the long and sinister figure of Mr Lytton Strachey stood on the threshold. He pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.

"Semen?" he said.

Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good (56).

Apparently, the white drawing room assimilates sex; poetry and promiscuity go hand in hand. At least that is how it looks, but it seems obvious that it is not so much sex as *sex talk* that is thus introduced in the drawing room. *Before* Strachey's remark, sex had not been part of the conversation: "When all intellectual questions had been debated so freely, sex was ignored. Now a flood of light poured into that department

too.” *After* Strachey’s remark the situation is different: “So there was now nothing that one could not say, nothing that one could not do, at 46 Gordon Square” (57). The distinction between “now” and “then” runs like a red thread through her argument and is fundamental to her way of constructing the story of her past. In terms of language, of words used, this episode is certainly evidence of a new way of making conversation, but in terms of action, there was for the young and unmarried Virginia Stephen a strong hope that “things could go on like this”, that is, that sex would *not* disturb the pleasure of talk and abstract argument. Hence, in spite of all the later hetero- and homoerotic relationships within the group, the talk of sex was also a way of escaping sex. The scene is thus more ambiguous than it seems at first, and the talk of sex and semen must be set against the background of Victorian prohibitions. In Victoria Rosner’s words: “the stain seems to point up some of what it seeks to deny: Woolf’s and Strachey’s continuity with the Victorian tradition and their reliance on the distinction between public and private life, between propriety and scandal, to give their work meaning” (2005: 90).

The Thursday evenings with all the up-and-coming men, friends of their brother Thoby’s, were nevertheless a new and exciting experience, but the excitement was above all verbal: to be able to say what one thought was liberating for young women brought up to serve and be silent. Most of the men knew each other from Cambridge and were strongly influenced by G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1902) and its notions about “the nature of good” (56). For the women, with little formal education, the pleasure of using their brains was more exhilarating than the thought of love. In fact, it was precisely because so many of the men were homosexuals, or “buggers” as the term went, that Virginia for one felt free. The liberation was also a liberation *from* love as the determining factor of

female life: "The atmosphere of Hyde Park Gate had been full of love and marriage. ... But at Gordon Square love was never mentioned. Love had no existence" (52). Neither had sex: "there was no physical attraction between us" (55).

Although Victorian impulses play a significant role in Woolf's writing – her obsession with time past and lost is but one sure sign – she no doubt seeks an alternative to the nuclear family and patriarchal family values. The plain white paint and the lack of napkins as well as the casual talk of semen are all part of a socio-political enterprise embedded in a domestic culture radically different from that of her childhood's Kensington – and of the majority of the English upper-middle class to which most (but not all) of "the bloombs-berries" belonged. In short, the fight between the traditional Victorian values and the changes embodied by Bloomsbury takes place inside as well as outside the home. When looking at the Stephen/Duckworth family, it is obvious that the home becomes a battlefield for two fundamentally different attitudes to life. The "new" is represented by Vanessa and Virginia (and their brothers); the "old" by their half brothers George and Gerald, George in particular. When they are all still living at Hyde Park Gate, George is threatened by Virginia's flair for the unconventional. One evening she comes down in a green dress made from fabric bought at a furniture shop – in itself an act of protest against convention: "Any defiance was therefore unfamiliar to him; and my green dress set ringing in him a thousand alarm bells. It was extreme; it was artistic; it was not what nice people thought nice" (154). This is the same conventional man with "no brains", according to Woolf, who at another, uncanny level, breaks a more serious cultural and moral code than any act of dressing, painting or conversation is capable of. In the following scene, which takes place several years before the humorous semen episode, we witness another man unexpectedly entering a room, and this

time it is clearly action and not talking which is the purpose of the visit:

Sleep had almost come to me. The room was dark. The house silent. Then, creaking stealthily, the door opened; treading gingerly, someone entered. "Who?" I cried. "Don't be frightened", George whispered. "And don't turn on the light, oh beloved. Beloved –" and he flung himself on my bed, and took me in his arms.

Yes, the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also (42).

The contrast between the two scenes could hardly be more striking. The first (which is really the second in terms of chronology) taking place in the light and easy atmosphere of the drawing room, its tone of humorous promiscuity undermining any possibility of sexual threat; the other hidden and taking place in the dark privacy of the night, literally whispering its secrets. "Hyde Park Gate in 1900 was the complete model of Victorian society," Woolf writes (150), and part of this society involves not only black walls and red upholstery but also a repressed, even incestuous sexuality.²

As we have already seen, there is an explicit contrast between the two houses in Kensington and Bloomsbury in terms of architecture and design, associated with darkness and light respectively, and the two scenes concerning sexuality reproduce this difference. There is also, however, a collision of values *within* the Kensington home, which concerns age as well as sex. "The patriarchal society of the Victorian age

2 There is among Woolf scholars a long and ongoing discussion linked to the complicated question of incest and what actually took place in the Stephen/Duckworth home, which I will not go into here. My point is simply to highlight Woolf's own remark and its contrast to the "semen scene".

was in full swing in our drawing room,” as Virginia Woolf formulates it (154).

Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate. The Victorian Age and the Edwardian Age. ... explorers and revolutionists, as we both were by nature, we lived under the sway of a society that was about fifty years too old for us. It was this curious fact that made our struggle so bitter and so violent. For the society in which we lived was still the Victorian society. Father himself was a typical Victorian. George and Gerald were consenting and approving Victorians. So we had two quarrels to wage; two fights to fight; one with them individually; and one with them socially. We were living say in 1910, they were living in 1860 (149-150).

1910 is of course no arbitrary year when it comes to Woolf. One of her most famous statements uses 1910 as a landmark: “in or about December 1910 human character changed” (1992: 70). 1910 was the year King Edward died after just a few years on the throne (he succeeded Queen Victoria in 1901, and was in his turn succeeded by King George³), but more importantly, it was the year “Manet and the Post-Impressionists”, commonly known as “The First Post-Impressionist Exhibition”, opened in London.⁴ “1910” is the new tune playing, welcome to the sisters and their friends, but completely foreign to Virginia’s half brother George:

Sometimes when I hear God Save the King I too feel a current belief but almost directly I consider my own splits asunder and one side of me criticises the other. George never questioned his belief in the old tune

³ Hence the terms Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian.

⁴ “(T)he name was struck out in talk with a journalist who wanted some convenient label” (Woolf 1940: 153). Desmond MacCarthy explains how Fry at last said: “Oh, let’s just call them post-impressionists; at any rate, they came after the impressionists (1995: 76).

that society played. He rose and took his hat off and stood. Not only did he never question his behaviour; he applauded it, enforced it (155).

In other words, the difference between them is a difference between endorsement and reflection. Woolf is no foreigner to the tradition that George is steeped in, but while he accepts it with no questions asked, she questions his very acceptance.

Roger Fry and modern domestic architecture

While Woolf was working on her last and longest autobiographical text, “Sketch of the Past”, in which the scene above occurs, she was also working on another book, namely the biography of Roger Fry. In this book she resumes the dialogue with Bloomsbury’s most prominent aesthetic thinker, and the influence from his essays can be seen in her way of constructing the past as a house. In his essay from 1918, “A Possible Domestic Architecture” (reprinted in *Vision and Design*, 1920), Fry formulates ideas which can be seen in accordance with Woolf’s rejection of the Victorian decorative style and her efforts to discredit nineteenth-century domestic conventions. He attacks “the desire to be romantic” (1990: 190), and argues for houses which are accommodated to people’s needs rather than governed by a certain style. Light and air are key elements in his architectural thinking – “large and particular high interiors” are his vision (192). For Woolf, the move to Gordon Square epitomized an “extraordinary increase of space” (46), and her words on the significance of space seem to echo Fry’s wish for “one room of generous dimensions and particularly of great height” (192). Fry’s views on modern architecture are certainly a significant step away from the Victorian houses where each room and floor is divided and has a separate function. In his emphasis on light, air and functionality he even seems to prefigure some of Le

Corbusier's ideas in *Towards a New Architecture* (*Vers une Architecture*, 1923), but in fact he is very far from the latter's functional anti-domesticity as summed up in the famous statement: "A house is a machine for living in" (1970: 89). By contrast, Fry negotiates the interaction between individual decoration and overall function; his "functionalism" includes the individual's "matters of choice" (193).

It is no coincidence that Woolf unfolds her criticism and remarks within a culture marked by certain rules of dress, colouring and furniture; and her emphasis on the year 1910 as a symbolic milestone for change owes a lot to Fry. A striking expression of the changed times came with the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, organised by Fry at the Grafton Galleries in London. As Desmond MacCarthy (another Bloomsbury friend who acted as secretary for the 1910 exhibition) reports, Fry introduced the works of Cézanne, Matisse, Seurat, Van Gogh and Picasso to the British public, and as a result he was called mad, indecent, immoral and self-conscious. One consequence of the exhibition was that he became a figure hated by the artistic and academic establishment. With hindsight, the most surprising criticism directed at the show was the accusation of indecency: "Pure pornography" or "Admirably indecent" as the headlines went (MacCarthy 1995: 77). Modern, insane, childish and pornographic were associations which clustered about the paintings in the public mind. "They are the works of idleness and important stupidity, a pornographic show," wrote the wife of a distinguished art historian in her diary (Woolf 1940: 157). As Woolf notes in her biography of Fry: "It would need today as much moral courage to denounce Cézanne, Picasso, Seurat, Van Gogh and Gauguin as it needed then to defend them. But such figures and such opinions were not available in 1910, and Roger Fry was left to uphold his own beliefs under a shower of abuse and ridicule". One of those

academically distinguished professors “could scarcely bear to hear his name mentioned and felt at his death that it was for English art ‘as if a Mussolini, a Hitler, or a Stalin had passed away’” (1940: 158-159). It is worth noting, though, that many people, including Woolf herself, failed to appreciate post-impressionism to start with, although they soon used it as a standard of innovation and aesthetic judgment (cf. Quick 1985).

For the public, Fry’s two exhibitions (the second was launched in 1912) represented a radical break with tradition. But for Fry himself this was not so. On the contrary, for him the new art represented a continuity with the past, not a rupture, and one of his main objectives was to teach the public to *see* – to open up a dialogue between the old and the new, the known and the unknown. His interest in the modern French painters did not preclude an equally strong interest in the Byzantines and non-European art.

In 1913 Fry launched the Omega Workshops. The principal aim of the Omega was to bring art into the home, but equally important was Fry’s ambition to provide an income for poor artists. Omega was a workshop where unsigned works were produced collectively by a group of artists and designers, although they were fairly easy to attribute to individual artists. Many of the Bloomsbury artists, such as Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, were part of the workshop. The workshop was started just after the second post-impressionist exhibition, and it can be seen as part of the same enterprise, namely to represent an alternative to existing conventions in painting and decorations. More important still, Fry and Omega refused “to accept the validity of the distinction between the fine and applied arts which had been sustained throughout the Arts and Crafts movement. For Fry and his colleagues at the Omega, design was a term that might equally apply to the manufacture of pottery, or stuffs, or household furniture,

as to book illustration, murals, or easel painting,” as Simon Watney formulates it (1990: 37).⁵

With the Omega Workshops, Fry brought the aesthetic principles of the Post-Impressionist exhibition – the bold colouring and simple lines found in Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso – into the domestic and everyday sphere. In line with the French painters, Fry and his followers were mixing modern techniques with an interest in the primitive and archaic, which meant that the Omega design, their furniture and decorations, represented an alternative, and a provocation, to the conventions of British taste. Fry’s ideas and innovations were prompted by the internationalism prevalent among the European avant-garde at the time, in the British press simply labelled “futurist” (Schoeser 2009).

Fry’s effort to obliterate the distinction between fine art and applied art, thereby challenging the distinction between public and private life, did not imply that he regarded life and art as one and the same. On the contrary, for Fry art was a means of enlarging and creating life, not reproducing what was already there.⁶ It is the artist’s ability to unfold a new

5 Both Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell painted murals and made patterns for prints, and were eminent decorators as well as regular painters. They were clearly influenced by French painting, and particularly in Grant’s work there are striking similarities with Picasso and Matisse. In terms of home decoration he and Vanessa Bell were pivotal when it came to transforming houses into artistic enterprises. The main meeting place for the Bloomsbury group from 1916 and onwards, Charleston Farmhouse in Sussex, is probably the most complete result of Bloomsbury’s domestic aesthetics, and is still intact.

6 “For I want to say that his understanding of art owed much to his understanding of life, and yet I know that he disliked the mingling and mixing of different things. He wanted art to be art; literature to be literature; and life to be life,” Woolf writes in her 1935 “Memorial Exhibiton Address” (2008: 135).

reality which interests him, as he argues in his essay “The French Post-Impressionists”:

These artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities. In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality (1990: 167).

The “reality” Fry aims at depends primarily on the imagination and formal capacity of the artist. In the preface to the catalogue for the second post-impressionist exhibition (1912), reprinted in *Vision and Design* as “The French Post-Impressionists”, he maintains that modern French painters were “trying to find a pictorial language appropriate to the sensibilities of the modern outlook”, but he resists the notion that “the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms” (1990: 167).⁷

Fry’s argument for art as subject to its own internal logic earned him the label “formalist”. But the detachment and necessity for “disinterested and contemplative imagination”, which he saw as a precondition for the creative artist, did

7 Michael Whitworth maintains that Fry was “more concerned with the formal qualities of a work than with what it represented” (2005: 111). In the works of Fry, as well as in those of painters such as Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, representational and “formal” qualities can hardly be dissociated, which also goes for Fry’s favourite among the French painters – Cézanne.

not mean a withdrawal from everyday life.⁸ Woolf, for one, questions his claim that art is “in the main self-contained”: “But, it is tempting to ask, were they distinct? It seems as if the aesthetic theory were brought to bear upon the problems of private life” (1940: 214). Likewise, the organisation of the Omega was governed by a wish to create “art applied to the needs of everyday life” (Fry in Woolf 1940: 217). In fact, Fry’s later essays confirm Woolf’s view; he never ceases to aim for the alliance of aesthetic and social requirements.⁹ It was exactly on this point that Fry disagreed with Clive Bell, Woolf’s brother-in-law and another prominent member of the Bloomsbury group. Both Fry and Bell might be seen as formalists, but whereas Fry’s “formalism” takes everyday life and experience as its point of departure, Bell is a hard-core, metaphysical formalist, seeing art as “significant form” with the aim of stirring emotions which lead the way to another, ultimate reality.¹⁰ Besides, Bell has no room for literature in his theory – it is reserved for the visual arts exclusively – and not surprisingly, it is Fry’s converging of aesthetics and domesticity that Woolf applies in her own work.

The post-Victorian home and post-impressionist art, whether visual or verbal, may be seen as two sides of the same coin.¹¹ In addition, the converging of aesthetics and domesticity may well be interpreted as a feminization of the masculine and militaristic rhetorics of the European avant-garde. Bloomsbury’s reaction to post-impressionist French paintings was to imag-

8 Or in Victoria Rosner’s words: “For Bloomsbury, formalism is not a retreat from the social world but an attempt to use the artist’s vision to organize and redefine that world” (2005: 172).

9 See *A Roger Fry Reader*. Ed. Christopher Reed, 1996.

10 See Bell 2008, where “significant form” is launched as the key term.

11 “Cézanne and Picasso had shown the way; writers should fling representation to the winds and follow suit”, as Woolf formulates it on behalf of Fry (1940: 172).

ine them as places to live in: “Far from trivializing modernist aesthetics through interior decoration, Bloomsbury aspires to make modernism the look of modern life,” Reed writes, thus identifying post-impressionism with modernism (2004: 110). It is obvious that Bloomsbury is indebted to French painting as well as to the social and political changes taking place during this period, and in their endeavour to integrate international social and aesthetic perspectives in their “formalism” they are modernists. However, their modernism challenges “myths of modernism as an antirealism ‘remote from the sphere of everyday practices’”, as Christine Froula formulates it (2005: 16). I will return to this challenge in my concluding remarks on Woolf – with hindsight the most prominent modernist of them all.

Aesthetics and domesticity in To the Lighthouse

We have seen how in her autobiographical writings Woolf envisions her past via rooms and houses, colours and decoration, in short via the domestic. The fact that in her fiction Woolf employs techniques of “spatial form”, to paraphrase the title of Joseph Frank’s seminal essay, is hardly surprising. But it is worth repeating that there is in all her work a connection to the domestic sphere that shows her involvement with everyday life.¹²

When Woolf in her frequently quoted essays “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) and “Modern Fiction” (1925) criticises the Edwardians Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy for being “materialists”, it is because their novels, in her view, are sociological descriptions and little else. Her view is that these authors are so intent on describing details of appear-

12 Or “the real world”, as Alex Zwerdling calls it in his *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986).

ance, economy and housing that they forget inner life. The surface is all – and all there is. In their novels factual description serves to explain human beings, and inadequately so, according to Woolf. In her own work, details pointing to the material world are certainly present in great numbers, but they are embedded in the individual characters' consciousness – in human perceptions of the world. She shared Fry's interest in the imaginative life, and besides, her writing is, as Leonard Woolf once remarked, "extraordinarily visual" (Rosenbaum 1995: 238). The realm of appearances is a point of departure, and her settings and scenes are configurations of colours, shapes and perceptions.

Woolf's account of the changes she witnessed during the years before and after World War One is an element of her novels. In particular, there is a painter among Woolf's characters relevant to my argument concerning the converging of aesthetics and domestic existence, namely Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Her work on her painting runs through the novel; it is started in the first part and finished in the third – with the famous exclamation coming as the novel's very last words: "I have had my vision" (2000: 226). Her technique is in accordance with a non-figurative modernist aesthetics, but she is no hard-core formalist: her subject matter is a traditional one, mother and child, and its impetus comes from her ambivalent love for Mrs Ramsay and her way of life.

Paradoxical as it may sound, Lily's work is an abstract painting inextricably bound to the domestic sphere. Its purple triangle "represents" mother and child (Mrs Ramsay and James in the opening pages), whereas the line she draws down the middle in the finishing scene parallels Mr Ramsay reaching the lighthouse with his two children. She is deeply involved in the life around her, and she can't reach the shape and design she strives for without coming to terms with the

place and people she is connected with: “For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary,” she says while finishing her painting (209). All the time while working on it, she reflects on Mrs Ramsay, her appearance, her movements, her life, in short, the essence of her: “But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything” (209). Lily thinks of places as well as people as “shapes”, and it is “shape” she tries to capture. She emphasises the need to get “the relations of masses, of lights and shadows” right (59). What worries her most is “the problem of space” (186). That “problem” must, it seems, be solved through shape – a key word for Lily as for Woolf herself.

Lily’s struggle obviously reflects the novel at large. We can see this quest for “shaping” in almost all the scenes in the novel, not only in those openly connected to art. Domestic activities are also represented as shapes: Mrs Ramsay’s dinner party, where she serves her *Beuf en Daube*, is the most poignant example of trying to configure disparate people as well as the ingredients into a spatial whole. One may say that Woolf goes further than Fry in fusing the aesthetic and the domestic spheres. His insistence on the difference between “active” and “imaginative” life is contested, and feminized, by Woolf’s emphasis on “shape” as a common denominator between the two spheres.

It is fair to say that by integrating Lily’s painting in her own “visual” composition Woolf has realized the theory Fry never found time to work out: “the influence of Post-Impressionism upon literature” (Woolf 1940: 172). It is hardly a coincidence that in doing this she employs the perspective of a *female* artist, thus sharpening his vision by integrating it in a gendered viewpoint.

The aesthetic thinking conveyed in Lily’s work thus echoes

Fry's, or rather Woolf's spatial application of Fry and the Post-Impressionists. Lily's central line down the middle of her picture, as well as Woolf's famous statement in a letter to Fry on her own work, "I meant nothing by the *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together," seem to draw on Fry's remark in "An Essay of Aesthetics" that creative "unity is due to a balancing of the attractions to the eye about the central line of the picture" (Quick 1985: 567). The word "vision", uttered by Lily as the book's last word, may also be addressed to Fry, cf. his *Vision and Design*, although it is a word frequently applied by Woolf long before his book appeared.

Lily's views are, however, not "*identical* with those of Roger Fry," as John Hawley Roberts maintains (1946: 842, my emphasis). Incidentally, there is just as much which links Lily to a *female* counterpart, namely Vanessa Bell. The interplay between lines and shapes is a recurring feature of both painters – Lily's painting with "its lines running up and across" (225) equals the patterns of diagonals and verticals in Bell's Omega designs. Besides, Lily's struggle in painting a traditional subject – the image of mother and child – without resorting to conventional representations, was something Bell was familiar with (Gillespie 1988: 197). There is of course also the conflict inherent in Lily's position as a female painter, subject to contemptuous remarks like "women can't paint, women can't write" (54), and well-meaning attempts to see her married rather than being a painter.

Lily Briscoe needs to detach herself from the demands of her surroundings in order to paint, whether it is Mrs Ramsay's urge to see her married or Mr Ramsay's demands for emotional support. "So much depends, she thought, upon distance" (207). She is also bound to the domestic sphere in the sense of opposing it: she is female, alone, and an artist;

she embodies the antithesis of Mrs Ramsay's dictum: "People must marry. People must have children" (67).¹³

Lily exhibits post-impressionism, but she also represents the shift in all human relations which Woolf in memoirs and essays locates in life around 1910. The domestic life of the first part of the novel is replaced by an alternative domesticity in the third, with Lily taking Mrs Ramsay's position as the main person, but not her position as hostess and mother "pouring out tea" – cf. the description of family life in Hyde Park Gate. The dominating male has not ceased to exist and exert his influence, however, and the house has remained more or less the same, despite the destruction and decay which is displayed in the short passage between the first and the third part, aptly called "Time Passes". "The house, for all the damage it has sustained, still stands. And despite Mrs Ramsay's death and the failure of her plans, Lily is left to grapple with her sturdy legacy," as Rosner puts it (167). Woolf thus alludes to the fact that the Victorian past lives on in the post-war present. However, the Victorian position is from the very first page crumbling rather than sturdy: Mrs Ramsay's domestic ideas are never fully respected – open doors and banging windows challenge her explicit orders and symbolise a lack of control – and even when her manipulations seem to work, they don't turn out successfully, as in marriages going awry, or not happening at all.

Lily's position on the lawn outside the house reflects her

13 See Whitworth (2005: 115): "By extending the language of aesthetics into the domestic sphere, and thus establishing analogies between Lily and Mrs Ramsay, Woolf is able to suggest that Lily has escaped the restrictions of Mrs Ramsay's life, and yet is simultaneously able to recover something valuable from Mrs Ramsay's life: it is not dismissed as 'merely' homemaking, but is recuperated as an expression of an otherwise frustrated imagination. Mrs Ramsay gave 'form' to the chaos of her family and friend."

ambivalence towards the family life going on around her. It also reflects Woolf's ambiguity towards the domestic space she is dealing with: the masculine upstairs and the feminine downstairs we saw located in the Victorian household of Hyde Park Gate may seem far from the Bohemian shabbiness of the house in *To the Lighthouse*, but the division is still there. The domestic space of Woolf's childhood home is recreated and fictionalized in the description of the Ramsay household – Mr Ramsay representing the “brain” and Mrs Ramsay the “hostess”, and between them, struggling for a room of her own, the single woman artist.¹⁴ Human relations may be about to change, but the demands upon women remain much the same, as do the gender divisions.

Woolf's writing is deeply steeped in the everyday: a dress needs to be mended, remarks about the weather are exchanged, flowers bought. But everyday occurrences are intertwined with perceptions and contradictions of the human mind. Woolf deals with reality as a heterogeneous entity and allows multiple perspectives to inform social practices and interaction. In her memoirs we saw how she embraced versatility and variation – those are qualities integral to her novels as well. Whenever Woolf talks about literature, she inevitably seems to move on to life: “Is life like this? Must literature be like this?,” she asks in “Modern Fiction”, and employs metaphors taken from daily life in order to demonstrate the inadequacies of existing literary conventions when it comes to representing “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (1984: 149).

Woolf's formal experimentation and her views on so-

¹⁴ Although the summer house in *To the Lighthouse* is set in the Hebrides, it is modelled on the Stephen family's house in St. Ives, Talland House. However, the description of the household, and the splits and divisions between family members, draw on the description Woolf gives of 22 Hyde Park Gate in *Moments of Being*.

cial matters are inextricably linked to the development in art, design and aesthetics which she witnessed during these years. But breaking out of “the fog of Victorianism”¹⁵ was harder than she could have anticipated around 1910. *To the Lighthouse* is a seminal testimony to that. On the surface at least, modern art seems to triumph over marriage and sexual threats. And yet: Lily’s painting is in itself subject to change and possible decay: “It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again” (225-26). Like the murals and decorations by the Omega artists, her picture embodies the fugitive, the transient and the contingent, cf. Baudelaire’s famous definition of the modern (1992: 355). It may be cast away, tucked under a sofa, forgotten – be or not be reclaimed again. The core of Lily’s work, Woolf seems to say, is to attain a subjective spatial vision, a perfect “moment of being” independent of the conventions in the culture inherited, though without annulling the past, and equally important, without prompting a new authoritative taste meant to last for centuries.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf draws on Bloomsbury’s formalism, but she also acknowledges the domestic inheritance she initially seems to reject. Thus, Lily’s painting takes place not outside but within the domestic space: “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, it’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (218). Her art, like Woolf’s writing, represents a fusion of aesthetic and everyday issues. It may be called “post-formalism” (Reed 1993: 35), or it may in terms of space simply be called domestic modernism. This article may be

15 The expression is Leonard Woolf’s; see Woolf in Reed 1996: 55.

seen as a contribution to exploring the textual and literary implications of this fusion.

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Dead Time, Empty Spaces: Landscape as Sensibility and Performance

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Landscape, in some form or another, constitutes an intrinsic part of most feature films. It is manifestly there, but the question is do we see it? P. Adams Sitney once labelled landscape the “unconscious issue of film theory” (103), an apposite articulation of the extent to which we fail to notice the presence of this overwhelmingly visual element within the film frame. Bizarrely and inexplicably, it’s as if the inherent inertia of the natural phenomenon has spilled over into the reflection on landscape itself; scholarship on the subject of landscape in film has indeed been slow to emerge. As a matter of fact, the first scholarly volume (in English) specifically and exclusively dedicated to an exploration of this area only appeared in 2006, an anthology of essays edited by Martin Lefebvre and published by Routledge.¹ In the introduction

1 The existence of two monographs on the subject in French does not substantially change the fact that landscape is an under-researched area in cinema studies. See Maurizia Natali, *L’Image-paysage: Iconologie et cinéma* (1996) and Jean Mottet, *L’Invention de la scène américaine: cinéma et paysage* (1998).

to that book, Lefebvre points out that the medium of film reversed the process that gave birth to landscape in the medium of painting. While narrative preceded landscape in Western art, in film history the setting arrived prior to the narrative (Lefebvre, xi). Travelogues and “scenics” were part of the repertoire of early cinema, whereas narrative films did not materialize until the end of the medium’s first decade (Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903). With the advent of storytelling, however, landscape swiftly receded into the background. Taking filmic landscapes seriously may thus be an act of criticism which reconnects us with a notion of cinematicity unburdened by narrative.

Materially present yet conceptually absent, landscape in film has historically been at the service of story space, which effortlessly translates it as setting, location or *mise-en-scène*. Natural landscape is an “agreeable movie performer,” Gilberto Perez contends,

[i]t will lend itself to the pretty pictures of a love story and to the spooky atmosphere of a gothic story, to the grand vistas of a Western and to the thrilling sights of a cliffhanger. Yet landscape in these roles is not engaged as an actual place, a stretch of the world we inhabit. Whether relegated to the background or brought forward as a spectacle, it is made to play a part in a fiction and made subservient to that fiction (218).

Unlike the arts of painting and photography, where it is of course a major genre, the art of film has – as Perez notes – tended to reduce landscape to a narrative effect. Intriguingly, a recent spate of art films have challenged this conventional subordination, allowing the setting to escape its narrative confinement in order to emerge as the animating force of the work. In some of the key films by late modernist directors such as Theo Angelopoulos, Tsai Ming-liang, Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Carlos Reygadas and Bruno Dumont,

landscape is conceived as a medium in its own right, to use W.J.T. Mitchell's term, precariously located at the intersection of technology, ecology, aesthetics and topographical reality. In asking not only what moral and existential significance landscape takes on in the context of art cinema, but also, more generally, how filmic landscape may be approached as a critical and theoretical category, my analyses will gravitate toward a set of recurring formal patterns – the long take, the tableaux, ellipsis, dedramatisation and, above all, the *temps mort* – that collectively engender a new poetics of landscape in the cinema.

In this article, I suggest that landscape, while not exactly constitutive of something akin to a film genre, has begun to slide increasingly into view in a number of recent arthouse features. Here, landscape enacts a process that I would like to refer to as *entroping*, the mobilization of “empty spaces” (such as stretches of wilderness or urban wastelands) as signification units that perform a conceptual function which escapes the narrative proper. Landscape in this sense visualizes abstract notions such as the *act of appearing*, *slow seeing*, and the *phenomenology of inertia*. When landscape ceases to be a mere backdrop for narrative events, it is performed rather than simply depicted. At the same time, this process renders cinematic space as a presentation, as something to be experienced in and of itself.

To make this distinction between space as representation and space as presentation more intelligible, one might helpfully invoke Gilles Deleuze's well-known master categories of the movement-image and the time-image as analogous structures. The cinema of the movement-image, Deleuze argues, subordinates time to action, in the sense that the former becomes an effect of the latter. The cinema of the time-image, on the other hand, gives the viewer direct perceptual or experiential access to time. Similarly, the performance of

landscape in recent art cinema offers us direct access to an experience of spatiality otherwise habitually obfuscated by the omnipresence of narrative.

Landscape – a condensed history

In the medium of painting, landscape was liberated from its narrative confinement by 16th and 17th century artists like Joachim Patinir, Albrecht Altdorfer, Annibale Carracci, El Greco, Claude Poussin and Claude Lorrain. And art historians, at least since Ruskin, have laboured to determine the explanations for this historical transformation of landscape from narrative setting to artistic genre.² Some have suggested that the shift may be attributed to changes in art's social function during the Renaissance, to the rise of linear perspective and the appearance of the concept of the Artist. The development of landscape painting may also have been bolstered by the revival of pastoral literature from Boccaccio to Milton (along with translations of Theocritus, Ovid, Virgil, Pliny and Horace) and by the philosophy of Renaissance Humanism and its conception of God's presence in nature. This was also a time of scientific evolution, of travel (the discovery of the New World), and of mercantilism (with its new forms of land management). The word "landscape" entered into the English language in the 17th century, and is derived from either the Middle Dutch "landschap," the Flemish "lantskip," or the German "Landschaft." Etymologically, the suffix (-scape) means "to give form or shape;" the process of moulding space, in other words, is integral to landscape as a concept. The crucial insight to be had here is that a notion of artificiality, of constructedness, is already in place as a defining

² See for instance Jacob Wamberg's *Landscape as World Picture* (2009).

element of the term. Landscape is thus not a spatial given, but a discursively enacted space.

With Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume, man's situatedness in the natural world became the basis of the experience of reality, and the apotheosis of nature was evidently palpable in Rousseau and in the Idealism of Friedrich von Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. His premise that untouched nature is inherently moral would permeate the fabric of the Romantic cultural imagination which produced the genre of American landscape painting in the 19th century (as would also, perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime). As Paula Marantz Cohen and others have claimed, the American West became a symbolically fertile topos for constructing a national identity that was distinctly non-European (73). Nature as depicted in American landscape painting of the mid-19th century and onward was more tempestuous and more untamed than its Old World counterpart. For Thomas Cole, the first practitioner of the Hudson River School and the acknowledged architect of the genre, the American wilderness as filtered through the artist's imagination represented unfringeable authenticity. The relation between individual and landscape is characterized by compatibility; the latter harmoniously subsumes the former in an integrated totality. In historian Frederick Jackson Turner's epochal speech on the frontier, first presented at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in July 1893, this relation was conveyed in dynamic terms as a movement in and out of civilization that became no less than constitutive of national identity.

Turner's lecture almost coincided with the birth of the movies, a medium that, as Cohen puts it, would soon serve to render the nation's vital connection to the land as "a mode of representation suited to express it long after the frontier had closed" (81). No genre epitomized this representational poli-

tics better than the Western, the most effortlessly cinematic of all genres. In his work for Biograph, D.W. Griffith treated landscape as an emblematic frame for episodes of heroic action; whereas the westerns of William S. Hart achieved a greater sense of unity of character and landscape. The setting had now become an extension of character, a perspective adopted by successors like James Cruze and John Ford. "The visualization of landscape in the service of character", Cohen writes, "was one of the great innovations of silent film" (106). Not least through Ford's classic westerns, the landscape of the American Southwest attained a level of iconicity which ultimately made its indexical connection to the land less significant than its aesthetic authority as pure image. But even this landscape – the magnificent Monument Valley, which seemed like a result of cinema more than of geology – could not really challenge the relegation of landscape to the margins of the narrative. Landscape remained in the background even when it was visually foregrounded.

The new landscape film

This inattention can partly be ascribed to the hermeneutic interests of the critics, quite obviously, as the thematic emphasis of any aesthetic text to some extent is defined (and vindicated) by whatever element that happens to preoccupy the viewer or reader at any given moment. There is, nonetheless, evidence to suggest that landscape has increasingly escaped its function as mere setting to become perhaps the principal subject of a film. Ordinarily, landscape is conceived as an iconographic element native to specific genres (above all the Western), rather than as a genre in its own right.

The art cinemas and new waves of the 60s and 70s seem to signal a change in some filmmakers' perception of landscape. In the work of European directors like Ingmar Bergman,

Miklós Jancsó, Andrzej Wajda, Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky, landscape became more prominent, accentuated stylistically and explored existentially. Many of the key films of the so-called New Hollywood Cinema movement – *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper 1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson 1970), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman 1971), to name just a few – also demonstrated a keener intellectual and emotional investment in the expressive possibilities of landscape. This new awareness has persisted and is perhaps more powerfully present in contemporary art cinema than ever before. More or less the entire *œuvre* of Theo Angelopoulos is centered on the phenomenology of landscape, as are films by Carlos Reygadas (for instance *Silent Light* 2007), Aleksandr Sokurov (*Mother and Son* 1997), Bruno Dumont (*Twenty-nine Palms* 2003), and Andrei Zvyagintsev (*The Banishment* 2007). Less cohesive historically but no less influential is the thematization of landscape in certain individual films like Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) – much misunderstood at the time of its release but since heralded as possibly the foremost reference point for the landscape film – Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984).

What does it mean, then, to foreground and thematize landscape in the fiction film? What are the epistemological rewards? As Henrik Gustafsson has recently argued, landscape “enables new perspectives and areas of analysis and interpretation in film studies” (12). In this sense, considering landscape may have fruitful ramifications for the accumulation of knowledge within the discipline of cinema studies. Another implication of studying filmic landscapes may be a reconfiguration of the distribution of narrative emphasis and point of view, a rethinking of the relationship between characters, space and action in ecological terms, perhaps along the lines of the inhumanist aesthetics promulgated by Robinson

Jeffers' *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1948). In a discussion of Jean Renoir's 1936 feature *A Day in the Country*, Gilberto Perez evokes such a relational inversion, suggesting that

A Day in the Country is a rare film that gives primacy to the landscape and lets it have a life of its own. It does not assign it a role and a meaning defined by the fiction. Rather it has the fiction define itself and its characters against the character of a landscape that was there first (218).

Renoir's film, according to Perez, succeeds in "[f]reeing the landscape from the dominance of fiction" (220). This, I take it, should not lead us into thinking that landscape provides a documentary foundation for the narrative, a kind of flipside to the fictitious, because cinema is a transfiguring machine that inexorably serves to fictionalize the scenic just as readily as the human or the agentive. The point is not that landscape in any way elides the fictional but rather that it adds something to it and so enriches our experience of the work as a whole.

Conceptions of landscape

Critics from diverse backgrounds have made numerous attempts to understand the nature of landscape as a phenomenon, or concept. An early appreciation of the form's signifying force can be detected in the theoretical writings of Sergei Eisenstein. The renowned montage director found landscape to be "the freest element of film, the least burdened with servile, narrative tasks, and the most flexible in conveying moods, emotional states, and spiritual experiences" (217). It is somewhat fascinating to see how Eisenstein thinks about certain narrative functions in terms of "servility," as if storytelling was a less palatable component of cinema and one that could only be secondary to aspects that were perceived

to be more exclusively cinematic. Landscape, he says, is “a complex bearer of the possibilities of a plastic interpretation of emotions” (355). Lefebvre links Eisenstein’s understanding of landscape to the filmmaker’s much discussed notion of attraction, as both seem to be in conflict with narrative.

While the tenor of Eisenstein’s conception of landscape might be called psychological, subsequent commentators like J.B. Jackson – founding editor of the *Landscape* magazine – and Simon Schama – author of the monumental *Landscape and Memory* (1996) – promote a cultural or sociocultural conception of landscape. Jackson admits that he is unable to regard landscape as a scenic or ecological category; instead, he sees it as “a political or cultural entity, changing in the course of history” (153). Schama affirms this view when he insists that landscapes are culture “before they are nature” (61). An ideological conception of landscape, furthermore, is offered by Denis Cosgrove, whereas the geographer Donald W. Meinig presents yet another conception of landscape, which is at the core symbolic. Actual landscapes are transformed by the movies into symbolic ones, he suggests, three prominent archetypes of which would be what he refers to as the New England Village, the Main Street of Middle America, and California Suburbia. Finally, there is W.J.T. Mitchell, who employs what could be called a medial conception of landscape. As already noted, Mitchell asserts that landscape is not an artistic genre but a medium “of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other.” In this respect, he continues, landscape is like money, “good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value” (5).

Landscape as sensibility, performance, duration

The truth is of course that all these different conceptions of landscape – the psychological, the cultural, the ideological, the symbolic and the medial – are equally pertinent. More often than not, they also probably co-exist within the same textual artifact. All these ways of approaching landscape as a formal category across multiple media and art forms (maybe with the exception of Mitchell's) belong within what is essentially a semiotic register of interpretation. The landscapes of art history, literature and film are by nature aesthetic forms, so how could they not be cultural, ideological or symbolic? What we know about the function and meaning of landscape needs to be construed as something more specific and precise than that. One proposal that I would like to make here is that landscape be considered in terms of what it *is* – that is, a sensibility – and what it *does* – that is, a performance.

Let us start with the latter. My hypothesis is this: since the cinema routinely turns landscape into the setting for its narrative action, we tend to take extra notice of those cases where there is what one might call a surplus of landscape. That is, when the space any given film devotes to images of the landscape is demonstrably in excess of what is narratively required, or motivated, the film has created a redundancy of landscape that can only be explained by going beyond the world of narrative. In films like *Twentynine Palms* (Dumont 2003), *The Weeping Meadow* (Angelopoulos 2004) and *Silent Light* (Reygadas 2007), the landscape threatens to engulf the entire diegesis; it is certainly no longer in the background but dominates the screen both visually and conceptually. Doubly accentuated, landscape in these films takes on a dimension of the performative, as if the narrative was a gallery and the landscape its exhibition.

Mitchell has argued that landscape is a “fetishized commod-

ity,” an object to be consumed (tourism, souvenirs and postcards) (15), but this observation seems to reduce it to a mostly ornamental function ill suited to account for its indeterminate status in art movies like the ones referred to here. Films like *Twenty-nine Palms* and *Silent Light* are hardly meant for consumption, their depiction of landscape much less so. Could it be that landscape – whose refractory uncommunicativeness makes it impossible to possess – is that which consumes us, the viewers? For someone like Jean-Luc Nancy, landscape begins “when it absorbs or dissolves all presences into itself” (58). It is what “opens onto the unknown [...] place as the opening onto a taking place of the unknown” (59). Nancy’s abstruse remark is suggestive, I think, of an underlying performative property that militates against the notion of framing landscape as object or commodity. If landscape effects an opening, a passage or gateway of sorts, it must mean that it is an active force, doing things rather than having things done to it. But how? What are its modes of operation?

Landscape can also be conceptualized as a particular sensibility, a rarefied articulation of values that cannot be conveyed by the narrative alone, and this might be its *modus operandi*. While there is no denying that filmic landscapes communicate different things depending on the context, what does indeed remain constant – I surmise – is the relationship between duration, space and temporal continuity. Herein lies the sensibility with which landscape is infused. Before the invention of cinema, the stillness and immobility of landscape were captured by the similarly motionless technologies of painting and then photography. Object and medium seemed suitably aligned, perfectly matched. The birth of film altered this relationship. Now the static quality of landscape was to be captured by a system of representation that was itself dynamic, in the process enacting a startling confrontation between mobility and immobility. One of the questions

Lefebvre poses in his introduction to *Landscape and Film* is how the cinematic landscape “relate[s] to the still landscapes of the pictorial tradition and notions such as the picturesque or the sublime?” (xii). One answer is that landscape as both form and sensibility was fundamentally changed by the cinematic. Film introduced an element of actual duration to landscape, just as landscape in turn brought a sense of immobility to the moving image. The filmed landscape is thus a paradoxical event: the animation of the spatially inert by temporal means, which is then at the same time also the paralyzation of the temporally animated by spatial means. What this paradox materializes is a stoic sensibility that negates what Elissa Marder has termed modernity’s *temporal disorders*. Her argument is that modernity is not so much a historical period as “a way of experiencing time” which entails a loss of continuity and unity (Marder 4). Landscape as it is used in Angelopoulos, Reygadas, Dumont and others channels a different rhythm, one that sidesteps the frenetic pulse of modernity and restores to experience a measure of stillness and tranquillity. In this dedramatized cinema of landscapes and empty spaces, it seems that time has to be killed off altogether before the disorders it produces can be overcome. In filmic terms, the word for this state of affairs is the *temps mort*.

Dead time, empty spaces

This concept, which translates as “dead time,” indicates a pause in the diegesis, a stretch of “empty” time where the camera stays behind after the action has moved on. Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Ordet* (1955) is sometimes credited with being the progenitor of this technique, but it is above all Michelangelo Antonioni who is responsible for introducing and employing it in an aesthetically consistent manner. In his

book on the director, critic Sam Rohdie identifies the *temps mort* as “[the] place at which the narrative dies, at which the camera becomes distracted” (51). The temporary hiatus which ensues marks, he says

a place in which another, non-narrative interest develops [...] These are places which are openly non-narrativised, of a pictorial and visual interest which suddenly takes hold, causes the narrative to err, to wander, momentarily to dissolve. They are among the most interesting places in Antonioni’s films, at which everything and nothing takes place (51).

In a medium ontologically committed to movement, nothing, of course, draws as much attention to itself as the lack of it, stasis. The stylistic bracketing of immobile passages in film may therefore be grasped as a deeply self-conscious, performative act, and what is being performed is nothing less than the rather abstract notion of duration. Dead time and empty spaces – it is through these occurrences that duration gets visualized. Historically, the poetics of dedramatisation is a modernist invention and a vehicle for the representation of emotions such as boredom, enervation and anomie. Its cinematic breakthrough was Roberto Rossellini’s *Voyage to Italy* (1953), a film that, to cite David Bordwell, was capable of “redefin[ing] what could count as action” (153) (the literary precursors of these sentiments were for instance Alberto Moravia’s *Time of Indifference* (1929) and Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938)). The long takes and the instances of *temps mort* in Antonioni and later in Angelopoulos developed this poetics into a distinct and immediately recognizable rhetorical strategy which resurfaced in film after film. And what this evacuation of narrative action from the film frame in turn produced was an abundance of landscaped space that seemed to stare back at the viewer.

*Tropologies of inertia, slowness
and appearing: Three cases*

The question is: what do we make of this vast, unyielding expanse of land which completely saturates the screen, shot by shot, scene by scene? In his book simply called *America*, Jean Baudrillard describes his encounter with the California wasteland in the following way:

The natural deserts tell me what I need to know about the deserts of the sign. They teach me to read surface and movement and geology and immobility at the same time. They create a vision expurgated of all the rest: cities, relationships, events, media. They induce in me an exalting vision of the desertification of signs and men. They form the mental frontier where the projects of civilization run into the ground. They are outside the sphere and circumference of desire. We should always appeal to the deserts against the excess of signification, of intention and pretention in culture. They are our mythic operator (63).

Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* takes place in this same environment, "where all that is most significant takes place", as Edward Abbey writes in his *Desert Solitaire* (330). Nested deep within the Mojave desert, the city of Twentynine Palms (population 14,764) is situated halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. The town was settled by gold miners in the late 19th century, and is home to the Joshua Tree National Park and the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, which is the world's largest marine base. Shot on location in and around this city, Dumont's film probes the growing complexities of a romantic relationship in a state of deterioration. David, the male protagonist, is a magazine photographer scouting for locations for a photo shoot. Accompanying him is his French girlfriend Katie. Apart from surveying the surroundings, they pass their time bickering and having sex.

Toward the end of the film, they are attacked by a gang of marines, who rape David in front of his girlfriend, a grisly act of emasculation that clearly alludes to John Boorman's 1972 classic *Deliverance*. Having made it back to their motel room after the traumatic event, David suffers a complete mental collapse and savagely stabs Katie to death on their bed.

The director himself has called *Twentynine Palms* an "experimental horror film". Like his previous features *La Vie de Jésus* (1997) and *L'Humanité* (1999), it has predictably been tagged "austere" and "Bressonian," and this skeletal, minimalist narrative with very little dialogue but plenty of frontal nudity really is a nasty movie which, to boot, features some images of sudden, revolting violence. However, when it doesn't traffic in shock effects, it can be profoundly boring, but – incongruously – it is boring in a captivating sense. Audiences nowadays have a high tolerance for extreme representations in the cinema. Where their capabilities as viewers are most severely tested is not in the realm of graphic depictions of aggressive action, but in that where there is a conspicuous absence of *any* action. Far more taxing than watching characters being shot or beaten to death are the protracted stretches in which the narrative comes to a halt, the film itself becoming sluggish and inert. Few phenomena in the film world are as inherently provocative as the Akermanesque scenarios in which nothing much seems to happen.

Perhaps this sense of outrage incited by slow-moving films is due to the perception that – to recapture what I touched upon a little earlier – cinema, as a system of moving images, must require narratives that are equally vigorous. Since material immobility is an ontological condition of media such as painting and photography, for instance, it may be that diegetic paralysis is less unacceptable there than it is in the medium of film. That being said, the cinema of lethargy is at least as old as the post-war art film tradition, and it has continued

to flourish in the early years of the 21st century. No less transgressive than the work of a Gaspar Noé or a Michael Haneke, the architecture of monotony in the films of Bruno Dumont, for instance, projects a different negative poetics, which, as we shall see, labours to supplant the orthodoxies of a literary, plot-driven cinema with a cinema of gestures, bodies and landscapes. A purer cinema, perhaps, and one less vulnerable to Peter Greenaway's infamous charge that the first hundred years of the medium's existence had mostly produced "illustrated text and recorded theater."³

Mexican director Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Light* (2007) is bookended by two astonishing sequences, a symphony of patience, where the camera, relying on time-lapse photography, documents the subtle transition from night to daylight and from day to nighttime respectively. Shot on location in a Mennonite community in northern Mexico, and using only non-professional actors, the film's slender plot charts the moral anguish of its main character Johan, a farmer, as he is torn between his frail wife Esther and his lover Marianne. *Silent Light*, which alludes to Dreyer's *Ordet*, moves at an almost excruciatingly slow pace, yet it is more expressive of the complexities and depths of human emotion than virtually any film you have ever seen. As Kaja Silverman has claimed, certain visual texts have the capacity "to reeducate the look" (5), and Reygadas's movie is certainly that kind of text. Relentlessly receptive even to the smallest change of sentiment and tone, *Silent Light* follows through on its initial figuration, the process of becoming, and cultivates what I am tempted to call a slow mode of seeing. This also appeared to have been the operational procedure for the film's production, as

3 Peter Greenaway, "Toward a Re-Invention of Cinema", Cinema Militans Lecture 28 September 2003, <http://petergreenaway.org.uk/essay3.htm>

Reygadas at one point decided to delay the shoot for weeks to wait for the torrent of heavy rain that he needed for one shot in the film.

If Antonioni's cinema provides the template for the staging of the *temps mort*, it is that of Tarkovsky that showed filmmakers how psychic landscapes can be sculpted into external ones; or better still, how they become indistinguishable from one another.⁴ In the work of Angelopoulos, a filmmaker quite adverse to the idea that the images he crafts contain any kind of symbolism, this is mostly how it goes. His monumental compositions seem too intimidating, too overpowering, for any conception one might have of natural landscapes. Although his films are shot on location, their tableaux come across more as mindscapes. Always concerned first and foremost with the problem of memory and the rituals of mourning, Angelopoulos's cinema may be understood – and this is my hypothesis – as a sensibility somehow related to Hans Gumbrecht's notion of presence and Martin Seel's *aesthetics of appearing*.

In his *Production of Presence* (2004), Gumbrecht explores the notion of “presence” as a dimension of our experience with cultural phenomena that cannot be accounted for by any politics of interpretation. Aesthetic objects and events have a sensorial impact that cannot be adequately captured by hermeneutic practice. On a similar note, Seel argues that aesthetic experience has at its core the quality of immediacy; aesthetics begins not with a sense of being, or mimesis, but with the act of appearing. Angelopoulos's work seems to resonate intriguingly with Gumbrecht's and Seel's terms, saturated as his films are by sensuous and enigmatic visual compositions that may seem to require some sort of decoding but which ul-

4 Consult for example Robert Bird: *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (2008).

timately escape interpretation and invite a different and more corporeally based mode of perception. Angelopoulos himself, for instance, has always adamantly denied that his recurring motifs and tableaux could be approached as symbols. The contemporary landscape films, and those of Angelopoulos particularly, de-narrativize and de-semioticize space, and in so doing encourage a kind of looking that puts experience over representation.

While this assertion, evidently, would have to be explored elsewhere, there is a sense in which this cinema of inertia and slow seeing captures in aesthetic form the alleged shift in criticism from representation to presentation discussed by (among others) Keith Moxey. In an article in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Moxey writes that “the contemporary focus on the presence of the visual object, how it engages with the viewer in ways that stray from the cultural agendas for which it was conceived and which may indeed affect us in a manner that sign systems fail to regulate, asks us to attend to the status of the image as a *presentation*” (133). The opening scene of Angelopoulos’s *The Weeping Meadow*, for instance – a *plan séquence* showing a group of refugees from Odessa slowly emerging from the sea – spatializes the process of appearing; the emphasis is not on action but on the torpid emergence of it, that part of temporality that would ordinarily be left out of a conventionally narrative film.

Conclusion

While landscape is a major genre in painting, then, in the medium of film it has been secondary to everything which takes place in the foreground of the frame: narrative action, dialogue, the human body etc. In film criticism it has likewise remained a terra incognita. These elements, after all, are quotable, whereas landscape is not. It could be hypothesized that

one cause of this aesthetic and critical erasure is the lingering hold that the literary and theatrical still exert over the fiction film. Had the influence from the other visual arts been as dominant as that from the 19th century novel and the so-called well-made play, landscape may have evolved to become a separate genre in the cinema as well. To borrow a term from the historian Martin Jay, the denigration of landscape in much classical cinema could simultaneously be seen as a symptom of the (paradoxical) denigration of the visual in this tradition. Studying landscape is thus a way of re-introducing and re-consolidating the pictorial aspect of cinema.

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Textual Action in W.C. Williams' *Paterson*

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If poetry and fiction in the 19th century were largely dominated by temporally organized forms, one may say that the 20th century turned to more spatial forms of thinking and expression. Certainly there was no reinstatement of the fixed, stable, hierarchical and coherent *place* of premodern man, but rather an exploration of a dynamic, changing, polytopic and open-ended *space*, a spatio-temporal or – to borrow Michail Bakhtin's concept – chronotopic universe. Indeed, much of the momentum of the American poetry of the 1920s and onwards is indebted to these new aesthetic tendencies. Thus Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, often considered to be the two main figures in modern American poetry, jolted their readers into poetic worlds where “kinetics”, “tension” and “process” are the key vectors of poetic organization.

In his influential essay “Projective Verse” from 1950, the poet Charles Olson, who hailed Pound and Williams as the very fathers of the new “open poem”, demanded that “every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the

image, the sound, the sense) must be taken as participants in the kinetic of the poem” (Olson 1997: 243), thus in many ways echoing what Williams had already laid out in his avant-garde work *Spring and All* from 1923.¹ With its non-linear and non-unitary organization, its experimental and seemingly improvisational kind of writing, its antagonistic movements and unresolved tensions between poetry and prose, this work is indeed highly illustrative of Williams’ quest for a poetical language that seeks, by means of the creative acts of liberation, to reach beyond any determinate systems or structures. Based upon his idea of a poetry that has its supreme goal in the “creation of new forms, new names for experience” (Williams 1986: 203), the poem itself, Williams claims, must be constantly willing to risk undermining its own thematic and formal coherence and unity. Indeed, a poem is “a field of action”, “a moving process” (Williams 1969: 280, 306), he states on different occasions, implicitly pointing to the dynamic principle of liberation and creation, the *textual action* generated by the tensions and conflicting movements in his work.² Even if Williams’ poetological assertions are notoriously elusive, the main idea is nonetheless suggested: the “field of action” is based upon how the imaginative poet experiments with, “expands” or even “attacks” the conventional “structures” of poetic diction (the sonnet or the iambic pentameter, for instance), making the poem the expression both of a spontaneous creation and of virtual possibilities;

1 The ideas of this “new” poem might go back beyond Pound and Williams. In her book on Arthur Rimbaud’s *Nachleben* in American and British poetry, Marjorie Perloff has shown the influence of both Cubist aesthetics (namely Apollinaire’s article “Méditations Esthétique. Les Peintres cubistes”) and Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* on *Spring and All*. According to Perloff, Pound was also influenced by Rimbaud (Perloff 1981).

2 For instance in the essay “The Poem as a Field of Action” from 1948 (Williams 1969: 287).

what Williams, in an ambivalent phrase to which I will later return, calls “hints toward composition”.³ This poetics of textual action, of process and suspense, of superimposable planes and heterogenous elements in non-hierarchical, arabesque and multi-layered space, is probably most energetically brought to the fore in Williams’ largest work, the long epic poem *Paterson*.

The structure of Paterson

When the first book of *Paterson* was published in 1946, Williams added an explanatory remark, an “Author’s Note”, in order to point out some directions in his vast project:

This is the first part of a long poem in four parts – that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody – if imaginatively conceived – any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.⁴

In this sense *Paterson* is not just a poem about a well-known city in New Jersey. It is also about a human being, a poet, also called Paterson, strangely interwoven with the life and history of the city and its inhabitants. Because of its vast range, its length and loose organization, most commentators regard *Paterson* as a modern (poetic) epic, and place it in the proximity of Pound’s *The Cantos*, Hart Crane’s *The*

3 “I said ‘hints toward composition’. This does not mean realism in the language. What it does mean, I think, is ways of managing the language, new ways. Primarily it means to me opportunity to expand the structure, the basis, the actual making of the poem” (Williams 1969, 290f).

4 All quotations of *Paterson* refer to the text-critical edition of Christopher MacGowan: Williams 1992. Here Williams 1992: 253.

Bridge, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Neruda's *Canto General* or Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*.⁵ Williams replaces the rigid compositional organization of narrative sequence of the classic epic with extremely loose narrative threads and an episodic and fragmentary texture more adequate to the experience of modern man. Even a brief glance at the visual aspects of the text lays bare its diversity: to the versified parts, which display many different patterns, Williams added several prose passages, some of them excerpts from newspapers and from books on various topics, for instance on the history of the town or on its people; even extracts from his own correspondence were included (preparing for the work took Williams thirty years, and finally composing it another seven years). The result of this compositional procedure is a puzzling patchwork of different linguistic modes and literary or non-literary genres seemingly without a thematic or a formal "surface network of articulate connections" (Breslin 1970: 173). Yet the poem displays several *Leitmotive* and recurrent figures. To mention only a few: the Passaic Falls and the Passaic River; the rock; divorce vs. marriage; walking; flowers; modern city life vs. nature; the fire; sounds and hearing. Arguably, the most important of these are probably the Falls and the river. Williams himself underlined the significance of the latter in his "Statement" about the poem from 1951:

Paterson has a definite history associated with the beginnings of the United States. It has besides a central feature, the Passaic Falls which as I began to think about it became more and more the lucky burden of what I wanted to say. [...] From the beginning I decided there would be four books following the course of the river whose life seemed more and

5 For discussions on this question, see for instance Lloyd (1980: 241-284); Schmidt (1995: passim).

more to resemble my own life as I more and more thought of it: the river above the Falls, the catastrophe of the Falls itself, the river below the Falls and the entrance at the end into the great sea (Williams 1992: xiii).

The river then, it seems, is a structural and thematic device, temporal and spatial at the same time, for the whole of the poem. But more important than the alleged resemblance between the poet's life and the Passaic is the connection Williams points to between the stream and language: "The noise of the Falls seemed to me to be a language which we were and are seeking and my search, as I looked about, became a struggle to interpret and use this language. This is the substance of the poem" (Williams 1992: xiii). Even if some of the analytic criticism on *Paterson* has mentioned the seminal role of the Falls and the Passaic, it is noteworthy that it has only marginally explored the ways in which the river can be said to contribute directly to the structure or the rhetorical form of the poem.⁶ Therefore, in my reading of some passages from the first book of *Paterson*, I shall explore *the specific language* of the "pouring / waters" (Williams 1992: 18), and focus on the work's textual action from the perspective of the poem's descriptions of the complex dynamics of the waterfall. The stream, I propose, is not a unifying textual structure – which is a reading suggested by Williams himself in his "Statement" and by some of his critics (Conarroe 1970: passim; Perloff 1981: 148) – but rather a figure of

6 There are some book-length studies of *Paterson*. For its complexity and sophistication the deconstructive approach of Riddel 1974 is certainly central in the Williams scholarship; Conarroe 1970, Sankkey 1971 and Lloyd 1980 are also elegant and very useful. Other distinguished contributions giving specific attention to *Paterson* are found in the following books: Wagner 1966; Breslin 1970; Mazzaro 1973; Bernstein 1980; Whitaker 1968; Whitaker 1989. Conarroe 1970 is the only one, however, to consider the river theme important enough to treat it in a separate chapter.

non-unity, of complexity and difference. I shall argue that the poem is patterned on the image of the river as a disharmonious, multilayered and unclosable space. Moreover, by means of its inherently flexible and dynamic, disintegrating and disseminating force, it not only emblemizes Williams' idea of the fluidity of poetical language, but is illustrative of the defamiliarizing and – in Williams' view – rejuvenating and never ending power of poetical language. The river is, as poetry should be, "Something else, something else the same" (Williams 1992: 32).

Streams, floods and waterfalls hold an important place throughout Williams' poetry. The river was the main theme in his very first poetic attempt, a long romantic poem in Keats' vein, unfortunately destroyed by the young poet himself (Williams 1958: 82). It is noteworthy that the river is still among the principal figures in his more mature works. In the early poem that is often considered to be a farewell to his romantic ideals, namely "The Wandering" from 1914, the river is particularly important. This long poem unfolds the gradual disavowal and unlearning of romanticism and the initiation into the harshness of sheer reality itself. The young I-poet is led by an old woman, both muse and *cicerone*, half whore, half midwife, an "old harlot of greatest lusting- / Indiscriminate reveller in all ages-" (Williams 1986: 30), to "Passaic, that filthy river" (Williams 1986: 34), where she urges the flood to receive and embrace him. And the I recounts:

Then the river began to enter my heart
Eddying back cool and limpid
Clear to the beginning of days!
But with the rebound it leaped again forward-
Muddy then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its filthiness,

animate a thousand automatons. Who because they
neither know their sources nor the sills of their
disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly
for the most part,
locked and forgot in their desires – unroused.

(Williams 1992: 6)

This narrative of the city and its inhabitants clearly illustrates Williams' critical stance towards modern civilization, which has been commented on a good deal (Conarroe 1970: passim; Whittemore 1975: 281). The inhabitants – or “automatons”, as they are called – endure the estrangement of instrumentalist and reified existence; they are seemingly foreign to their natural environment, walking unconsciously “outside of their bodies aimlessly” and “locked and forgot in their desires – unroused.” As Michael B. Bernstein has pointed out, the task that Williams sets for his poem is to remove the barrier that separates man from nature: “Throughout four books, *Paterson* enacts a nostalgic search for a natural language, an idiom which can recover the lost innocence of full communication between landscape and mind, and between artist and world” (Bernstein 1980: 213). However, this romantic idea of man's estrangement from nature and from natural language, and the urge, expressed by the poet, to restore them to their presumed primordial unity, is by no means the whole story of Williams' poem. Indeed, if one looks closer at his general poetics, as sketched in the prose parts of *Spring and All* as well as in letters and essays, one will find that Williams not only fervently dismisses traditional and romantic views on the therapeutic and salutary effects of nature, but also (and more fundamentally) endorses a poetry in which the romantic tendency to anthropomorphize nature is constantly checked by a language that seeks to avoid all traces of subjective projection and colouring of

the object.⁷ Williams, in fact, conceives of poetical language not as a means of making his objects congruous with the poetical mind, i.e. intellectually graspable, but rather as a way of preserving their original foreignness and “thingness”, to produce a reality not dictated by the subordinating and conceptual power of thought, but evolving out of the concreteness of the things themselves. In the passage immediately following the one quoted above, in what is one of the poem’s most acute poetological statements, this “realistic” view of language is energetically brought into focus:

–Say it, no ideas but in things–
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident–
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained–
secret – into the body of the light!

(Williams 1992: 6f)

What the poem means by “no ideas but in things” is that the poetical mind should not permeate the objects in the sense of giving them an anthropomorphic form, but rather that the things themselves, through their unembellished, non-idealized or “split” character, are allowed to escape the totalizing subjective gaze. In a gesture reminiscent of “The Wandering”, where the I immerses itself in the filthy river of reality, Williams claims that the things themselves must be acknowledged,

7 The best introduction to the general poetological thinking of Williams is beyond doubt found in the indispensable essays by one of the strongest advocates of Williams’ poetry, J. Hillis Miller; a phenomenological version (1965) as well as a more deconstructive one (1985). Miller doesn’t dwell on *Paterson* in these famous articles, nor does he do so, to my knowledge, in any of his other texts on Williams.

not in their conventional and stereotyped appearance, but through the medium of “splits”, “furrows”, “crease”, “mottle” and “stains”. However, this idea of a sensual language patterned on the concreteness of things is only practicable from a linguistic point of view when language itself breaks loose from its conventional syntax. There must be a “cracking up of phrases which have stopped the mind”,⁸ he says in one of his poetological texts, and the same view is elaborated in *Paterson*, where language constantly revokes and disrupts itself, and where the poet proclaims, in Book Four: “Dissonance (if you are interested) leads to discovery” (Williams 1992: 175).⁹ In fact, when Conarroe speaks of Williams’ quest in *Paterson* for a “redeeming’ language” (Conarroe 1970: 6), one should hasten to add that this redemption can only be reached through a language that acquires dynamism and energy on the basis of its own violence and “jagged pattern”. In the central poem “Catastrophic Birth” from *The Wedge* (1944), the importance of violence is unequivocally stressed: “By violence lost, recaptured by violence / violence alone opens the shell of the nut. // [...] Each age brings new calls upon violence / for new rewards, variants of the old” (Williams 2001: 55f.). Williams, in fact, is devising a *new* poetry in which energy is released through the kinetics achieved by abrupt and radical configurations and unprecedented intertwinements of different word-units. But this new poetry can only come into being to the degree that the poetry itself, as he says in the aforementioned essay “Poetry as a Field of Action”, is willing to “expand” and “attack” the structures that underlie its composition (Williams 1969: 291). Only through the violent

8 C.W. Williams, “How to Write”, in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* IV, quoted from Miller (1965: 296).

9 Williams’ poetry is a very good illustration of the concept of poetic defamiliarization developed by the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky. See also Perloff 1981: 115f.

destructions of compositional schemes and formal grids can the poem hope to turn into a virulent and open-ended, unpredictable space, or rather a “field” of textual action. Instead of privileging the homogeneity and unity of the composition, Williams pleads for the improvisational principle of “hints towards composition”, i.e. the poet’s attention to uncertain and evocative signals of possible routes of creation. In this sense, underlying Williams’ idea of textual action is his notion of the provisional character of every semantic and formal position. Textual action thus consists in a constant unsettling of every fixity of meaning and structure. Or in other words, the poet has to change and destroy in order to create.

In *Paterson*, this violence of poetical language, liberating the word-things from their conceptual fixations, is epitomized by the river, and more specifically by the dynamism of the waterfall. In the next passage of the poem, Williams explicitly introduces the connection between poetic language and the waterfall:

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields,
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—
the river comes pouring in above the city
and crashes from the edge of the gorge
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

(What common language to unravel?
. . . combed into straight lines
from that rafter of a rock’s
lip.)

(Williams 1992: 7)

Whereas in the first passage of the book, Williams had pointed to the inhabitants of *Paterson* as mere “automatons” and

Paterson himself as “eternally asleep”, here he introduces the Passaic as an instance of sheer, all-pervading action and violence. In the topography of Paterson, then, the river stands out as *the* performative agent, confronting the somnolent passivity of its inhabitants with its own rudimentary force and noise. Significantly, the river is closely linked here to poetic language. Not by chance, the precipice is called “the rafter of a rock’s lip”, thereby turning the attention to the lip and to speech. Clearly, the noise and violent performativity of the Falls point to what Bernstein called Williams’ quest for a “natural language” able to liberate man from his civilizational deadlock.¹⁰ Still, it is not quite clear what Williams means by “common language” “combed into straight lines”. Does the term “common language” point to what he says in the “Statement” about his search for a language that everybody can understand,¹¹ and is the unravelling of language, such as it is realized by the waterfall, a way of making this language less specialized, less estranged, more directly communicative? Or is it rather the other way round, so that “the straight lines” of the Passaic Falls are in fact completely at odds with Williams’ own poetological maxims, according to which poetry

10 The idea of an original connection between river and speech goes back to ancient Greece and has one of its premises in the verb “rhéin”, which means to float as well as to speak. This etymological figure is used by Homer, Herodotus, Callimachos and Plato. In Roman times the connection between water and poetry was canonized, as in Horace’s well-known poem on Pindar: “Pindarum, quisquis studet aemulari” (Carm. 4,2) (Horace 1952).

11 “This seemed to me to be what the poem was for, to speak for us in a language we can understand. But first before we can understand it the language must be recognizable. We must know it as our own, we must be satisfied that it speaks for us” (Williams 1992: xiii).

should be based upon a defamiliarized syntax and consist of “crabbed verses” (40) and jagged and flexible lines?¹²

One way of addressing the enigma of these lines in a more substantial manner is to resort to the first sketches that Williams made of his epic poem, namely “Paterson: the Falls”, included in the *The Wedge*, where the same phrases occur, yet with some conspicuous differences:

What common language to unravel?
The Falls, combed into straight lines
from that rafter of a rock’s
lip. Strike in! the middle of

some trenchant phrase, some
well packed clause. Then...
This is my plan. [...]

(Williams 2001: 57)

The description of the “straight lines” of the waterfall seems to provoke, in its turn, a dynamic language of pauses, ruptures and anacoluthons; a “Strike” which attacks the integrity of the sentence as such. In this sense, the lines of this poem are anything but “straight”, and Williams seems to be responding to his own question in the negative: language should *not* be

12 The *refus* of harmonious verse that Williams wanted his poems to be is clearly stated in the last passage of Book 1, where, citing a book on Greek poetry (viz. John Addington Symonds: *Studies of the Greek Poets*, vol. 1, p. 284), he notes the so-called “crippled” or “crabbed verses” that one finds in the poet Hipponax’s use of *choliambi* (“lame or limping iambs”): “Here again, by their acceptance of this halting meter, the Greeks displayed their acute aesthetic sense of propriety, recognizing the harmony which subsists between crabbed verses and the distorted subjects with which they dealt – the vices and perversions of humanity – as well as their agreement with the snarling spirit of the satirist. Deformed verse was suited to deformed morality” (Williams 1992: 40).

common! In other words: Williams here programmatically proclaims his eagerness to rejuvenate language by means of defamiliarization, rhythmification and abrupt energy.

Yet returning to the later version, this impression of syntactical rupture is softly subdued; Williams here seems to accentuate, through a laconic and elliptic form, the question itself, and the enigma that it entails, rather than pointing at a preconceived poetological “plan” that would solve it. Indeed, the poem here seems to address its *raison d’être*, making the language of the waterfall the question around which it will not cease to revolve throughout its five books. Importantly, the parenthesis is an auto-poetological comment, where Williams reflects on his own activity and where he questions the idea of a poetic transformation of the flood and the waterfall into language. The reader, then, is confronted with the central problem of imitation: in what ways will the poet be able or willing to canalize or manipulate the chaos of running water into the “straight lines” of a traditional poetic discourse? Clearly, the river is presented as something to be poetically explored; it is, as the poet himself claimed in his “Statement”, and as elaborated on by the poem, a prerequisite or a potential of poetical creativity: by asking the question of “What common language to unravel?”, Williams turns to the stream and its waterfall in order to seek out the viable roads of his own poetical enterprise.

The river, then, comes into focus precisely where the poem for the first time starts to question its own linguistic and ontological status. It thus forms the point of departure for any inquiry into the linguistics and rhetorics of *Paterson*, and in particular the question of the representational relationship between the stream and the poetical language. Moreover, one might say that the river, with its inherent dynamics and instability, is not only elemental to *Paterson*, but that it emblemizes the main characteristics of Williams’ whole poet-

ical work and theories of poetry as a “a field of action”, as a moving or undulating space, where the language no longer coagulates into fixed concepts, clichés and “phrases which have stopped the mind”, but is rather conceived of as moving and ever regenerating itself, thereby keeping its own momentum – its own fluidity – constantly alive. Or as it is much more elegantly expressed in “The Last Turn” from *The Wedge*: “Nothing recognizable, the whole one / jittering direction made of all / directions spelling the inexplicable” (Williams 2001: 83).

The eddies and whirls of poetic language

One could certainly regard a stream as a continuous, linear and coherent space extending organically from the source to its mouth or estuary. Yet in the poem Williams sees it differently. Indeed, following a closer look, the reader perceives that the river itself is highly disharmonious, and that it is based upon a dialectics of entanglement and distinctiveness, of continuity and “divorce”, of grounding and vortex which blurs any conception of coherence. In the next passage of *Patterson*, Williams minutely describes the movement and kinetics of the flood as it approaches the brink, and the subsequent “thunder”:

Jostled as are the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise, rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward – or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf or curdy spume, seeming
to forget .

Retake later the advance and
are replaced by succeeding hordes
pushing forward – they coalesce now
glass-smooth with their swiftness,
quiet or seem to quiet as at the close
they leap to the conclusion and
fall, fall in air! as if
floating, relieved of their weight,
split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk
with the catastrophe of the descent
floating unsupported
to hit the rocks: to a thunder,
as if lightning had struck

All lightness lost, weight regained in
the repulse, a fury of
escape driving them to rebound
upon those coming after–
keeping nevertheless to the stream, they
retake their course, the air full
of the tumult and of spray
connotative of the equal air, coeval,
filling the void

(Williams 1992: 7f)

This starts as a simile of “the waters approaching the brink” and the poet’s “thoughts” (e.g. the imagination of Paterson the dreamer, the poet), but, as one would expect in a poem by Williams, the anthropomorphical tendency is immediately checked: it is by no means the “thoughts” that project their own subjective content onto the water, but the other way round; indeed, one feels tempted to say that instead of “thoughts” conceptually *unravelling* and making sense out of the confusion of the waters, the waters instead complicate and confound “his thoughts”. This passage, in other words, corroborates the idea of poetical language as a specifically fluid

medium, making the “thoughts” evasive and unstable rather than semantically fixed. The river language, here, depicts “his thoughts” via a suspension of *definite* thought.

One of the most striking elements in this passage, however, is its meta-linguistic dimension: Williams frames the river language as a medium in which the interplay and tensions between continuity and discontinuity come to the fore; in which the water jostles forwards but is still constantly confronted with the opposing energies of “eddies” and whirls: “his thoughts / interlace, repel and cut under, / rise, rock-thwarted and turn aside / but forever strain forward – or strike / an eddy and whirl [...]”. And then, in the next stanza: “they leap to the conclusion and / fall, fall in air! as if / floating, relieved of their weight, / split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk / with the catastrophe of the descent [...]”. Anyone who has ever witnessed the might of waterfalls will admire the verisimilitude of Williams’ description, but the main thing here is precisely to point out how the poet uses this discontinuous topographical structure of the stream in order to focus on the ambivalence of poetical language. If the river, at one point, is marked by a tension within continuity, it stands out, at another point, as a fall characterized as “splitting apart” and therefore as a “divorce”. Drawing attention to the key moment when the river goes from horizontal to vertical, and then back again to horizontal (where the waters are said to “retake their course”) – a movement that illustrates a process of separation followed by unity – Williams in fact brings into focus the dialectics between deviation and continuation, difference and identity, which is not only a key poetological concept for the poem as a whole, but also epitomized by its punning name: *Paterson* bringing together the father (*pater*) and the son.

This passage, then, is a clear instance of what was called the fluidity of poetical language, in the sense that it brings out

not primarily the continuity and spatial unity of the river, but rather the tensions within this unity, its *discontinuity*. Later in *Paterson*, Williams gives an outline of this complex figure:

. . . a mass of detail
to interrelate on a new ground, difficultly;
an assonance, a homologue
triple piled
pulling the disparate together to clarify
and compress

The river, curling, full – as a bush shakes
and a white crane will fly
and settle later!

(Williams 1992: 19)

The poem here alludes to the affinity between the flux of the stream and its own rhetorical operations of assonantic, homological, paronomastic and anagrammatic (as in “triple piled”) distortions. The river is linked with the sublime image of an unsettling of the scenery, a bush shaking and a bird flying away. In this sense the poem clearly gives priority to movement over fixation and semantic determination. The river language curls, undulates and distorts, phonetically obfuscating the borders between the different word units.

A further demonstration of Williams’ poetological notion of difference of unity is found in the following impressive passage:

And the air lying over the water
lifts the ripples, brother
to brother, touching as the mind touches,
counter-current, upstream
brings in the fields, hot and cold,
parallel but never mingling, one that whirls

backward at the brink and curls invisibly
upward, fills the hollow, whirling,
an accompaniment – but apart, observant of
the distress, sweeps down, or up clearing,
the spray–

brings in the rumors of separate
worlds, the birds as against the fish, the grape
to the green reed that streams out undulant
with the current at low tide beside the
bramble in blossom, the storm by the flood–
song and wings–

one unlike the other, twin
of the other, conversant with eccentricities
side by side, bearing the water-drops
and snow, vergent, the water soothing the air when
it drives in among the rocks fitfully–

(Williams 1992: 24f)

The movements of air and water depicted here adhere to no law but to the chaos of currents and counter-currents, as in “hot and cold”, “accompaniment – but apart”, “down, or up”, “birds as against the fish”, “one unlike the other, twin / of the other, conversant with eccentricities / side by side” etc. Resemblance or identity is contrasted with alteration and difference, harmony with dissonance, calm with turmoil, the unity is broken up by diversity, whose parts are only to be fused together again. Consequently, the poem finds support for its own rhetorical structure in the classic notion of the river as something peculiarly other than itself and still the same (see for instance the famous apophthegm of Heraclitus on the impossibility of treading twice into the same river). The poem’s recurrent imagery of the asymmetry, imbalance or disharmony of the stream in general – and of the cataract in particular – still asserting it being a “one”, is accurately

summed up in the gnomic verse “Something else, something else the same” (Williams 1992: 32).¹³

As we have seen, for Williams language is genuinely poetic only when it reaches a level of abrupt concreteness and evokes an impression of fluid spontaneity which dissolves “the trenchant phrases” and shatters the “well packed clauses”. One of the ways in which this type of fluid writing sets itself in motion is through the trope of *paronomasia*, i.e. the distortion of a word through the replacement of it by a word with a phonetic affinity. In fact, phonetical *glissandi*, assonances and paronomasias abound in the text. Here follows one of the most interesting passages, where the poem – rather than installing a specific intention or method – thematizes the lack of any preconceived “plan” or “direction”:

There is no direction. Whither? I
cannot say. I cannot say

13 This figure of difference within unity goes a long way back. It functions as the idea of harmony in a famous Heraclitus quotation (see esp. fragment Diels/Kranz B 8: “to antixoun symferon kai ek ton diaferonton kallisthen harmonian”; or in the translation of Jaap Mansfeld: “Das Widerstreitende zusammentretend und aus dem Sich-Absondernden die schönste Harmonie” (*Die Vorsokratiker* 2003: 256f), and is later re-formulated and critically evaluated by Plato in *Symposium* (187a-b) as (in the translation of Schleiermacher) “das Eins, in sich entzweit, sich mit sich einige” (“hen diaferomenon auto auto symferesthai”) (Plato 2005: 259). Horace’s famous question “quid velit et possit rerum concordia discors” (“what will and what can the disharmonious harmony of the things”) in *Epist.* 1,12 (Horace 1952) has become a standard formulation of the figure. It revives in romanticism, for instance in the poetics of Coleridge, where he speaks of the poetic mind and of imagination as fusing “sameness, with difference” (Coleridge 1983: 16f), and at various places in Hölderlin, for example in the novel *Hyperion*, where it is considered to be not only the “essence of beauty” but also the historical starting point of philosophy (Hölderlin 1992: 685). It is interesting to note that this figure is essential to the whole lyric and literary tradition centred around the river theme.

more than how. The how (the howl) only
is at my disposal (proposal): watching-
colder than stone .

(Williams 1992: 17).

And some lines further on:

with the roar of the river
forever in our ears (arrear)
inducing sleep and silence, the roar
of eternal sleep . . . challenging
our waking-

(Williams 1992: 17)

By conflating “how” with “howl”, “disposal” with “proposal”, and “ears” with “arrear”, Williams suspends referential stability, making the predicative function of language centre on its own staggering, its own hesitation and indeterminacy. The assertion that there is “no direction” adequately points at what was called the poet’s fluid spontaneity, his renouncement of any preconception. We are, once more, presented with the poet’s search for reality and immediacy of perception: Instead of following a determined course, he privileges the instantaneousness of the moment, emphasizing the abruptness, subversiveness, concreteness and literary anarchy of the “howl”.

The implication of such inherently ambivalent language is bewilderment and lack of understanding. In fact, the poem frequently refers to the river language’s inherent lack of clarity. This is succinctly laid out in one of the fundamental passages in *Paterson*:

A false language. A true. A false language pouring – a language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear.

(Williams 1992: 15)

This passage, even though it does not explicitly mention the river, must be seen in connection with the vocabulary of the lines quoted above: “the river comes pouring in above the city / and crashes from the edge of the gorge / in a recoil of spray and rainbow mist–” (Williams 1992: 7), as well as with a later passage:

The water pouring still
from the edge of the rocks, filling
his ears with its sound, hard to interpret.
A wonder!

(Williams 1992: 16).

Williams, in fact, toys with the strange and far-reaching paronomastic connection between “*false* language” and the sound of the Passaic *Falls*. This is a way of stressing how this river language in itself is inherently ambivalent, its waters both “glass-smooth” (Williams 1992: 8) and transparent as the truth, yet also fundamentally thwarted and obscure, as is any language marked by the distortions and subversions of paronomasia. It’s an unclear yet highly seductive language that cannot be understood according to the parameters of true or false. The danger of such a language is made evident by a montage of excerpts from old newspapers describing the deaths of Mrs Cumming and Sam Patch. Both are closely linked to floods. The reader is told that a Mrs Sarah Cumming, on 20th June 1812, fell or jumped into the Passaic Falls, and that a Sam Patch, a resident of the city, being a professional river diver, at some time in 1829 leapt into the Genesee

River but never came back alive: He “plunged toward the stream below. But instead of descending with plummet-like fall his body wavered in the air – Speech had failed him. He was confused. The word had been drained of its meaning. [...] Not until the following spring was the body found frozen in an ice-cake” (Williams 1992: 16). For Williams, both these deaths signify the failure to come to terms with the specific language of the stream.

The river as “hints to composition”

Williams, in his “Statement” from 1951, wrote that “the substance” of *Paterson* was the “struggle to interpret and use” the noise and language of the Passaic Falls. As I have maintained in this paper, the cataract and the river serve as the model of his poem’s rhetorical and structural set-up. The “pouring / waters” (Williams 1992: 18), in fact, is an energizing force which makes the poem “a field of action”, where the poet lets his poetry be dictated by these waters’ own tensions, their energies and counter-energies, thus creating the impression of a totally unpredictable and undulating or moving poetical space. Williams was highly sceptical of romanticism, but as we have seen it nevertheless lurks in his project: on the one hand, he rejects anthropomorphism, that romantic master trope. Yet, on the other, seeking a natural language and making the river his master figure of poetic speech can be seen as a thoroughly romantic project.¹⁴ This points to

14 If romanticism is usually regarded as giving priority to the imagination over imitation, or, to use the famous concepts of M.H. Abrams from *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), to the *lamp* over the *mirror*, the idea of a representation of nature is still very much at the core of romantic aesthetics. According to Paul de Man, in his early article “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” (1960): “the theme of imagination linked closely to the theme of nature [...] is

the basic problem of *Paterson*. Repeatedly, in different ways and on different occasions, the poem alludes to the question of whether the stream's "noise", tensions and fluidity can be transformed into poetical language and literary space. To what extent, then, can it be said that the poem follows a mimetic idea where the river is the representational model on which the poem is patterned?

In fact, the notion of a representational or an imitational relationship between the river and language is valid only to a certain degree. At least from *Spring and All*, Williams had been strongly opposed to the idea of an art primarily based on being a representation or copy of nature, arguing that representational art is hollow in that it privileges "the beautiful illusion" and seeks to "distract the attention from its agnized approaches to the moment" (Williams 1986: 178). In the same work, he demanded that modern art, having dispensed with "the illusion relying to composition to give likeness to 'nature'", now should equally abolish "realism" in order to focus on "reality itself". Yet Williams' vocabulary is notoriously complicated: what he seeks is not representation in the meaning of copying, but what is somewhat confusingly called "actual representation" (Williams 1986: 204), i.e. an enhanced and dynamized mode of representation, also referred to as "actual existence" (Williams 1986: 207). Indeed, what Williams here points to as "actual" is an earlier version of his definition of modern poetry as a "field of action": stripping the words bare of their conventional and representational func-

the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes the poetics of romanticism." In fact, as de Man will point out, this ambiguity stems from the romantics' conception of the "intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural object. Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination" (de Man 1984: 2, 7).

tion, putting stress on their purely literal core, and, finally, focusing on the stripped words as the sensual centre, the “here and now” in the compositional process, poetry acquires a dynamism which Williams tends to compare to a provisional and tentative movement into the unknown and unpredictable. The compositional process, he argues, thus proceeds by sudden hints (“hints to composition”) and uncertain indications rather than by any preconceived, firmly established plan; more specifically, the process can be seen as a constant play between the destruction of the “beautiful illusion” on the one hand, and the poetic emancipation and primacy of precisely those elusive yet promising moments of fugitive immediacy which Williams conceives of as dimensions of “actual existence”, of “reality itself”, on the other.¹⁵ This “actual existence” is an epiphany of a sudden, seemingly negligible yet ultimately compelling appearance. Therefore, Williams, in what is probably the most famous poem from *Spring and All*, can proclaim that what obliges the poet is not the typical grand themes of poetical tradition, but rather the incidental and adventitious object, as in one of Williams’ most famous poems: “so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow // glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens” (Williams 1986: 224).

This scepticism towards the logic of representation and its “beautiful illusion” is also evident in *Paterson*. The mirroring in language of the experience of the river, the ambitious project of the poem, is thus always put into question. From the beginning, this relation is hinted at, stated or positively confirmed, sometimes even elaborated (one particular case involves those passages where the language seems typo-

15 This logic is also pointed out by Miller: “Like Rimbaud, Williams must break down all cultural and natural forms, kill everyone, and destroy everything in order to return things to the primal chaos from which a reality without any antecedents may spring” (Miller 1970: 420).

graphically to depict the movements of falling water), but, subsequently, always put into question, made uncertain or even negated. One of the most important and more obvious examples of this suspension of the river language relation is the extravagant mixture of genres displayed in the poem: whereas the poetry sections display the river language at its purest and also most explicit, the prose parts question and arguably undermine the homogeneity of the lyric discourse and thus of the hegemony of riverine language. More explicitly, this undoing of the representational model is expressed by the *Leitmotif* of the non-intelligibility of the sound of the Falls and the river. Not only are we repeatedly told that the inhabitants of Paterson do not understand it, or that this incomprehension was fatal to Sam Patch or Mrs Cummings – even the poem itself, from very early on, expresses doubts whether it understands or can represent this language adequately. It is symptomatic that this self-critical quest for a poetical language adjusted to the moving space of the Falls and of the river will continue to reverberate throughout the poem. In Book II one finds the following verses:

That the poem
 the most perfect rock and temple, the highest
 falls, in clouds of gauzy spray, should be
 so rivaled . . . that the poet,
 in disgrace, should borrow from erudition (to
 unslave the mind): railing at the vocabulary
 (borrowing from those he hates, to his own
 disfranchisement) . . .

(Williams 1992: 80)

Here, the identification of the poem with natural phenomena like rock and water is put into question, or “rivaled”, in the sense that the poet criticizes himself for having taken

recourse to “erudition” and “borrowing” – in these lines one might for instance see an allusion to Baudelaire, who in his famous sonnet “Correspondances” also compares nature to a temple, or to the drama “The Rock” by Williams’ literary rival, T.S. Eliot – i.e. to something completely different from the unmediated vision of nature so ardently sought for and advocated by the poem.¹⁶ Soon after, the poem names what it sees as the main obstacle of perceptual immediacy, namely language:

The language . . . words
without style! Whose scholars (there are none)
. . . or dangling about whom
the water weaves its strands encasing them
in a sort of thick lacquer, lodged
under its flow . . .

Caught (in mind)
beside the water he looks down, listens!
But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused
uproar: missing the sense (though he tries)

16 The dismissal of erudition and learning is a strange aspect in Williams’ work and life. Williams, who had lived and studied in France and Germany for several years, who spoke French and Spanish, who had some knowledge of Greek and Latin, and was very well read, liked to pretend that he possessed no literary culture and learning at all. In his essay “American Poetry in the Twentieth Century”, the American poet Kenneth Rexroth, who knew the old Williams quite well, remarked: “All this is part of his conception of himself as the leader of ‘Anti-literature’” (Rexroth 1971: 81). Indeed, this tendency of Williams shows at least one important feature of his work and poetics, his ever growing critical stance towards the excessively learned poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, who had both left America to live in Europe. Williams saw himself as the founder of a real American, democratic, and therefore Anti-European [*sic*] literature, in which every recourse to Europe’s literature or philosophy was to be eschewed. Still, this *anxiety of influence* notwithstanding, *Paterson* is full of direct and indirect allusions, some mocking and some reverential, to his poetical colleagues and forefathers.

untaught but listening, shakes with the intensity
of his listening .

Only the thought of the stream comforts him,
Its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage – and
A wreath of fur .

(Williams 1992: 81)

These intense lines show not only the poem's pessimistic outlook on its endeavours, in that it names the abyss between language and nature, but also, as a counterpoint typical in *Paterson*, the renewed "comfort" and anticipation of a redeeming unity that the thought of the stream brings about. In a laconic tone typical of Williams, this sequence not only lays bare how the scholars and the words trying to represent the water will fail its object, i.e. be "encased" in a "thick lacquer", but also claims that the poet does not understand what he sees or hears, that he cannot detect any anthropomorphic qualities, words or syllables in the pouring water. However, in a logic that is elemental to *Paterson* as a whole, the passage suggests that from the experience of defeat arises new hope, what is "terrifying" is at the same time "inviting".

This inversion of defeat into hope is often repeated in the poem, and it lies at the core of Williams' idea of textual action being based on the improvisational principle of "hints towards composition". In fact, the poem indicates that the "pouring / waters" are adequately and authentically perceived only to the degree that one acknowledges its total foreignness and independence of anthropomorphic projections. As represented in art and literature, nature runs the risk of being merely a lie, a domesticated "beautiful illusion", Williams says. Nevertheless, he argues in *Spring and All*, it can still function as a key to poetical creation: "Nature is the *hint to composition* not because it is familiar to us and therefore the terms we apply to it have a least common

denominator which gives them currency – but because it possesses the quality of independent existence, of reality which we feel in ourselves. It is not opposed to art but apposed to it” (Williams 1986: 207f, my italics). Once more – as in the essay “The Poem as a Field of Action” – the key formulation is “hints to composition”. Williams claims that nature – or, in *Paterson*, the stream – offers the poet “hints to composition”, the hint being an elusive signal of possible, yet indistinct roads to be taken in the poem. But the logic in *Paterson* is precisely that these “hints” are as soon lost as they are perceived. The sounds and signals of the river can never be adequately described. Nonetheless they still remain a presence to which the poem aspires and which it seeks to juxtapose – appose, as it were – to its own words and sentences. Indeed, Williams seems to understand the connection between nature and art on the grounds of a very vague idea of their interdependence: instead of being represented, nature is to be linked or apposed, as an addition, to the text itself; it is not entirely outside of the text, nor opposed to it, but located at its edges, at the indistinct point where the text, instead of closing in upon itself, opens itself up to its correlate, to what is not yet said, but sought for. According to Williams, it is precisely because we feel “the quality of independent existence, of reality in ourselves”, that the artist can be aware of this transcendental movement. For Williams, a composition by “hints” thus seems to be following the traces that lead the poet to ever “expand” the structure of the sentence anew, bringing the language forward in a move that cannot end, that must infinitely defer the end of writing.

In some lines from Book II, part of a passage later reissued as an autonomous poem under the name “The Descent” in the collection *The Desert Music* from 1954, the frequent idea of defeat is linked to the very renewal of poetry:

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat – since
the world it opens is always a place
 formerly
 unsuspected.

(Williams 1992: 78)

Defeat is an integral potential of invention, of the challenging of old forms and old poetic parameters so important to Williams' work. And this dialectic also applies to the poet's relationship to the pouring water. Even if he fails to understand and adequately represent it, this doesn't mean that the river loses all interest for him – on the contrary, it strengthens the significance of the river as an emblem of poetic rejuvenation. The river, then, is the very principle of textual action in *Pater-son*, running its meandering course through the non-closable space of the poem. The poet seeks out the "confused uproar" and dizzying eddies and whirls of the river, not in order to fixate it into a traditional poetic diction, but to find, in his modernist experience of a failure of poetic representation, the potentiality or novelty of what is not yet lodged, encased or tamed.

Conclusion

In this article, then, we have seen how Williams considers poetry in *Pater-son* as a "field of action", where the text is both the expression as well as the reflection of the violence and meandering dynamics of the river and the space where this takes place. Williams thus conceives of the textual action in his large poem as grounded on the uneasy yet productive *interaction* between nature and language, where the seemingly non-graspable and independent quality of the river, its unstable, fluid and unclosable space, permanently compels the poet to re-consider, suspend or transcend his own plans or

intentions. It is precisely in his descriptions of the catastrophe of the cataract that the river most energetically is held up as a paradigm of poetical creation. In fact, the violence of the “confused uproar”, the “eddies and whirls” of tumultuous space, is an emblem of the textual action that goes on in the text: it points to how the poet seeks to destroy traditional structures of poetic diction and representation, and at the same time how he looks into the chaos and confusion of the river for hints to his own composition. Moreover, in his choice of the river as the substance of the work, Williams privileges a phenomenon that evokes *the topography of the unfinished*, a space of unlimited expansion. A work covering such a phenomenon must postpone every closure or ending. Its author acted accordingly: in 1958 Williams, already old and ailing, added a fifth part to the existing four parts; and then, half blind and with one side of his body paralyzed, in 1961 started another one, a sixth book. This manuscript, consisting of a few typed sheets, starts the whole project all over again, alluding to pregnancies, stories to be told, implying that endings can be reversed infinitely. In this sense, the river stands as the figure of Williams’ own interminable poetic project *Paterson*.

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The Reader Address as Performativity in Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Usage de la parole*

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L'Usage de la parole (*The Use of Speech*) by Nathalie Sarraute is a literary work in which language plays a crucial part, and indeed constitutes the main theme. The book, published in 1980, consists of ten short prose texts, which are small linguistic dramas addressing the question of characters being affected in various ways by the use of words. Each text is centred around a particular utterance, like "Ich sterbe" (the title of the first text, presumably Chekhov's last words uttered in German on his deathbed), or the more prosaic "Ne me parlez pas de ça" ("Don't talk to me about that"), which is put to work in the texts, so to speak; and the possible effects are observed and explored in given settings, in order to allow us as readers to witness and undergo the acts that the words accomplish. These effects are carried out through the rhythm of Sarraute's characteristic, repetitive syntax, through the use of the present tense, and last but not least through the text's explicit and *direct reader address*, which

in 1980 represented a new and unique turn in her writing.

Sarraute has described how the reader address in *L'Usage de la parole* emerged in her writing process:

Without wanting it, and quite spontaneously, in these texts I address the reader because I somewhat have the illusion that after all this time [...] I have after all ended up gaining some readers who follow me, who are close to me. I do not know them, but I have this illusion, I need it to be able to work, that we walk along together and that I address them (*My translation*).¹

The spontaneous confidence in the existence of a faithful and complaisant reading audience that Sarraute is expressing here resulted in a narrative structure in which addresses to the reader or brief imagined dialogues between the reader and the first-person narrating voice appear in the beginning and at the end of each short text, forming a kind of extradiegetic frame for the narrated stories. For instance, here is the opening of the first text: “Ich sterbe. What’s that? They are German words. They mean: I’m dying. But from where, but why all of a sudden? You’ll see, be patient” (1983: 7).² The use of the personal pronoun “vous” in an explicit apostrophe (“vous allez voir, prenez patience”) in the passage establishes

1 “Sans le vouloir, et tout à fait spontanément, dans ces textes je m’adresse au lecteur parce que j’ai comme l’illusion qu’après tant de temps [...] j’ai tout de même fini par acquérir quelques lecteurs qui me suivent, qui me sont proches. Je ne les connais pas mais j’ai cette illusion, j’en ai besoin pour travailler, que nous cheminons ensemble et je m’adresse à eux” (Sarraute quoted by Valerie Minogue, Sarraute 1996: 1914).

2 “Ich sterbe. Qu’est-ce que c’est? Ce sont des mots allemands. Ils signifient je meurs. Mais d’où, mais pourquoi tout à coup? Vous allez voir, prenez patience” (1996: 923). The two sets of numbers of pages related to citations from Sarraute’s texts refer, respectively, to the French original texts and the corresponding English translations listed in the bibliography.

a realm of intimacy and of impressions shared by the narrating “I” and the reader. This sense of closeness is reinforced by the use of the present tense and the repeated questions (“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” “Mais d’où, mais pourquoi tout à coup?”), insisting that something is emerging and taking place at this very moment, before our very eyes, even though I don’t know what it is yet as I start reading. In this way, the reader is immediately placed alongside the narrator as they both witness and discover the drama beginning to unfold in the text.

The dialogical narrative mode in *L’Usage de la parole* is associated with Sarraute’s broader reflection on the reading experience. The text/reader relationship is in fact an integral part of her critical and literary work from the very beginning, for instance in her first novel *Portrait d’un inconnu* (1947, *Portrait of an Unknown*), centred around the main character’s discovery of a particular painting in an art gallery, or in *Les Fruits d’or* (1960, *The Golden Fruits*), which stages the reception of a novel with an identical title among Parisian intellectuals. In both these texts, however, the encounter between art work and reader is represented and reflected upon, unlike *L’Usage de la parole*, where it seems to be acted out through the reader address. Instead of talking about the connection with the reader, the text talks directly to the reader and establishes the connection. *L’Usage de la parole* thus appears to reveal in a particularly striking way a possible parallel or link between performativity, the intersubjective relation and the text/reader relationship. In order to analyze and discuss this connection, it is necessary to start by considering Sarraute’s conception of intersubjectivity.

*Intersubjectivity and “the terrible
desire to establish contact”*

Interpersonal relationships in Sarraute’s work are governed by *tropisms*. Originally a biological term, describing the movements of an organism caused by an external stimulus, “tropism” is used by Sarraute as a metaphor for what she refers to in the critical essays of *L’Ère du soupçon* (1956, *The Age of Suspicion*) as “indefinable movements” set in motion by an external agent, taking place at the extreme borders of consciousness and causing our actions and utterances. In other words, tropisms are basic responses or reactions in the human psyche which in their turn influence our behaviour. And the main external agent that sets off these responses is the *other person*, as they are typically triggered in social encounters of all kinds. In fact, in Sarraute’s texts, tropisms appear as a fundamental drive towards the other. Under the influence of tropisms, Sarraute’s interpersonal relationships seem to gain an uncontrollable dynamic of their own. Everything her characters say and do is really determined by a constant, basic need to *establish contact* with the other, as she expresses it in *L’Ère du soupçon*.³

This means that when Sarraute’s characters talk to each other, driven by the impulses of tropisms, their utterances do not primarily convey messages, but might be said to bring about either rejection or attraction on a very basic level of social interaction and communication. Ann Jefferson points out that human relations and verbal relations intertwine in Sarraute’s tropistic universe, where language, as a result, becomes performative rather than constative. Words in Sarraute’s dialogues, she says, are characterized by a “capacity

³ Sarraute adopted the expression “a terrible desire to establish contact” from Katherine Mansfield’s *Journal* (Jefferson 41-42).

to produce effects on their recipients [that] far exceeds their capacity to signify". Consequently, "[t]aking ideas and the content of words seriously is no more than a charade required by the rules of the game as a means of ensuring the real business of the encounter: contact with the other" (Jefferson 63-64). The connecting power of words is always the centre of attention, whether the characters try to hide from their interlocutors behind a wall of words frenetically piled up on top of each other, or whether they keep looking for any word that may cause reactions, remove barriers and affect the other, almost in a direct, physical manner. In this sense, utterances in Sarraute's texts carry tropisms rather than meaning.

Sarraute discovers a parallel phenomenon in Dostoevsky, as she explains in her essay "De Dostoïevski à Kafka" ("From Dostoevsky to Kafka"). Here, she gives a striking and rhythmic description of the "terrible desire to establish contact" with the other, which in a similar way dominates characters in her own texts:

It is this continual, almost maniacal need for contact, for an impossible, soothing embrace, that attracts all of these characters like dizziness and incites them on all occasions to try, by any means whatsoever, to clear a path to the "other", to penetrate him as deeply as possible and make him lose his disturbing, unbearable opaqueness; in their turn, it impels them to confide in him and show him their own innermost recesses. Their momentary dissimulations, their furtive leaps, their secretiveness, their contradictions, the inconsistencies of their conduct, which, at times, they appear to multiply for the mere pleasure of it, and dangle before the eyes of the other, are, in their case, nothing but coy, flirtatious attempts to arouse his curiosity and oblige him to draw nearer. Nor is their humility anything but a timid, round-about appeal, a way of showing that they are quite near, accessible, disarmed, open, acquiescent, in complete surrender, completely abandoned to the understanding, the generosity, of the other: all the barriers erected by dignity, by vanity, have been torn

down, anyone can approach them, no one need fear to come in, entrance is free (1963: 33-34).⁴

As always in Sarraute's writing, we distinguish a contrast between two levels in the text: the superficial level, or what the characters seem to say and do, and a deeper level, which indicates the semi-conscious impulses that really motivate them. The interlocutors described do not appear as mastering subjects able to communicate meaningful messages to the other, but as victims at the mercy of forces they do not control, driving them "comme un vertige" into saying "*n'importe quoi*" – anything. A basic need for contact determines every utterance and every initiative directed towards the other. But at the same time, this need is also, according to the text, "impossible" to fulfil – after all, a genuine and complete fusion with the other can never be realized, as direct access to his or her consciousness and sensations remains outside the subject's reach, which may explain why the character's behaviour appears as "maniaque". Rephrasing in the passage, resulting in the juxtaposition of nearly synonyms ("dissimulations passagères/bond furtifs/cachotteries", "leurs contradictions/ces

4 "C'est ce besoin continuel et presque maniaque de contact, d'une impossible et apaisante étreinte, qui tire tous ces personnages comme un vertige, les incite à tout moment à essayer par n'importe quel moyen de se frayer un chemin jusqu'à autrui, de pénétrer en lui le plus loin possible, de lui faire perdre son inquiétante, insupportable opacité, et les pousse à s'ouvrir à leur tour, à lui révéler leurs plus secrets replis. Leurs dissimulations passagères, leurs bonds furtifs, leurs cachotteries, leurs contradictions, et ces inconséquences dans leur conduite, que parfois ils semblent multiplier à plaisir et faire miroiter aux yeux d'autrui, ne sont chez eux que des coquetteries, des agaceries pour piquer sa curiosité et l'obliger à se rapprocher. Leur humilité n'est qu'un appel timide, détourné, une manière de se montrer tout proche, accessible, désarmé, ouvert, offert, tout livré, tout abandonné à la compréhension, à la générosité d'autrui: toutes les barrières que dressent la dignité, la vanité, sont abattues, chacun peut s'approcher, enter sans crainte, l'accès est libre" (1996: 1568).

inconséquences dans leur conduite”, “tout livré/tout abandonné” etc.), appears to undermine the importance of each chosen formulation, giving us a sense that the correct term is never found; this structure instead draws our attention to the breathless rhythm of the long sentences that the repetitive style causes. In order to communicate to us how the fact of continuing talking becomes more important to Dostoevsky’s characters than the meaning of their words in their impossible quest of the other, Sarraute’s essay *acts out* the phenomenon rather than explaining it.

The text’s repetitive rhythm incarnates the intensity and the persistence of the movement towards the other, which thus seems to materialize and continue moving in the syntax of the text. In this way, the text avoids specifying the signification of the contact which is sought after – it merely shows its exterior or apparent effects. To the extent that the text makes explicit what the impossible contact is about, this is done through the use of spatial metaphors, which suggest that the desired contact simply concerns an almost physical closeness or contiguity (“se frayer un chemin jusqu’à autrui”, “l’obliger à se rapprocher”, “se montrer tout proche, accessible”, “toutes les barrières sont abattues [...] l’accès est libre”).

Passion performative

As my example indicates, then, there seems to be a close relationship between tropisms, social interaction and performative language in Sarraute’s literary work. In this respect, her writing constitutes an original and distinct example of the link between performativity and communication of human emotions analyzed by Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller. In *Speech Acts in Literature*, Miller explains that all statements concerning inner life are in fact examples of performative rather than constative language, since our feelings or our

physical pain are not open to verifiable knowledge, or directly accessible to the other. With reference to Derrida's analysis of passionate speech acts, Miller argues that the other's expression of emotions cannot be verified or falsified – they are unfathomable or impenetrable secrets (Miller 159-160). For instance, I have no means of knowing whether the other is truly in pain. One example Miller uses to illustrate this is Derrida's analysis of the utterance “Je t'aime” in an unpublished seminar given at L'École des Hautes Études in Paris in 1992:

“Je t'aime” is a performative locution in part because the one to whom it is spoken has absolutely no way to verify that what I claim is a fact. You must take it on faith that I am telling you the truth. Another way to put this is to say that my locution “Je t'aime” is always implicitly, even sometimes explicitly, accompanied by something like “I swear to you that it is true.” The swearing is an explicit performative. Derrida goes so far as to assert that all performative language is testimony, bearing witness, and vice versa (Miller 135).

As a consequence, my response to the other's expression of love, desire or pain is also performative in the sense that it relies on belief or trust. As such it involves an implicit performative utterance (Miller 164). Thus, the communication of emotions becomes a matter of acting out the emotion in language rather than explaining and representing it. Miller even suggests that in the case of the utterance “Je t'aime”, it is the words that bring about the emotion, and not the other way around: you do not fall in love until you say “I love you” (137).

It also follows that the interlocutor of what Miller designates as passionate speech acts is not a Cartesian ego constituted by conscience. The expression and exchange of emotions seems to establish a particular form of subject/object correlation through which the subject relates to the other without

reducing him or her to an object of conscience. In this respect, Miller shows how his own as well as Derrida's analysis of emotional performatives relate to Husserl's examination (in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation*) of the problem of access to other minds (Miller 135, 159). In fact, according to Miller, the opacity of the other ego described by Husserl is what makes passionate speech acts possible, necessary and efficient. Where cognition fails to ensure communication, other faculties can and must come to the fore. And as always, the confrontation with what we cannot know tends to make our passion grow stronger.

Such reflections concerning intersubjectivity and the problem of communication of emotions seem highly relevant for Nathalie Sarraute's writing of tropisms. She discovered Husserl in the 1920's as a young student in Berlin, and the influence of phenomenology in her literary work has been noted by several critics.⁵ However, the encounter with the otherness of the other in her texts may seem even more radical than Husserl's theory of analogical appresentation can account for. According to Husserl's analysis, I relate to the other by seeing him or her as an *alter ego*, or another self, in analogy with the way I perceive myself. There is a sense of recognition and reciprocity in Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity that seems different in Sarraute's texts. As Ann Jefferson also notes, the term "intersubjectivity" cannot strictly speaking be used to describe Sarraute's portrayals of human relations, because of the radical inaccessibility of the subjectivity of the other they imply. In fact, the entire breakdown of representation, plot, characters and syntax in Sarraute's novels may be seen

5 For instance Arnaud Rykner's *Nathalie Sarraute* (1991); Rachel Boué's *Nathalie Sarraute, la sensation en quête de parole* (1997) and Monique Gosselin-Noat's "Vertiges et prestiges de l'espace" (1998).

as relating a fundamental and radical experience of alterity. This is why I believe that Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy constitutes a fruitful theoretical perspective for analyzing human relations in Sarraute's work, and for the consideration of the performative language related to it.⁶ Lévinas and Sarraute may be said to have Husserl as a common starting point for the reflection on intersubjectivity, in addition to the literary work of Dostoevsky, which plays a major role for both. But they both differ from Husserl in their more radical accounts of alterity; and also in the sense that in Sarraute's literary universe as well as in Lévinas's thinking, *sensation* has priority over intentionality. For both, the "I" is constituted by sensibility, not by conscience or cognition – much like the interlocutor of passionate speech acts described by Miller in *Speech Acts in Literature*.

According to Derrida, the link between the experience of alterity and passionate speech acts also has relevance for the reading of literature. In *Passions* (1993), he suggests a parallel between the secret that impassions us performatively in intersubjective exchanges and the secret that impassions us in a literary work:

Derrida's name for the unfathomable secret is *le tout autre*, the wholly other, that is, an otherness that in no way can be known or assimilated into some version of "the same". It is this otherness in literature, Derrida argues, that "impassions us". Derrida means by this that the unfathomable secret in each literary work has the strange performative effect of arousing our passion (Miller 159).

6 I discuss the parallels and differences between Sarraute and Lévinas more extensively in my *Éthique et esthétique dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute. Le paradoxe du sujet* (2007).

One of the things that Derrida does in *Passions*, as this passage suggests, is to apply the logic as well as the terminology of Lévinas's analysis of the social relation to the text/reader relationship ("le tout autre", which cannot be assimilated into "le même"). The reader's experience and reactions facing a literary text are implicitly compared to the awakening and the passionate answer of the "I" facing the other. And the result, in both cases, seems to be communication relying on passionate speech acts.

With reference to *L'Ère du soupçon* and to Ann Jefferson's analysis of Sarraute's work, I have suggested that the tropistic desire to establish contact with the other is carried out through performative language in the communication between characters in her texts. At the same time, Sarraute wanted a similar performative communication to take place *through* her texts, in the relationship between reader and literary work. Analyzing Sarraute's critical essays on literature, Ann Jefferson concludes that "[r]eading for, in, and, ideally of Sarraute is very much a matter of desire", and that "[t]he desire that drives Dostoevsky's characters towards 'an impossible and calming embrace' also drives the reader on in the same search for a similar ideal relation" (Jefferson 131-132). On the basis of a short analysis of enunciation and narrative structure in *L'Usage de la parole*, I would like to take a closer look at this desire involved in the reading of Sarraute's texts, and at its connection to performativity. In what specific ways does *L'Usage de la parole* proceed in order to mobilize the reader and awaken our passion through confrontation with alterity, as Derrida argues in *Passions* that literature does? In order to discuss further the relationship between reading, performativity and alterity in Sarraute's texts, I will then try to examine the particular form of subject/object correlation her reading experience establishes by relating it to Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy and language theory.

Narrating voice, anonymity and intimacy

As already mentioned, dialogues occur at two diegetic levels in *L'Usage de la parole*, namely the dialogue between characters in each short text, and the dialogue between the narrating first-person voice and the reader figure addressed as “vous” in the frames surrounding the stories. The many encounters taking place at the diegetic level of *L'Usage de la parole* let us discover and experience the tropisms that various exchanges set in motion. Words reject and provoke distance, like those of a mother correcting her son by suggesting that his father might stop loving him if he doesn't behave. Or words connect and strive to reach the other, like the unstoppable torrent of words of a man trying to affect his seemingly indifferent friend, or the flirtatious exchange of banalities between two strangers about to fall in love. But how does the basic need to establish contact with the other relate to the *narrative* characteristics of the text? At first glance, the rather artificial reader address in *L'Usage de la parole* seems to create distances rather than closeness. Epic distance, to be more precise. The narrating “I” talking directly to the reader highlights and consolidates the distinction between the levels of story and narration in the text, giving us a sense of a detached and completed course of action which we consider from afar. However, this initial impression grows more complex once we take a closer look at the status and roles of narrator, action and reader in the text.

Who is the first-person narrator of *L'Usage de la parole*? Perhaps we should simply assume that it is Nathalie Sarraute herself? After all, she says so explicitly in one of the passages we just read: “I address the reader” etc. There are also clear references in the text to her earlier novels, for instance the sentence “Si tu continues, Armand, ton père va préférer ta

sœur (If you go on like that, Armand, your father will prefer your sister),” which had already appeared some twelve years earlier in *Entre la vie et la mort* (1968, *Between Life and Death*). However, Sarraute never identifies herself as the narrating voice of *L’Usage de la parole*, and interestingly the very few adjectives describing the narrator in the text apparently indicate otherwise, as they are all put in the masculine form. In fact, the narrating voice of *L’Usage de la parole* does not seem to be anything more than a voice; it does not belong to any homodiegetic narrator like the ones we find in Sarraute’s first two novels. It is simply a voice with whom we discover the universe of the texts – a very oral and personal and at the same time completely anonymous voice, both close to us, and somewhat out of reach.

In addition to its paradoxical, intimate anonymity, which makes it harder to grasp or to relate to, the narrating voice of *L’Usage de la parole* also tends to blend into the voice of the characters it depicts. The “I” of the texts does not refer exclusively and unambiguously to the narrator. For instance, in the text on Chekhov’s death, a traditional and distanced first presentation of the story’s main character in the past tense situates the narrated story in a distinct time and place separated from those of the narration itself: “So, at the beginning of this century – in 1904 to be more precise – in a German spa, a dying man raised himself up in his bed. He was Russian. You know his name: Chekhov” (1983: 7).⁷ But soon, the tone of the text changes:

Wise. Modest. Reasonable. Always so undemanding. Content with whatever comes his way... And he is so at a loss, so bereft of words...

7 “Donc au début de ce siècle – en 1904, pour être plus exact – dans une ville d’eaux allemande s’est dressé sur son lit un homme mourant. Il était russe. Vous connaissez son nom: Tchekhov” (1996: 923).

he has none... this resembles nothing, this recalls nothing anyone has ever described, ever imagined... this is surely what is meant when people say that there are no words to say it... there are no more words, *here*... But then, from quite close, within his range, ready for use... with *that* doctor's bag, *those* instruments... a word of good German make, a word his German doctor habitually uses to certify a death, to announce it to the family, a solid, strong verb: *sterben*... thank you, *I'll take it, I shall know how to use it properly and duly apply it to myself: Ich sterbe* (1983: 9; *my italics*).⁸

In this passage, as the italics indicate, the character first designated as “il” ends up by saying “je”. There are no quotation marks or punctuation of any other kind that can distinguish the “I” of the narrating voice from the “I” of the character. Instead, a barely perceptible enunciative slide takes place in the text, prepared by the sudden use of the present tense, and notably by the appearance of various deictics. The spatial adverbs “ici” and “voilà”, followed by the demonstratives “cette”, “ces” and “ce” prepare the transition from Chekhov being designated as “il” (“il est si démuni” etc.), to the point in the passage where he starts expressing himself in the first person (“merci, je le prends”). As a consequence, the boundary between narrating voice and character voice becomes

8 “Sage. Modeste. Raisonnable. Toujours si peu exigeant. Se contentant de ce qu'on lui donne... Et il est si démuni, privé de mots... il n'en a pas... ça ne ressemble à rien, ça ne rappelle rien de jamais raconté par personne, de jamais imaginé... c'est ça sûrement dont on dit qu'il n'y a pas de mots pour le dire... il n'y a plus de mots *ici*... Mais *voilà* que tout près, à sa portée, prêt à servir... avec *cette* trousse, *ces* instruments... voilà un mot de bonne fabrication allemande, un mot dont ce médecin allemand se sert couramment pour constater un décès, pour l'annoncer aux parents, un verbe solide et fort: *sterben*... merci, *je* le prends, *je* saurai *moi* aussi le conjuguer correctement, *je* saurai *m'*en servir comme il faut et sagement l'appliquer à *moi-même: Ich sterbe*” (1996: 924; *my italics*).

blurred and indistinct, and the already anonymous narrator seems to disappear even more behind his characters.

Or is it in fact the opposite which is the case, in the sense that the story and the characters may just as well be said to disappear in favour of the narrator? Nathalie Sarraute herself has stated that the reader address in *L'Usage de la parole* is also inspired by 18th century novels (like Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*). And obviously, another function of the text's narrative mode, like in these novels, is to break the referential illusion by constantly reminding us that everything the text relates is a fictional construct. Unlike a classical Hollywood movie, for instance, the obvious marks and presence of a narrator in *L'Usage de la parole* seem to deny the reader the possibility of identifying and empathizing with the characters as if they were real human beings. As the narrating voice repeatedly explains and comments on what he does, we almost have the impression of being invited into the writer's laboratory and participating in the act of creation. This becomes particularly striking in the text "Ne me parlez pas de ça" ("Don't talk to me about that"), where the narrating voice asks us to participate in an hypothetical "game" where one imagines that one poses a certain question to a couple of randomly chosen groups of people, in order to analyze the different reactions provoked by the utterance (the question asked is the following: in the midst of a conversation, would you be able to interrupt your interlocutor with the phrase "Don't talk to me about that?" Why/why not? etc). But note that nothing of this actually "happens" inside the text's fictional universe – the narrating voice only encourages us to *imagine* that it does, or rather that it *might* happen. In fact, the whole story is entirely narrated in the conditional tense. As a result, the level of the story in the text dissolves and disappears completely, as the very idea or illusion of an action separated from narration is challenged,

and the narrator/reader dialogue ends up dominating the text entirely.

A simple referential reading of *L'Usage de la parole* is further undermined by the fact that the narrating voice constantly erases details concerning time, space and characters in the stories. A striking example is the opening of the text "Le Mot Amour" ("The Word Love"), where two strangers meet by chance, exchange a few words and suddenly start feeling attracted to one another. The narrating voice starts by describing the frame and scene surrounding the instance about to be analyzed in the following way:

It was at the back of a *smoky, ill-lit café, probably* a station buffet... *I rather think* you could hear the sounds of trains, whistles blowing... *but that's of no importance...* what stands out from a yellowish haze is, on either side of the table, two *blurred* faces, and above all two voices... *I can't make them out very clearly either*, I wouldn't be able to recognize them... what reaches me now is the words these voices conveyed... *and not exactly the words, I don't remember them...* but that doesn't matter either, I can easily invent other words of the same order, the most banal imaginable... the kind that two strangers *are likely* to exchange in the course of any ordinary meeting, at a café table... whether they are about the taste of what they are drinking... orangeade, or maybe tea? or about the advantages and the disadvantages of travelling by train, by plane... or about anything you like, *I'll leave it to you, if you like, to imagine others* (1983: 65-66; *my italics*).⁹

9 "C'était au fond d'un petit café *enfumé, mal éclairé, probablement* d'une buvette de gare... *il me semble* qu'on entendait des bruits de trains, des coups de sifflet... *mais peu importe...* ce qui d'une brume jaunâtre ressort, c'est de chaque côté de la table deux visages *presque effacés* et surtout deux voix... *je ne les perçois pas non plus avec netteté*, je ne saurais pas les reconnaître... ce qui me parvient maintenant ce sont les paroles que ces voix portent... *et même pas les paroles exactement, je ne les ai pas retenues...* mais cela ne fait rien non plus, je peux facilement inventer des paroles du même ordre, les plus banales qui soient... de celles que deux personnes étrangères l'une à l'autre *peuvent* échanger au cours d'une rencontre

As we can see, once stated, each proposition of the narrative is made relative or even annulled through epistemic modality (“il me semble,” “probablement”) and through the use of negations, corrections and rephrasing. The text does not allow any precise image or description to become fixed, so to speak, thus causing the diegetic level of the text to dissolve into thin air, and allowing it to merge into the voice of the narrator, a narrator who, as we have seen, also appears as an indistinct and elusive entity. In one sense, what the reader is left with is a negative description, or, paradoxically, a distinct presence of something which cannot be grasped, but which precisely because of this inaccessibility is all the more powerfully felt and experienced.

Consequently, the two diegetic levels of the text seem in fact to be indistinguishable from one another. In *L'Usage de la parole* the basic model of communication, in which an interlocutor transmits a message to a receiver, is not fully respected, as the different instances involved tend to intertwine and merge into each other. Or perhaps we should say that communication is *redefined*, in the sense that the text's narrative structure makes it a matter of participating, reacting and acting. This means that the blurring of the limits between textual instances actually empowers the reader. As the repeated negations and corrections in the opening of “Le Mot Amour” indicate, when the distances and distinctions between narrator, represented action and reader disappear, we are as readers sucked into the continuous movement of the text, where we participate in what is being acted out here and now rather than identifying a recognizable and intelligible reference. This tendency

quelconque, à une table de café... est-ce sur le goût de ce qu'elles boivent... une orangeade ou bien du thé? ou sur les avantages et les inconvénients des voyages en train, en avion... ou sur n'importe quoi, *je vous laisse, si vous le voulez, en imaginer d'autres...*” (1996: 946-947; *my italics*).

is confirmed and strengthened by the explicit handing over of initiative to the reader through reader address in the passage just cited (“je vous laisse, si vous le voulez, en imaginer d’autres”), encouraging our active participation.

In fact, throughout *L’Usage de la parole*, the reader is repeatedly asked to intervene as an active co-creator of the text, and imagine other scenarios and outcomes of the stories. “Ne me parlez pas de ça” shows this in an original way, since this particular text may be read as a kind of *mise en abyme*, or a miniature copy of *L’Usage de la parole* as a whole. Just as the reader addresses in each story invite us to participate in various “jeux” made up of words, the characters of “Ne me parlez pas de ça” are asked to participate in a party game presented as a “survey” concerning the possible effects of the utterance which constitutes the text’s title. In order to explain why they can or cannot utter the words in question, the characters demand concrete examples of imagined conversations in which the sentence might occur (examples which correspond to the stories of *L’Usage de la parole* as a whole). But as the characters through the examples repeatedly pronounce the utterance “Ne me parlez pas de ça” and thus are exposed to its possible effects, acting them out in what increasingly resembles therapeutic role-playing, the onlookers of an imagined drama become participants and co-creators, and the game becomes reality: the characters end up screaming “Don’t talk to me about that” for real, to make the effects of the game stop. At the same time, the actual reading of the text sets in motion a similar mechanism. For in order to read it, I am also forced to repeat and “make mine” the words “Ne me parlez pas de ça”, written in direct speech, the present tense and the first person, as if it was my own response *to the text*. This inevitably activates our emotions towards what we read, and makes it virtually impossible to stay indifferent to it.

As a consequence, in *L’Usage de la parole*, narrator, charac-

ters and readers all assist and participate in what *takes place here and now*; we all relive, or indeed live and experience “every time for the first time” what happens in narration. The time and place of narration coincide with the time and place of action as well as with the time and place of reading, through a strange effect of simultaneity and immediacy created by the logic and the structure of the text. The same logic will later constitute the very idea of a new collection of short texts, entitled precisely *Ici* (1995, *Here*), where the narrator’s “je” and the reader’s “vous” blend into the imprecise and flexible space of “ici” or “here”, which might be regarded as a site of co-enunciation. Interestingly, the title of this book, or the space, entity or notion of “ici,” proves almost impossible to talk about or to represent unequivocally, causing all kinds of misunderstandings of the notion’s reference, as the title takes on new meanings and is inevitably *actualized* each time it is uttered, by virtue of its deictic quality.

As narrator, story/characters and reader become increasingly intertwined and indistinct in *L’Usage de la parole*, words appear to come to the fore in their place. Actually, the book’s original title was not *l’usage* or “The Use of Speech,” but simply “Voici des mots” (Minogue 1996: 1910) – “Here are some words” – containing yet another ambiguous deictic (“voici”) which may belong to narrator, text and reader alike. And gradually, the words of *L’Usage de la parole* seem to start emerging and acting completely on their own, in the “here and now” of text, narrator, character and reader, as the following example both explains and illustrates: “And now these words [...] come... borne on what wind?... come and alight here, a tiny ember, blackening, burning this white page”

(1983: 8).¹⁰ Note how combinations of passive constructions and of certain metaphors as well as the avoidance of personal pronouns (the wind moving the words, the ember blackening the page) create a sense of absence of agents and interlocutors of any kind in the passage. But at the same time, deictics other than personal pronouns (“voilà”, “ici”, the present tense) establish a distinct realm of closeness and immediacy. The anonymity and the uncertain reference of the passage, which could be associated with distance and lack of identification with recognizable characters, seem somewhat paradoxically to bring about a strong presence and simultaneity, abolishing distinctions and distances between various textual instances. In short, seemingly, as narrator, characters and reader become indistinguishable and merge into the imprecise action of the text, contact is established between them.

What remains is to examine and interpret the consequences or signification of the abolition of distances associated with reading in *L'Usage de la parole*. What does our contact with the text imply?

*Reading as creation of sameness
or as proximity of alterity*

In *Dialogue and Distance. Reading Nathalie Sarraute* (1999), Emer O'Beirne convincingly argues that through her reader address in *L'Usage de la parole*, Sarraute, adopting a somewhat self-contradictory rhetorical strategy, tries to gain monologic control over her text. By anticipating the reader's reactions to the text, the narrating voice creates an ideal reader figure from which the real readers can take their cues, thus

10 “Et voilà que ces mots [...] viennent... poussés par quel vent... se poser ici, une petite braise qui noircit, brûle la page blanche...” (1996: 924).

depriving them, or at least *trying* to deprive them, of interpretative freedom, distance and opposition. The apparently privileged dialogue of *L'Usage de la parole* in fact objectifies the subject it addresses, according to O'Beirne. She suggests that the contact with the other that Sarraute's text strives to establish must be interpreted as a controlling presence, or even as a violent act of domination:

It seems that a primordial fusion of self and other, an Imaginary relation where both cease to be distinguishable, can even in the intimacy of reading only be approximated in a relationship of domination and submission. The creation of sameness always involves the (voluntary or imposed) suppression of one party's otherness. Text and reader here only lose their discreteness through the reader's willingness to give in to the text (O'Beirne 154).

In other words, Sarraute seems to want to control the interpretation of her text completely, and make sure the right message gets through, in an effort to protect the (for her) indisputable truth she believes so strongly in, namely the reality of tropisms. This appears to be a very clear tendency in all of her texts.

But is that necessarily the case? O'Beirne's argumentation seems to presuppose that Sarraute's text/reader relationship is cognitively based. In opposition to such a conclusion, I would like to argue that the blurring of boundaries between writer/text and reader brought to the fore by my reading must be regarded as something else than the establishment of mutual agreement and understanding. "The terrible desire to establish contact" with the reader in *L'Usage de la parole* does not necessarily imply consensus and the creation of sameness. I think we should rather consider the reader address in the text as the narrating voice's attempts to say *anything*, "n'importe quoi", to provoke emotional reactions of *any kind* in the reader. The

efficiency or felicity of the performative is in *itself* what is sought after, not the acceptance of a certain meaning or point of view. Doesn't setting off the movements of tropisms precisely involve exposing or subjecting oneself and others to unpredictable and uncontrollable effects, in accordance with the dynamics described by Derrida as iterability? Just like Dostoevsky's characters evoked in *L'Ère du soupçon*, the narrating voice's primary concern and main function in *L'Usage de la parole* can be to "se montrer tout proche" in a basic, almost physical manner; and more precise and sophisticated rhetorical strategies like persuasion appear as nothing more than one type of several possible additional or prolonged effects. As such, the reader addresses resemble the two characters of "Le Mot Amour", just about to fall in love, who exchange all kinds of meaningless, empty platitudes just in order to prolong the conversation and to make the closeness of the moment last (an easily recognizable scenario in this particular case). Thus, the banalities start floating in the air like fragile soap bubbles – "[t]hese scarcely ballasted, dilated words rise, float, bob about gently, then softly alight, barely skim..." (1983: 66),¹¹ and so barely and tenderly brush the other.¹² This is language as pure contiguity, or proximity, in the sense that the sheer events of reaching out to the other through address and of maintaining

11 "[c]es paroles peu lestées, dilatées, s'élèvent, flottent, légèrement ballottées, se posent doucement, effleurent à peine..." (1996: 947).

12 To Sarraute, words seem to need this open space in them in order to perform felicitous passionate speech acts – if her words do something, it is never exactly what they say. So when the word "amour" finally emerges in the conscience of the two strangers, the fragile approach between them is broken and the moment has already passed – "amour" is a word too heavy to fly. Interestingly, this means that Sarraute in "Le Mot Amour" reaches a conclusion that is the exact opposite of the one Derrida suggests in his analysis of "Je t'aime": to Sarraute, uttering the word "love" suffocates the passion rather than arousing it.

contact through conversation exceed by far the importance of the signification of the words exchanged. Such a conception of performative language as *touch* is described in Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy.

Levinasian ethics are based on the subject's encounter with the other. The face of the other cannot be reduced to an object that the "I" can master or reflect upon. At the same time, it cannot be ignored. This experience of alterity constitutes the subject by mobilizing his sensibility, confronting the "I" with the demand of acknowledging what exceeds knowledge. Lévinas describes the subject's response to the other in linguistic metaphors: in approaching me, the other calls me (*m'appelle*) – and in acknowledging his irreducible presence, I answer. Similarly, the ethical relation is also reflected in, or rather realized through, language. For Lévinas, before speech concerns meaning, it involves proximity, or placing oneself at the other's reach, as he explains in the article "Langage et proximité" (1961, "Language and proximity"). To communicate is to expose oneself to the other and to give the other the possibility to receive or to reject me, in analogy with the view that the other cannot be understood or misunderstood, only met with care or violence. Speaking isn't just a cognitive activity and cannot be reduced to the content of my words – speaking is first and foremost engaging in social interaction, and as such the speech act has immediate ethical significance and consequences. In *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*), Lévinas goes on to describe this performative level of language as the Saying.

As in Levinasian ethics, Sarraute's addresses to the reader try to awaken and mobilize the reader's sensibility through a call that can be met or not. Her literary communication also seems to relate to J. Hillis Miller's account of passionate speech acts and their relationship to the problem of access

to other minds. Since the reality of tropisms is not open to knowledge, communicating them becomes a matter of provoking them, and of setting in motion and submitting to the uncontrollable dynamic they imply. Fundamentally, Sarraute's experiences of reading appear to materialize the event of placing oneself at the other's disposal, or exposing oneself unconditionally to the other, offering the other confidence and sincerity that can be received or rejected. Perhaps literary communication, according to Sarraute, isn't primarily a matter of explaining and of making sense of things, but rather a matter of experiences of caresses or strikes.

In *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Lévinas explains that the Saying of language implies that "[t]he one is exposed to the other as skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter" (Lévinas 1981: 49).¹³ And in "Langage et proximité" he characterizes language's most basic function as touch and caress – as pure approach and contiguity which do not carry any meaning or intention, and thus can realize the encounter with the other without subjecting him to consciousness. There is a similar description of a unification between writer, text and reader that maintains difference at the end of *Les Fruits d'or*, where the narrative voice tries to relate his encounter with the literary text as "something that takes me gently and holds me without letting me go... something untouched, innocent... like a child's slender fingers clinging to me, like a child's hand nestling in the hollow of my own" (1964: 138).¹⁴ To Nathalie Sarraute, the experience of reading seems precisely to be this seizing

13 "l'un s'expose à l'autre comme une peau s'expose à ce qui la blesse, comme une joue offerte à celui qui frappe" (Lévinas 83).

14 "quelque chose qui me prend doucement et me tient sans me lâcher... quelque chose d'intact, d'innocent... comme les doigts flûets d'un enfant qui s'accrocheraient à moi, la main d'un enfant qui se blottirait au creux de ma main" (1996: 617).

of the other's hand – it concerns *contiguity*, or the fact of being *touched* in a fundamental way. The both beautiful and disturbing metaphor of the fragile fingers of a child held by the strong, solid hand of an adult indicates what this touch involved in reading is about: it activates something sensorial or bodily rather than cognition, and it concerns trust, risk and exposure, or even the possibility of care or violence, suggested by the asymmetry and the tension created by the combination of the verbs “s'accrocher à” and “se blottir”, and the expression “au creux de ma main”.

What the narrating voice asks of us in *L'Usage de la parole* isn't necessarily to be believed or understood, but nothing more than pure and simple closeness. Any kind of contiguity or touch would do, be it caresses or strikes, and any passionate reaction from the reader would indeed be preferable to distance and indifference, or, in the words of a passage from *Tropismes*, to the experience of the other's completely absent *non-response*, which “buff[s] [me] gently, negligently, with a flick of the hand” (1963: 27).¹⁵ May not this search for proximity also be what Sarraute evokes when she talks about the emergence of the reader addresses during the writing of *L'Usage de la parole*, inspired by the confidence in readers “qui me *suivent*, qui me sont *proches*”? These addresses to the reader may in fact be seen as an outspoken attempt to draw readers near through an explicit and overt display of vulnerability, as the narrating voice simply asks, or even implores me to “[l]isten to these words... they're worth it, I assure you...” (1983: 47).¹⁶

15 “[me] repouss[e] doucement, négligemment, du revers de la main” (1996: 10).

16 “Écoutez-les, ces paroles... elles en valent la peine, je vous assure...” (1996: 939).

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Loving the Alien: Bartleby and the Power of Non-Preference

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There are several reasons why speech-act theory has proved a fruitful companion to the study of literature. One of them, as Jonathan Culler has argued,¹ is that it allows us conceptualize the way language *works* anew: the critical engagements with J.L. Austin's founding insights from *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) performed by Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman and Judith Butler, among others, allow the reading of literary texts to appear as an *event* having real-life consequences, instead of as a passive approach to objects finished once and for all. This venture has supplied us with analytical tools which can offer new possibilities for addressing the relationship between literary texts and society, especially con-

1 "In short, the first result of the performative is to bring to center stage a use of language previously considered marginal – an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language – and to help us conceive of literature as act" (Culler 2000: 507).

cerning how the former can influence or reshape the latter, or, as Sandy Petrey has claimed: “The importance of speech-act theory is that doing things with words, like doing them by other means, can make or unmake our world” (Petrey 1990: 21). Austin’s legacy has therefore proved a promising venue in the attempt to come to terms with one very fundamental Gordian knot: the question of aesthetics and politics.

Even so, there are problems that might arise when insights gained through the application of these tools are separated from their theoretical origins, taking on a life of their own as they travel to new fields of scientific enquiry. This risk is especially acute when not enough attention is paid to the specificity of the object of scientific investigation. In the following, I will elaborate on this through a closer look at a recent, somewhat unexpected turn of events: at a certain point, not too long ago, parts of the branch of political thought devoted to creating a more just society through a critical (re)engagement with Marxism suddenly developed an interest in what must be one of the strangest characters in the annals of literature: Herman Melville’s scrivener, Bartleby.

Such a choice should perhaps not come as that much of a surprise, as the philosophers in question had shown a previous penchant for unorthodox theoretical bedfellows, as exemplified by the “collective love affair” from the late 1990s and onwards between thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, on the one hand, and St Paul, on the other.² Given the branch’s atheistic bent, choosing one of the most devoted founders of Christianity as a hero could of course be said to be a bit odd, but that is only if you focus on the *content* of Paul’s faith. Focus instead on its *form*, and it makes a lot more sense: in Badiou’s interesting reading,

2 See, for example, Badiou (2003), Agamben (2005) and Žižek (2003).

what this former Pharisee exemplifies is an extreme militant faithfulness. Paul is the one who never backs down or gives up, no matter what happens, no matter what hardships loom ahead. After his run-in with the Lord Almighty on the road to Damascus, the same zealotry that had previously been put to work exterminating Christians was now used to promote and spread a universal truth open to *everyone*.³

In other words, there is an unmistakable logic to the interest in Paul, at least opposed to what was to come, when large parts of the aforementioned branch collectively turned to Bartleby. In the wake of Gilles Deleuze's influential article "Bartleby; or, The Formula" from *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1989), we have seen a small landslide of critical writings from some of today's most prolific theorists – including Žižek, Agamben, Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, just to name a few, as well as their many commentators – forming yet another branch on the massive, ever blossoming tree of reception of Melville's story.⁴

This leads to the question of why exactly Bartleby and his formulaic reply when asked to do anything – "I would prefer not to" – so appealed to these theorists.⁵ Given the text's enigmatic character, it comes as no surprise that it has proved an

3 As Paul himself puts it: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3: 28).

4 The enormous amount of writing on Melville's text led Dan McCall to coin the term "the Bartleby Industry". See McCall (1989).

5 Here it must be stressed that not all of them are equally enthusiastic in this regard; Badiou's likening of Bartleby's non-preference to betrayal of the Truth in *Logics of Worlds* (2009: 400) being a case in point. My labelling of these thinkers as a "branch" should therefore not be understood as a claim that their approaches to Melville's text (or their thinking as such) form a homogenous whole or are mutually compatible. Rather, it is due to the fact that they discuss the same problems with somewhat similar goals, they often use the same examples, debating how they should be understood, and frequently refer to (and often ferociously criticize) each other.

endless source of inspiration to literary scholars. But what is it about “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street”⁶ that caused these political thinkers to debate whether its main character should be seen as a relevant figure on which to model a new, radical politics for the post-cold war era? My contention is that a closer look at Deleuze’s use of insights from speech-act theory in his reading of Melville’s story can help us answer this, as well as indicating how Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” can be said to push speech-act theory to its limits. First, though, a closer look at the text itself is in order.

Enter Bartleby

“Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance” (Melville 1986: 17), so says the bewildered first-person narrator of Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”, originally published in two instalments in the November and December editions of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art* in 1853.⁷ The story is set in New York sometime during the 1840s or the early 1850s,⁸ and we follow the retroactive attempts of the narrator – an elderly lawyer –

6 Hereafter referred to as “Bartleby, the Scrivener”.

7 This was the first year *Putnam’s* was in print, as well as two years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, a book which at the time was neither particularly well-reviewed nor much read, something that was only to happen with the so-called “Melville revival” of the 1920s, approximately 30 years after its author’s demise. In 1856, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” was reprinted as part of *The Piazza Tales*, a collection of stories also including “Benito Cereno” and “The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles”, among others.

8 As Barbara Foley has argued, due to contemporary events, a few years must have passed between the initial encounter between the lawyer and Bartleby (probably sometime between 1843 and 1847), and the act of narration (sometime between 1848 and 1853). According to her, Melville has mixed up the order of these events so that “the story could not, strictly speaking, have taken place at all” (Foley 2000: 89).

to come to terms with the life and death of Bartleby, the new scrivener he somewhat unwisely hires, inventor of a simple but failsafe recipe for creating chaos. He is a safe and sensible man, the narrator, a man of logic and reason, one who expects all problems to be solvable through common deliberation.⁹ The problem with this perfectly sensible approach to life is that it has its limits: while it is perfectly capable of dealing with most situations, there are those where it will become obvious that it is useless, and Bartleby is precisely such a hard rock where reason is left to flounder like a fish out of water.

“Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance”, the narrator says, and he says so with good reason, for few have ever been confronted with such a maddeningly stubborn and enigmatic refusal as that of Bartleby. What happens is as follows: the lawyer has three people working for him, the three going by the nicknames Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut – the first two copyists, the last a twelve-year-old errand boy, so named for the nuts he regularly purchases for the others. From morning until noon, Turkey is a pleasant fellow as well as a hard-working employee, but from noon on he is rash, hot-tempered and energetic in a not too pleasant manner. Nippers, on the other hand, strikes the narrator as “the victim of two evil powers – ambition and indigestion” (7). The latter of these is worse and makes him more irritable in the morning, while his condition improves in the afternoon. The lawyer is therefore stuck with two scribes who in a weird sort of way can be said to complement each other – one who is grumpy in the morning and comparatively mild in the afternoon, and one for whom the reverse is true.

It is for this reason, as well as to cope with a heavier

9 A Jürgen Habermas or a Richard Rorty *avant la lettre*, one might say.

workload that results from being promoted to the title of Master in Chancery, that the narrator decides to hire another scrivener.¹⁰ Thus, enter Bartleby:

In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now – pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby.

After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers (11).

In the beginning, everything works out fine, with the new employee copying away diligently, albeit in rather too mechanical a manner for the narrator's liking. The real problems start on the third day: a scrivener's job description also entailed proofreading, ensuring the absolute correspondence between original and copy, making sure there were no errors. As the narrator comments, this could hardly be said to be an amusing task; but boring or not, it still needed to be done. When he requests that Bartleby help him, this is what his new employee tells him: "I would prefer not to".

Cutting a long story short, from now on this will be Bartleby's often repeated answer to the narrator's different utterances – be they questions, suggestions, orders, attempted bribes or threats – except when he drops the "would", the "to" or makes other minor alterations. This strange behaviour leads the narrator to become increasingly confused, acting

10 The importance of the narrator's profession in connection to the difference between courts of common law and Courts of Chancery is treated convincingly in Herbert F. Smith's "Melville's Master in Chancery and His Recalcitrant Clerk" (1965), as well as Cornelia Vismann's "Cancels: On the Making of Law in Chanceries" (1996).

in an increasingly erratic manner. He considers himself to be a kind and sensible man, and at first he tries to reason with the scrivener, then to make up all sort of excuses for him, before finally trying to convince him to quit. This to no avail, since such an option, too, is something Bartleby “would prefer not to.” The lawyer also tries to provoke some kind of reaction, but this is easier said than done, for, as he puts it: “indeed, I might as well have essayed to strike fire with my knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap” (17). Nothing can shake Bartleby’s uncanny mildness, nor cause him to directly oppose his boss in any way.

Eventually, this “preferring not to” is extended to the act of copying itself, but the lawyer still lets Bartleby stay on, even after finding out that he is in fact living in the office, spending most of his time in extended “dead-wall reveries”,¹¹ never venturing outside, nor eating anything but the ginger nuts the errand boy purchases for him. Finally, seeing no other way of getting rid of his mild-mannered foe, the narrator decides to relocate, leaving Bartleby in the old office. Unsurprisingly, this is not something the new tenants appreciate all that much. After some initial confusion they have the scrivener arrested for vagrancy and put in jail. Even though the lawyer, who feels a strange sort of responsibility, bribes one of the jailers to make sure that he is well fed, Bartleby still prefers “not to” eat.¹² In the end he dies, asleep “with kings and counselors”,

11 I.e. staring blankly at the office walls. For an analysis that centres on the significance of the floor-plan of the lawyer’s chambers and the lack of anything remotely resembling a view, see Leo Marx’s 1953 classic “Melville’s Parable of the Walls” (1979).

12 For, as he explains in one of his more talkative moments (thereby, in a sense, clearing the way which the Hungerkünstler, after whom Kafka’s short story is named, will later wander): “I would prefer not to dine-to-day. [...] It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners” (Melville 1986: 44). The close affinity between Melville and Kafka has been pointed out by several critics, including Jorge

as the lawyer puts it in a reference to Job 3:14, where Job laments the day he was born, longing instead to sleep with “kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves”.¹³ A fitting epitaph, indeed, since few literary characters have ever built as desolate a place for themselves as Bartleby, turning his back on the world, expiring curled up in front of a brick wall.

The narrator adds a postscript to these bizarre events by disclosing the one piece of additional information he has managed to come across – that the scrivener had once been employed at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, but that he had been removed due to a change in administration. The story then ends with the following paratactic exclamation: “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (46).

An army of Bartlebys

It must be stressed that the “collective affair” initially sketched out does not represent the first political readings of Melville’s story, far from it. Indeed, one will find a lot of earlier (more or less) Marxist approaches. As Naomi C. Reed has argued in “The Specter of Wall Street: ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ and the Language of Commodities” (2004), these tend to view the story in terms of the quotidian: “Marxist criticism of ‘Bartleby’ in particular, takes its cue from this sense of the tale as a story of the everyday, casting it as a realistic story, with an emphasis on working life” (Reed 2004: 247-248). She divides this tradition into two main trends. First, there

Luis Borges: “I would observe that Kafka’s work casts a curious ulterior light on ‘Bartleby’. Melville’s story defines a genre which, around 1919, Franz Kafka would reinvent and further explore” (Borges 2001: 246).

13 *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. “The Book of Job”. Chapter 3. 21 September 2010 <<http://www.bartleby.com/108/18/3.html#s2>>.

are the earlier, more thematic readings, often treating the text as a simple allegory of the inhumanity of life under capitalism, with *Bartleby* as a synecdoche for an exploited working class. The second, more historicist line, treats the story as a critical commentary on the state of the proletariat and class struggle in New York during the 1840s and 1850s. What these two main currents have in common, according to her, their important differences notwithstanding, is a marked tendency towards ignoring the complexity of the text in favour of extrapolating a clear political message. To Reed, what is thus inevitably lost is a “sense of the story’s weirdness” (Reed 2004: 247).

Even though this criticism might also be levelled against at least parts of the more recent Marxist or post-Marxist interest in the scrivener, what sets this apart as a tradition in its own right is the insistence on the *positive*, emancipatory aspects of the “I would prefer not to”. Rather than a victim whose passivity is seen as an impotent defence-mechanism, *Bartleby*’s generic reply is here treated as an *active*, potentially revolutionary force. This has even led to some viewing his passivity as a possible ideal for a liberatory politics of today, either as part of a larger strategy or in itself. These possibilities find their respective expressions in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, on the one hand, and Slavoj Žižek, on the other.

Starting out with Hardt and Negri’s collaborative work, their crucial reference to *Bartleby* is found in the short, italicized subchapter “Refusal” at the end of “Passages of Sovereignty”, the second part of *Empire* (2000). Even though it is a brief chapter, it still comes at a very important point in their general argument, functioning as a transition from their critique of that new imperial form of sovereignty after whom the book is named – Empire being the “political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world” (Hardt and Negri 2001: xi)

– to their attempt to elaborate the new forms of subjectivities which might oppose this state of affairs. Here, they juxtapose the different sort of refusals enacted by Bartleby and Michael K, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). This is what they have to say regarding the former:

His refusal is so absolute that Bartleby appears completely blank, a man without qualities or, as Renaissance philosophers would say, *homo tantum*, mere man and nothing more. Bartleby in his pure passivity and his refusal of any particulars presents us with a figure of generic being, being as such, being and nothing more (Hardt and Negri 2001: 203).

Even though Hardt and Negri admit that their hatred of authority leads them to admire refusals like those of Michael K and the scrivener, they still consider them insufficient. This is in large part due to their agenda, showing how the necessary surplus products of Empire’s continual growth – which they term the *Multitude* – can be reconfigured so as to present a real political alternative:

This refusal certainly is the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only the beginning. The refusal in itself is empty. Bartleby and Michael K may be beautiful souls, but their being in its absolute purity hangs on the edge of an abyss. Their lines of flight from authority are completely solitary, and they continuously tread on the verge of suicide (204).

In other words, to Hardt and Negri, Bartleby’s negation is seen as a first, necessary step on the long way towards a more just society – first you refuse what is, and then you build something new, but this has to be a collective effort, not a solitary one:

What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal. Our lines of flight, our exodus must be constituent and create a real alternative. Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we also need to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community. This project leads not towards the naked life of *homo tantum* but toward *homohomo*, humanity squared, enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community (204).

One of the problems with this in many ways quite commonsensical view is how it misconstrues the “I would prefer not to” as a simple refusal, albeit one taken to its outer limits. Claiming that “Melville’s character fits in with a long tradition of the refusal of work” (Hardt and Negri 2001: 203), they thereby ignore the scrivener’s singularity and the complexity of his generic response, for, as Agamben puts it: “Bartleby does not consent, but neither does he simply refuse to do what is asked of him; nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation” (Agamben 1999: 256). Naomi C. Reed’s critique of the older Marxist tradition can therefore easily be applied to Hardt and Negri as well: what is lost by treating Bartleby’s non-preference as a promising, yet insufficient oppositional strategy, is the possibility of understanding his utter strangeness.

It can be claimed that Slavoj Žižek, at least to a certain degree, manages to avoid such a reductive manouver in his recent *The Parallax View* (2006), even though he, no more than the authors of *Empire*, offers an in-depth reading of Melville’s text to substantiate his views. Like Hardt and Negri, he is mainly interested in Bartleby as part of a larger attempt to recreate a radical politics, but unlike them – and in direct opposition to them – he refuses to consider the “I would prefer not to” simply as a starting point: “Bartleby’s attitude is not merely the first, preparatory, stage for the second, more ‘constructive,’ work of forming a new alternative order; it is

the very source and background of this order, its permanent foundation” (Žižek 2006: 382).

The reasons for this are to be found in Žižek’s dismissal of most (if not all) forms of traditional political opposition as ineffective gestures which end up fortifying what one is out to challenge, since they are already inscribed into the current state of affairs.¹⁴ Instead of thus helping to calibrate the system through protesting, he advocates a politics of subtraction, of refusing to participate. This is where Melville’s scrivener can show the way: “Bartleby,” Žižek claims, “does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate. [...] This is how we pass from the politics of ‘resistance’ or ‘protestation,’ which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation” (381-382). To him, this “negation of negation” is the essence of the scrivener’s actions – what they stand for is “the formal gesture of refusal as such” (384), devoid of any content.

Trying to theorize how this could be put into practice, in *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek suggests that “the first gesture to provoke a change in the system is to withdraw activity, to do nothing” (Žižek 2008: 180). Only this, he feels, can help bring about the fundamental violence that he argues is needed to cause radical changes to the ideological armatures of our Western societies. As he controversially claims: “Sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do” (183).

14 A proper elaboration of Žižek’s position would have to include a discussion of his notion of the *act*, but this lies outside the limits of my present concerns. For a well-written discussion of the differences between him and Badiou in this regard, which also briefly touches upon their approaches to Melville’s text, see Ed Pluth’s “Against Spontaneity: The Act and Overcensorship in Badiou, Lacan and Žižek” (2007).

On the one hand, this version of a Bartleby politics, based on the “I would prefer not to” as a perpetual end in itself, can be said to be much closer in spirit to Melville’s main character than Hardt and Negri’s approach – a radical politics sharing the scrivener’s strangeness, so to speak. Even so, this is of little help when it comes to elaborating exactly what it would look like and how it could be brought about in practice. As Žižek himself acknowledges, this is no by no means an easy feat: “The difficulty of imagining the New is the difficulty of imagining Bartleby in power” (Žižek 2006: 382). And it could also be argued that simply equalling the scrivener’s strangeness is not the same as understanding him. As Armin Beverungen and Stephen Dunne have correctly argued in their “I’d Prefer Not To’. Bartleby and the Excesses of Interpretation” (2007), Žižek – just like Hardt and Negri – ends up applying politics to Bartleby, instead of letting it emanate out from him. As they claim: if a Bartleby politics is to be successful,

such a project has to carefully work through Bartleby, taking seriously the many difficulties and complexities of appropriating the story rather than opting for the simpler exercise of covering them over. Otherwise, any political lesson drawn will be bound to answer towards a residual excess that can be neither contained nor channeled (Beverungen and Dunne 2007: 176).

As opposed to the necessary “residual excesses” of such reductive appropriations, constantly threatening to undermine the validity of any and all political lessons Bartleby might teach us, Beverungen and Dunne set forth the contributions of Deleuze and Agamben as more faithful to Melville’s story, and therefore as more valuable. While this is certainly true, in the following I want to argue that what enabled Hardt, Negri and Žižek to use Bartleby for their own purposes in this manner, might in fact be an overvaluation of the disrupt-

tive effects of “I would prefer not to”, based on a somewhat simplified reading of Bartleby’s speech acts found in Deleuze.

On the indeterminacy of “preferring not to”

“Bartleby; or, The Formula” can be seen as a continuation of sorts of what Deleuze and Félix Guattari set out to do in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [1975]. In both cases, the theoretical focus is on how literature in some cases manages to subvert language from within, thereby opening up new possibilities – new “lines of flight” – for the creation of *affects*. The differences between Kafka’s and Melville’s *œuvres* notwithstanding, for Deleuze they can both be said to have invented such a deterritorialized language, one that is in the process of *becoming* or more specifically of *becoming-minor*.¹⁵

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener”, this distortion of language from within does not result from the application of a general *procedure*. Instead, it is Bartleby’s *formula* which does the trick: “The formula at first seems like the bad translation of a foreign language. But once we hear it more clearly, its splendor refutes this hypothesis. Perhaps it is the formula that carves out a kind of foreign language within language” (Deleuze 1998: 71).¹⁶ For Deleuze, even though it is “at best

15 In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, this task is formulated as follows: “how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language?” (Deleuze and Guattari 2006: 19). For the authors, such a becoming-minor, such an actualization of what is yet only virtual, is indeed the case for *all* true masterpieces of literature.

16 This resonates well with a point made by Jacques Derrida in *The Gift of Death*, where he claims that “I would prefer not to”, “evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing

a localized tick that crops up in certain circumstances” (72), it is still powerful enough to topple all the social bonds language helps to keep alive, or as he puts it: “Without a doubt, the formula is ravaging, devastating, and leaves nothing standing in its wake” (70). To this, one might ask, how come?

This is where the inspiration from speech-act theory becomes evident. According to Deleuze, due to its abrupt ending, as a speech act Bartleby’s generic utterance “leaves what it rejects undetermined, confers upon it the character of a radical, a kind of limit-function” (68), simultaneously encompassing *all* the different things one can “prefer not to” do: not just a, but also b, c, d, e...¹⁷ To him, the formula thereby can be said to collapse Austin’s distinction between constatives and performatives; between language that refers to what already exists and therefore has a clear truth-value, on the one hand, and language that causes something to come into being *in* the uttering, and which therefore has to be assessed by means of other criteria,¹⁸ on the other:

fixed, determinable, positive, or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses or accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language” (Derrida 1995: 75).

17 It is for similar reasons that Giorgio Agamben will argue that Bartleby should be seen as a figure of “*potentia absoluta*”, an absolute potentiality which “keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be” (Agamben 1999: 267).

18 To be more precise, Austin suggests that performatives should be judged according to whether they can be said to have “happily brought off” (Austin 1980: 14) the intended action or not. For such an assessment, he suggests the terms *happiness* (or *felicity*) and *unhappiness* (or *infelicity*), where the latter category can be subdivided into *misfires* (botched procedures) and *abuses* (where the speech acts are properly executed, but without the intention of abiding by them).

The formula I PREFER NOT TO excludes all alternatives, and devours what it claims to preserve no less than it distances itself from everything else. It implies that Bartleby stop copying, that is, that he stop reproducing words; it hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language. But it also stymies the speech acts that a boss uses to command, that a kind friend uses to ask questions or a man of faith to make promises. If Bartleby had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role. But the formula stymies all speech acts, and at the same time, it makes Bartleby a pure outsider [*exclu*] to whom no social position can be attributed (Deleuze 1998: 73).

A similar reading of the “I would prefer not to” as undermining the distinction between constatives and performatives can be found in J. Hillis Miller’s chapter on “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in his book *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990). Here Miller notes that this collapsing takes place on several levels, as a consequence not only of the scrivener’s speech acts, but also of his actions (or non-actions, to be more precise). For legal documents of the sort that Bartleby is supposed to copy to be accepted in a court of law, there must be no doubt about their authenticity. This, of course, is why proof-reading them is so important to the narrator. As Miller reminds us,

These documents must be exactly correct in all their copies in order to perform their function, which is to transfer property from one owner to another or to execute a bond or mortgage, a promise to pay so much interest along with principal over such and such a time. Such a promise, like a property deed, is a speech act. A conveyance is not primarily constative, though it may contain a description of the property in question. A conveyance is properly performative, if it is written right. It is a way of doing things with words (Miller 1990: 148).

By “preferring not to” verify what he has copied, Bartleby in effect makes the copied documents null and void in a legal

context. He thereby undermines their performative power, turning them into *dead letters* similar to the ones he supposedly handled in his previous job.¹⁹ This is more or less the same as the formula amounts to in the sphere of speech acts. In the scrivener, these two levels – acts and speech acts – can therefore be said to mutually strengthen each other in a symbiotic relationship, the result of which is the formula's eerie hold over the narrator. This power is further illuminated in another brief quote from Miller. "I would prefer not to", he says,

is like an endless loop in the process of reasoning. The disruptive energy of this extraordinary group of everyday words is limitless. [...] It is neither constative nor performative, or perhaps it might be better to say it is an exceedingly disquieting form of performative. It is a use of words to make something happen, but what it makes happen is to bring about the impossibility of making anything happen with words (156).

This last point is essential, since Austin himself was perfectly aware that a clear separation between the performative and the constative was impossible. No matter how much he tried to keep the two apart, he was forced to admit that they blend together, and it was this which led him to the conclusion that even the most clear-cut constative use of language – such as the statement "the cat is on the mat" – could in certain cir-

19 In an interesting attempt to elaborate a "semantics of cancels" (i.e. cancelled law papers), Cornelia Vismann makes a similar point: "[I]f Bartleby prefers not to examine the copy, he renders the examination impossible and, furthermore, makes the copy itself worthless. A copy is a copy precisely because certified by a comparison with the original which guarantees its *legal* correctness. An unrevised transcript is not a legal copy and must not be allowed into circulation" (Vismann 1996: 144).

cumstances function as a performative.²⁰ To Austin, in other words, there is no usage of language that cannot potentially make things happen, to which Miller replies: except Bartleby's "I would prefer not to".

If one were to explain this in Austinian terms, one could say that this is due to the formula making the "securing of *uptake*" (Austin 1980: 117) impossible, since it fails to make sense to its audience. Whereas this would normally lead to people simply dismissing such a speech act as gibberish – as "nothing at all" and "no more than *words*", if we are to believe Benveniste – this is not possible for the narrator: he perfectly well understands the meaning of the words uttered by Bartleby, but has no way of reacting to them in a meaning-

20 This is the reason Austin ends up abandoning the constative-performative distinction, opting instead to describe speech acts as either *locutionary* (the "performance of an act of saying something", 100), *illocutionary* (the "performance of an act in saying something", 99) or *perlocutionary* (the consequences of such an illocutionary act). Not everybody equally approved of this insight. Émile Benveniste, for example, writes the following in the chapter "Analytical Philosophy and Language" in his *Problems in General Linguistics*, which can be seen as an attempt to defend speech-act theory from its creator: "we see no reason for abandoning the distinction between the performative and the constative" (Benveniste 1971: 238). Interestingly, according to Benveniste's criteria, Bartleby's utterances not only fail to qualify as speech acts, they fail to qualify as *having an existence at all*: "In any case, a performative utterance has no reality except as it is authenticated as an *act*. Outside the circumstances that make it performative, such an utterance is nothing at all. Anybody can shout in the public square, 'I decree a general mobilization,' and it cannot be an *act* because the prerequisite authority is lacking, such an utterance is no more than *words*; it reduces itself to futile clamor, childishness, or lunacy. A performative utterance that is not an act does not exist. It has existence only as an act of authority. Now, acts of authority are first and always utterances made by those to whom the right to utter them belong" (236). Suffice to say, such a view would have a very hard time explaining how words uttered by those not in power could bring about a revolution, as is sometimes known to happen.

ful manner. It is just as impossible to ignore the formula as it is to master it or relate to it, and it is this which can be said to “bring about the impossibility of making anything happen with words”.

To Austin, such a lack of uptake constitutes an “unhappy” or “infelicitous” speech act. As he sees it, intended results only come about through a common adherence to accepted rules.²¹ Even though this is far from the case with *Bartleby*, it does not mean that the formula is without effects – first and foremost the undermining of the narrator’s expectations, leading to his increasing puzzlement and confusion – but whether these are the intended ones or not (or if there are in fact intentions behind the formula at all), we have no way of deciding. Thus, giving an answer to whether the formula in fact constitutes a “happy” or “unhappy” speech act becomes just as impossible as saying whether *Bartleby* himself is happy or sad.

For Deleuze, the problem – or, if you so please, the promise – of *Bartleby*’s position is that it is based on a logic altogether different from that of the world upon which it is brought to bear. As we all do in our everyday lives, the narrator operates according to a logic of *presuppositions* or *assumptions*: we expect that if we do one thing, other people will react in a certain way. Even though our doing A will of course not always lead to others doing B, this vague form of expected causality still functions as a grid underlying human social interaction. That is, as long as the people you are interacting with follow (more or less) the same rules and operate by

21 One of the few exceptions to this rule mentioned by Austin is the act of initiating a new procedure. For newness to come about, someone must, after all, be the first to do something which has not been done before, preferably without becoming too unpopular in the eyes of one’s surroundings. As Austin puts it: “Getting away with things is essential, despite the suspicious terminology” (Austin 1980: 30).

similar presuppositions. As the narrator learns the hard way, Bartleby, on the other hand, “was more a man of preferences than assumptions” (Melville 1986: 31).

To Deleuze, this animosity towards the logic of presuppositions should not be written off as random or as madness. Quite the contrary, the formula is simply the mode of expression best suited to what he terms Bartleby’s *logic of preference*: it might not be on the side of reason as it is commonly accepted, but it is fully formed and internally consistent nonetheless. The creation of such an alternative logic of constant becoming is one of the main tasks of a minor literature.²² What Deleuze says with regards to “great novelists” could therefore just as well have been said about Bartleby himself: their work remains “enigmatic yet nonarbitrary: in short, a new logic, definitely a logic, but one that grasps the innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to reason” (Deleuze 1998: 82).

It is for these reasons that Deleuze claims that Bartleby’s speech act can be said “to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole” (73); it is an “etiolation of language” (Austin 1980: 22) in the *best* sense of the word, to reappropriate the famous dismissal of literary language in *How To Do Things With Words*. An additional reason for this is the formula’s last defining feature: its highly contagious nature. It spreads like a virus or a disease, infecting the speech of

22 This helps explain Deleuze’s fondness for Anglo-American literature: according to him, “the English and the Americans [...] have a very special attitude to logic. They do not conceive it as an ordinary form containing in itself the first principles. They tell us, on the other hand, that you will either be forced to abandon logic, or else you will be led to invent one! Logic is just like the main road, it is not at the beginning, neither does it have an end, one cannot stop” (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 56).

those in its vicinity, or, as the narrator observes, some time after Bartleby first starts uttering his generic reply:

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using the word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? (Melville 1986: 27).

This goes for Nippers and Turkey as well, the word “prefer” popping up repeatedly in their speech without them being aware of it, something Melville applies for great comic effects. Even though Bartleby “would prefer not to” budge,²³ the formula itself has no such qualms, proliferating endlessly. To borrow Richard Dawkins’s (somewhat problematic) term for the transmission of cultural units,²⁴ “I would prefer not to” could easily be viewed as a highly successful *meme*;²⁵ a fierce combatant in the cultural version of the battle known as survival of the fittest, its lack of concrete content notwithstanding. It is, as Borges claims, “as if Melville had written, ‘It’s enough for one man to be irrational for others and the universe itself to be so as well’” (Borges 2001: 246). Or better still: it is enough for one man to follow his own logic of preference for the entire logic of assumptions to unravel.

23 This aversion to travelling should not be taken to mean that Bartleby’s subtraction does not qualify as a Deleuzian “line of flight”. Rather, it is the perfect illustration of the following point: “To flee is not exactly to travel, or even to move [...], because flights can happen on the spot, in motionless travel” (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 37).

24 See Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* ([1976] 1989), especially 189–201.

25 Successful here meaning that the meme has a high “survival value” (Dawkins 1989: 193), *i.e.* an ability to spread and not be forgotten. The collected output of the “Bartleby Industry” bears plentiful witness to the formula’s credentials in this area.

For Deleuze, this is where the fundamental violence of the “I would prefer not to” resides.

The mutating formula

Even though Deleuze’s approach to Melville’s story will surely stand as one of the most valuable more recent additions to the “Bartleby Industry”,²⁶ there are still some problematic aspects to his reading which should be addressed, lest they lead later readers astray. As important and theoretically liberating as his focus on the *active* aspects of Bartleby’s non-preference is, it could be argued that this conclusion is based on a somewhat simplified reading of the formula.

To explain this, we should look closer at one point that this far has not been touched upon: its mutability. As opposed to less attentive readers, who tend to present it as if it had only one form, this is something Deleuze acknowledges: Bartleby’s generic reply, he says,

has several variants. Sometimes it abandons the conditional and becomes more curt: I PREFER NOT TO. Sometimes, as in its final occurrences, it seems to lose its mystery by being completed by an infinitive, and coupled with *to*: “I prefer to give no answer,” “I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,” “I would prefer not to take a clerkship,” “I would prefer to be doing something else” ... But even in these cases we sense the muted presence of the strange form that continues to haunt Bartleby’s language (Deleuze 1998: 69).

²⁶ Here, I have only had the opportunity to explore the part of his argument connected to the formula. Equally important is his classification of the different types of characters in Melville’s work – *monomaniacs* (for example Ahab, Claggart and Babo), *hypochondriacs* (Benito Cereno, Bartleby and Billy Budd) and *prophets* (Ishmael, Captain Vere and the lawyer) – as well as his opposition between particular characters and those that are true *Originals*, Bartleby belonging to the latter category.

In other words, to Deleuze, these different versions all belong to the same set. This gives him the privilege of focusing on the most common of these, as well as on what he calls its “indispensable complement” (74): “I am not particular,” which Bartleby utters three times during the conversation when the lawyer suggests alternative means of employment to him.

Even though it might be fair to see a statement such as “I prefer not to” or even a specification of something Bartleby would prefer to avoid doing – “... not to make any changes” (Melville 1986: 40), for example – as nothing more than a minor alteration still safely within the boundaries of the set of “I would prefer not to”, this still does not necessarily explain why one should do the same for, say “At present I prefer to give no answer” (26). After all, “preferring to give no answer” is different from “preferring not to give an answer.” The formula’s increasing tendency towards positive preference instead of non-preference becomes even more evident when Bartleby at one point – tired of the bickering of the lawyer, Nippers and Turkey – says that he “would prefer to be left alone here” (27).

This is not to say that these versions could not, in fact, be versions of one and the same “great indeterminate formula [...] which subsists once and for all and in all cases” (Deleuze 1998: 69); but as long as Deleuze only states that this is the case without paying sufficient attention to those instances where the formula is sent into new directions by the twists of Bartleby’s tongue, this weakens his conclusions. The same can be said of the lack of mention of those speech acts which are obviously *not* versions of the formula – unless of course, you are willing to stretch its wording so far that it loses all specificity and ends up being able to encompass any utterance whatsoever. To give an example: when Bartleby finally gives up copying, this is narrated as follows: “Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing

no more writing. ‘Why, how now? what next?’ exclaimed I, ‘do no more writing?’ ‘No more.’ ‘And what is the reason?’ ‘Do you not see the reason for yourself?’ he indifferently replied” (Melville 1986: 28). Here, when the narrator says that Bartleby “had decided upon doing no more writing,” this could of course just be his own rephrasing of another instance of “I would prefer not to”, but the scrivener’s later answers show that even though the formula is an integral part of his communication with his surroundings, it is not the only one. These other parts – statements like the above as well as Bartleby’s enigmatic first comment when the narrator visits him in jail: “I know you [...] and I want nothing to say to you” (43) – would also have to be taken into account if one wishes to gain a proper understanding of the formula and its *modus operandi*; when it is operative and when it is not. The same goes for the fact that it appears much more regularly in a “pure” form during the early stages of the relationship between Bartleby and the narrator, increasingly mutating as the story progresses.

In failing to take aspects such as these properly into consideration, Deleuze makes the formula into more of a monolith than it is – more of a tree than a rhizome, to put it in Deleuzian terms. He thereby ends up inflating, if not the formula’s importance to the story, so at least its destructive effects. Claiming that it “leaves nothing standing in its wake” ignores that it is, after all, the narrator who lives to tell the tale, and not Bartleby. No matter how disconcerting the formula is to the lawyer, lodging itself in his memory as something that refuses to entirely go away, it can hardly claim to have brought him to his knees, either, at least not in the long run. For, as Miller points out in his seminal essay “The Critic as Host”, regarding the impossibility in Shelley’s poetry of lovers ever attaining a higher union: “Language always remains, after they [the lovers] have exhausted or even annihilated

themselves in an attempt to get it right, as the genetic trace starting the cycle all over again” (Miller 2005: 34). The same goes for the love affair between Bartleby and the walls at which he stares in his “dead-wall reveries” – or the affair between him and the political philosophers in question, for that matter: language remains and so does its shadow, the logic of assumptions.

We are now in a better position to understand the unprecedented powers accorded to Bartleby’s strategy by Hardt, Negri and Žižek. While none of them can be said to be particularly influenced by speech-act theory as such, there is little doubt that their approaches to Melville’s story are indebted to Deleuze’s reading. This does not mean they share his main concerns – where he talks of minor literature undermining language, they focus on undermining liberal democracy. They rather follow in the footsteps of his opening up of the text, where his (undoubtedly non-Austinian) engagement with Austin’s legacy allowed us to conceive of the formula as an *active*, subversive strategy, instead of as an impotent retreat from the capitalist world of exploitation.

While such an approach has much to offer, there are also pitfalls. Even though Deleuze doesn’t completely manage to avoid these, his reading still comes across as one that takes Bartleby seriously and – for the most part – listens intently to what the scrivener actually has to say. The same can hardly be said for Hardt and Negri, and only to a certain degree for Žižek, although the latter’s contribution seems to hold possibilities that have yet to be explored. As politically or theoretically tempting as an uncritical praising of an oppositional practice modelled on Bartleby might seem, such a venture will be of little value unless it truly makes an effort to come to terms not only with the strangeness of Melville’s pale and otherworldly (anti)hero, but also with the twists, turns and mutations of the “I would prefer not to”. The equal

slipperiness of scrivener and formula – their mutual resistance to appropriation – have proved and will continue to prove a difficult stumbling block, constantly threatening to undermine the outcome of any critical venture.

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Index

A

Abbey, Edward [324](#); [329](#)
Abrams, M.H. [355](#)
action [9](#); [18](#); [48](#); [60](#); [62](#); [67](#);
[85](#); [88](#); [89](#); [93](#); [94](#); [95](#);
[100](#); [101](#); [107](#); [113](#); [114](#);
[115](#); [134](#); [181](#); [187](#); [190](#);
[192](#); [193](#); [197](#); [199](#); [200](#);
[206](#); [214](#); [215](#); [216](#); [234](#);
[250](#); [254](#); [256](#); [278](#); [291](#);
[293](#); [313](#); [316](#); [317](#); [320](#);
[322](#); [323](#); [325](#); [328](#); [344](#);
[378](#); [381](#); [383](#); [385](#); [386](#);
[409](#)
Adorno, Theodor W. [261](#);
[267](#); [270](#); [275](#); [280](#)
aesthetic experience [138](#); [139](#);
[141](#); [216](#); [235](#); [257](#); [327](#)
Agamben, Giorgio [396](#); [397](#);
[405](#); [407](#); [409](#); [420](#)
Alquié, Ferdinand [235](#); [251](#)
Altdorfer, Albrecht [314](#)
alterity [11](#); [19](#); [87](#); [98](#); [111](#);
[116](#); [117](#); [376](#); [377](#); [386](#);
[389](#)
Althusser, Louis [33](#); [57](#); [87](#)
Andersson, Dag [256](#); [271](#);
[278](#); [280](#)
Angelopoulos, Theo [18](#); [312](#);
[317](#); [320](#); [322](#); [323](#); [327](#);
[328](#)
animating force, power or
energy [9](#); [10](#); [11](#); [13](#); [17](#);
[18](#); [52](#); [84](#); [85](#); [86](#); [87](#); [88](#);
[89](#); [90](#); [93](#); [99](#); [105](#); [106](#);
[109](#); [110](#); [111](#); [116](#); [117](#);
[129](#); [130](#); [139](#); [159](#); [171](#);

[183](#); [187](#); [188](#); [190](#); [191](#);
[192](#); [193](#); [194](#); [197](#); [198](#);
[202](#); [203](#); [206](#); [209](#); [213](#);
[215](#); [216](#); [224](#); [228](#); [234](#);
[236](#); [245](#); [255](#); [268](#); [288](#);
[312](#); [318](#); [321](#); [338](#); [339](#);
[342](#); [344](#); [346](#); [355](#); [371](#);
[403](#); [411](#)

Antonioni, Michelangelo [115](#);
[191](#); [317](#); [322](#); [323](#); [327](#);
[330](#)

Apollinaire, Guillaume [334](#)

Aragon, Louis [269](#)

Aristotle [62](#); [244](#)

Ashcroft, Bill, Garreth Griffiths
& Helen Tiffin [73](#); [81](#)

Athenaeum [8](#)

Austin, J.L. [9](#); [11](#); [15](#); [16](#); [18](#);
[19](#); [20](#); [22](#); [24](#); [31](#); [32](#); [33](#);
[34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [40](#); [41](#); [42](#); [43](#);
[54](#); [57](#); [67](#); [81](#); [87](#); [118](#);
[143](#); [144](#); [152](#); [157](#); [158](#);
[159](#); [161](#); [162](#); [163](#); [193](#);
[197](#); [206](#); [207](#); [216](#); [217](#);
[236](#); [251](#); [395](#); [396](#); [409](#);
[411](#); [412](#); [413](#); [414](#); [419](#);
[420](#)

autopoiesis [142](#); [150](#); [151](#)

Axelrod, Steven G. and Helen
Deese [363](#); [365](#)

B

Bachelard, Gaston [12](#); [22](#); [99](#);
[118](#); [288](#)

Badiou, Alain [396](#); [397](#); [406](#);
[420](#); [421](#)

Bakhtin, Michail [333](#)

- Bal, Mieke [15](#); [22](#)
- Balzac, Honoré de [18](#); [212](#);
[223](#); [224](#); [228](#); [231](#); [233](#);
[235](#); [241](#); [250](#); [251](#); [257](#);
[266](#); [425](#)
- Bange, Christine [84](#); [118](#)
- Barthes, Roland [8](#); [22](#); [25](#);
[109](#); [118](#); [147](#); [191](#); [425](#)
- Bartleby Industry, the [397](#);
[415](#); [416](#)
- Baudelaire, Charles [118](#); [254](#);
[268](#); [276](#); [277](#); [280](#); [307](#);
[308](#); [330](#); [359](#)
- Baudrillard, Jean [141](#); [145](#);
[147](#); [324](#); [329](#)
- Bazin, André [17](#); [22](#); [187](#);
[188](#); [189](#); [190](#); [192](#); [193](#);
[194](#); [195](#); [196](#); [197](#); [213](#);
[216](#); [217](#)
- Beck, Ulrich [141](#); [145](#); [146](#);
[147](#)
- Bell, Clive [288](#); [300](#); [308](#)
- Bell, Vanessa [283](#); [285](#); [287](#);
[288](#); [290](#); [292](#); [297](#); [298](#);
[299](#); [304](#); [308](#)
- Benjamin, Walter [12](#); [19](#); [22](#);
[118](#); [165](#); [184](#); [189](#); [191](#);
[217](#); [218](#); [253](#); [254](#); [255](#);
[256](#); [257](#); [259](#); [260](#); [261](#);
[262](#); [263](#); [264](#); [265](#); [266](#);
[267](#); [268](#); [269](#); [270](#); [271](#);
[272](#); [274](#); [275](#); [276](#); [277](#);
[278](#); [279](#); [280](#); [289](#); [308](#)
- Benveniste, Émile [22](#); [68](#); [81](#);
[152](#); [161](#); [162](#); [163](#); [412](#);
[420](#)
- Bergman, Ingmar [316](#)
- Bergson, Henri [174](#); [176](#); [177](#)
- Berlin [19](#); [145](#); [149](#); [150](#); [253](#);
[255](#); [256](#); [257](#); [259](#); [261](#);
[262](#); [263](#); [264](#); [266](#); [267](#);
[268](#); [269](#); [270](#); [271](#); [273](#);
[275](#); [276](#); [277](#); [278](#); [279](#);
- Bernstein, Michael B. [337](#);
[340](#); [344](#); [363](#)
- Beverungen, Armin and Stephen Dunne [407](#); [420](#)
- Bird, Robert [327](#); [329](#)
- Blair, Emily [286](#); [308](#)
- Blanchot, Maurice [12](#); [22](#); [99](#);
[118](#); [235](#); [251](#)
- Bloomsbury group, the [283](#);
[284](#); [285](#); [286](#); [288](#); [292](#);
[293](#); [295](#); [296](#); [297](#); [298](#);
[300](#); [301](#); [307](#); [308](#); [309](#)
- Boccaccio, Giovanni [314](#)
- body, the [12](#); [32](#); [40](#); [41](#); [60](#);
[64](#); [65](#); [74](#); [75](#); [76](#); [84](#); [87](#);
[88](#); [90](#); [91](#); [98](#); [109](#); [116](#);
[129](#); [130](#); [131](#); [132](#); [137](#);
[145](#); [155](#); [156](#); [157](#); [166](#);
[167](#); [168](#); [170](#); [171](#); [172](#);
[173](#); [174](#); [175](#); [176](#); [177](#);
[178](#); [179](#); [181](#); [183](#); [187](#);
[188](#); [189](#); [190](#); [204](#); [206](#);
[226](#); [244](#); [257](#); [266](#); [269](#);
[272](#); [278](#); [284](#); [326](#); [328](#);
[340](#); [341](#); [355](#); [424](#)
- Böhme, Gernot [128](#); [129](#); [140](#)
- Boorman, JoY [325](#)
- Bordwell, David [323](#); [329](#)
- Borges, Jorge Luis [402](#); [415](#);
[420](#)
- Bosanquet, Theodora [178](#);
[184](#)
- Boué, Rachel [375](#); [392](#)
- Bourdieu, Pierre [141](#); [145](#);
[147](#)
- Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane [12](#); [22](#)

Breslin, James E. [336](#); [337](#);
[363](#)
 Bresson, Robert [17](#); [22](#); [187](#);
[190](#); [192](#); [193](#); [194](#); [196](#);
[197](#); [198](#); [199](#); [200](#); [201](#);
[202](#); [215](#); [217](#)
 Breton, André [18](#); [223](#); [224](#);
[231](#); [232](#); [233](#); [234](#); [235](#);
[237](#); [238](#); [239](#); [240](#); [241](#);
[242](#); [243](#); [245](#); [246](#); [247](#);
[248](#); [249](#); [250](#); [251](#)
 Broadbent, Jim [203](#)
 Brown, Bill [165](#); [184](#); [301](#);
[310](#)
 Burke, Edmund [315](#)
 Butler, Judith [10](#); [15](#); [16](#); [23](#);
[31](#); [32](#); [33](#); [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [37](#);
[38](#); [39](#); [40](#); [44](#); [45](#); [47](#); [50](#);
[57](#); [65](#); [81](#); [143](#); [149](#); [155](#);
[156](#); [157](#); [158](#); [162](#); [164](#);
[166](#); [184](#); [395](#)

C

Cage, Joÿ [127](#)
 Callimachos [344](#)
 Carlson, Marvin [10](#); [23](#); [61](#);
[81](#); [162](#); [164](#)
 Carlyle, Thomas [174](#)
 Carracci, Annibale [314](#)
 Casey, Edward [12](#); [23](#)
 Cassirer, Ernst [10](#); [23](#)
 Cavell, Stanley [15](#); [23](#)
 Cézanne, Paul [296](#); [298](#); [299](#);
[300](#)
 Chase, Cynthia [43](#); [57](#)
 Chekhov, Anton [367](#); [379](#);
[380](#)
 Chénieux-Gendron, Jacqueline
 line [232](#); [251](#)
 Coetzee, J.M. [404](#)

Cohen, Paula Marantz [315](#);
[316](#); [329](#)
 Cohen, Tom [23](#); [40](#); [57](#)
 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor [352](#);
[363](#)
 Cole, Thomas [315](#)
 community [12](#); [13](#); [47](#); [126](#);
[136](#); [137](#); [159](#); [167](#); [168](#);
[169](#); [170](#); [172](#); [174](#); [176](#);
[182](#); [208](#); [209](#); [214](#); [259](#);
[326](#); [405](#); [425](#)
 Conarroe, Joel [337](#); [340](#); [342](#);
[364](#)
 constative [11](#); [158](#); [162](#); [171](#);
[182](#); [245](#); [370](#); [373](#); [410](#);
[411](#); [412](#)
 context [8](#); [16](#); [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [41](#);
[43](#); [44](#); [50](#); [68](#); [87](#); [98](#);
[115](#); [116](#); [142](#); [145](#); [149](#);
[158](#); [160](#); [163](#); [166](#); [167](#);
[178](#); [192](#); [201](#); [229](#); [239](#);
[277](#); [313](#); [321](#); [411](#)
 converging of genres, art forms
 and/or media [7](#); [8](#); [13](#); [17](#);
[19](#); [84](#); [85](#); [91](#); [105](#); [106](#);
[107](#); [110](#); [111](#); [112](#); [113](#);
[114](#); [116](#); [167](#); [196](#); [205](#);
[216](#); [284](#); [300](#); [302](#)
 Cornford, Francis MacDo-
 nald [176](#)
 Cosgrove, Denis [319](#); [329](#)
 Crane, Hart [335](#)
 Crang, Mike and Nigel
 Thrift [12](#); [23](#)
 creativity [8](#); [10](#); [11](#); [12](#); [19](#);
[84](#); [85](#); [86](#); [87](#); [88](#); [89](#); [90](#);
[98](#); [100](#); [106](#); [108](#); [110](#);
[116](#); [224](#); [229](#); [236](#); [245](#);
[250](#); [288](#); [299](#); [304](#); [334](#);
[346](#)
 Cruze, James [316](#)

Culler, Jonathan [15](#); [23](#); [395](#);
[420](#)
Currie, Gregory [188](#); [217](#)
Cusimano, Nadia [145](#); [146](#);
[147](#); [148](#); [164](#)

D

Darwin, George H. [170](#)
Davies, JoŸ Langdon [172](#)
Dawkins, Richard [415](#); [420](#)
Day-Lewis, Daniel [203](#); [204](#)
de Certeau, Michel [12](#); [23](#)
Deleuze, Gilles [10](#); [20](#); [202](#);
[203](#); [217](#); [313](#); [329](#); [397](#);
[398](#); [407](#); [408](#); [409](#); [410](#);
[413](#); [414](#); [416](#); [417](#); [418](#);
[419](#); [420](#)
Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Par-
net [414](#); [415](#); [421](#)
Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guat-
tari [12](#); [23](#); [408](#); [421](#)
de Man, Paul [10](#); [23](#); [24](#); [26](#);
[40](#); [55](#); [57](#); [87](#); [218](#); [254](#);
[281](#); [355](#); [356](#); [364](#)
De Niro, Robert [192](#)
Derrida, Jacques [8](#); [10](#); [15](#);
[16](#); [24](#); [27](#); [31](#); [32](#); [33](#); [34](#);
[35](#); [36](#); [40](#); [43](#); [44](#); [45](#); [56](#);
[57](#); [58](#); [87](#); [118](#); [156](#); [158](#);
[162](#); [163](#); [164](#); [193](#); [277](#);
[373](#); [374](#); [375](#); [376](#); [377](#);
[388](#); [392](#); [395](#); [408](#); [409](#);
[421](#); [425](#)
Descartes, René [40](#)
Diaz, Cameron [212](#)
DiCaprio, Leonardo [203](#); [204](#);
[205](#)
Dickens, Charles [55](#); [58](#); [426](#)
Diderot, Denis [381](#)
Dinesen, Isak [69](#); [73](#); [80](#); [81](#)

discourse [11](#); [13](#); [37](#); [66](#); [67](#);
[72](#); [73](#); [82](#); [87](#); [88](#); [90](#);
[91](#); [95](#); [98](#); [100](#); [105](#); [107](#);
[109](#); [110](#); [142](#); [144](#); [146](#);
[147](#); [149](#); [150](#); [154](#); [155](#);
[160](#); [163](#); [166](#); [171](#); [172](#);
[173](#); [205](#); [346](#); [358](#)
Dolar, Mladen [84](#); [118](#)
domesticity [108](#); [272](#); [283](#);
[284](#); [286](#); [287](#); [288](#); [289](#);
[292](#); [295](#); [298](#); [301](#); [302](#);
[303](#); [304](#); [305](#); [306](#); [307](#)
Dos Passos, JoŸ [195](#)
Dostoevsky, Fyodor [198](#); [371](#);
[373](#); [376](#); [377](#); [388](#)
dramatisation [52](#); [55](#); [113](#)
dedramatisation [107](#); [114](#);
[313](#); [322](#); [323](#)
Dreyer, Carl-Theodor [322](#);
[326](#)
Duckworth, George [288](#); [292](#);
[295](#)
Duckworth, Gerald [288](#); [292](#)
Dumont, Bruno [18](#); [312](#); [317](#);
[320](#); [322](#); [324](#); [326](#)
Duras, Marguerite [17](#); [83](#); [84](#);
[85](#); [86](#); [87](#); [88](#); [89](#); [91](#); [92](#);
[102](#); [110](#); [111](#); [115](#); [117](#);
[118](#); [119](#); [120](#); [121](#); [425](#);
[426](#)
E
Eagleton, Terry [24](#)
Eisenstein, Sergei M. [210](#);
[318](#); [319](#); [329](#)
El Greco [314](#)
Eliot, George [15](#); [31](#); [41](#); [42](#);
[43](#); [44](#); [45](#); [46](#); [47](#); [48](#); [49](#);
[50](#); [51](#); [52](#); [53](#); [54](#); [58](#);
[218](#); [359](#)
Eliot, T.S. [336](#); [359](#)

ellipsis [115](#); [116](#); [313](#)
Ellis, Havelock [172](#)
enargeia [244](#)
energeia [62](#)
enunciation [9](#); [19](#); [34](#); [68](#);
[180](#); [377](#); [385](#)
Esterhammer, Angela [10](#); [24](#);
[65](#); [82](#)
etiologies, aesthetic speech
acts as [11](#); [36](#); [183](#); [414](#)
event [51](#); [62](#); [67](#); [69](#); [88](#); [106](#);
[108](#); [109](#); [114](#); [135](#); [136](#);
[138](#); [142](#); [143](#); [149](#); [151](#);
[160](#); [166](#); [205](#); [242](#); [260](#);
[278](#); [322](#); [325](#); [390](#); [395](#)
eventness of performance [16](#);
[124](#); [135](#); [136](#)

F

fascism [171](#); [178](#); [180](#)
fashion [104](#); [123](#); [147](#); [157](#);
[166](#); [168](#); [169](#); [171](#); [174](#);
[179](#); [185](#); [230](#); [243](#); [263](#);
[424](#)
Faulkner, William [87](#); [195](#)
felicitous speech acts [34](#); [35](#);
[43](#); [54](#); [152](#); [388](#)
Felman, Shoshana [10](#); [24](#); [67](#);
[82](#); [395](#)
Feuerbach, Ludwig [254](#); [280](#)
field of action, poem as [334](#);
[342](#); [347](#); [355](#); [356](#); [362](#)
Fischer-Lichte, Erika [10](#); [15](#);
[16](#); [24](#); [123](#); [124](#); [131](#);
[139](#); [140](#); [142](#); [143](#); [144](#);
[149](#); [150](#); [151](#); [157](#); [158](#);
[159](#); [160](#); [161](#); [162](#); [163](#);
[164](#); [166](#); [167](#); [168](#); [174](#);
[176](#); [178](#); [184](#); [423](#)
Flamel, Nicolas [246](#)

Flaubert, Gustave [27](#); [257](#);
[273](#); [275](#); [330](#); [426](#)
Flügel, J.C. [172](#); [173](#); [174](#);
[177](#); [178](#); [179](#); [180](#); [181](#);
[184](#)
Foley, Barbara [398](#); [421](#)
Fontaine, Jean [198](#); [199](#); [200](#)
Ford, JoY [316](#)
Foucault, Michel [34](#); [67](#); [82](#)
Frank, Joseph [12](#); [24](#); [301](#);
[308](#)
Frazer, James George [175](#); [176](#)
Freud, Sigmund [45](#); [289](#)
Froula, Christine [301](#); [308](#)
Fry, Roger [284](#); [288](#); [294](#);
[295](#); [296](#); [297](#); [298](#); [299](#);
[300](#); [302](#); [303](#); [304](#); [308](#);
[309](#)

G

Gade, Rune and Anne Jer-
slev [164](#)
Gauguin, Paul [296](#); [298](#)
gaze [85](#); [86](#); [93](#); [96](#); [97](#); [98](#);
[100](#); [101](#); [104](#); [106](#); [112](#);
[113](#); [114](#); [115](#); [116](#); [150](#);
[204](#); [205](#); [214](#); [216](#); [341](#)
gender [32](#); [33](#); [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [37](#);
[38](#); [39](#); [40](#); [50](#); [57](#); [65](#);
[143](#); [147](#); [149](#); [155](#); [157](#);
[171](#); [179](#); [181](#); [182](#); [183](#);
[284](#); [287](#); [289](#); [290](#); [306](#);
[424](#)
Gennep, Arnold van [134](#); [140](#)
Giacometti, Alberto [234](#); [235](#)
Gillespie, Diane Filby [304](#);
[308](#); [309](#)
Gjerdén, Jorunn S. [19](#); [367](#);
[392](#); [423](#)
Gleeson, Brendon [203](#)
Göbbels, Joseph [175](#)

Godard, Jean-Luc [192](#)
Goffman, Erving [65](#); [82](#); [142](#);
[164](#)
Gogh, Vincent van [296](#)
Göring, Hermann [175](#)
Gosselin-Noat, Monique [375](#);
[392](#)
Gould, Timothy [181](#); [184](#)
Grant, Duncan [288](#); [297](#); [298](#);
[299](#)
Greenaway, Peter [326](#); [330](#)
Griffith, D.W. [316](#)
Grønstad, Asbjørn [18](#); [311](#);
[424](#)
Guenther, Irene [171](#); [184](#)
Gullestad, Anders M. [7](#); [19](#);
[395](#); [424](#)
Gumbrecht, Hans [327](#); [330](#)
Gustafsson, Henrik [317](#); [330](#)

H

Habermas, Jürgen [67](#); [82](#); [399](#)
habitus [166](#); [170](#)
Hall, Kira [24](#)
Hamill, Pete [209](#); [217](#)
Haneke, Michael [326](#)
Hardt, Michael and Antonio
Negri [397](#); [403](#); [404](#); [405](#);
[407](#); [419](#); [421](#)
Harrison, Jane Ellen [176](#); [182](#)
Hart, William S. [316](#)
Heard, Gerald [172](#)
Hegel, G.W.F. [174](#)
Heidegger, Martin [12](#); [25](#);
[288](#); [392](#)
Heinich, Nathalie [84](#); [119](#)
Hell [229](#)
Hellman, Monte [317](#)
Heraclitus [351](#); [352](#)
Herodotus [344](#)
Hessel, Franz [268](#); [269](#); [280](#)

Hill, Leslie [84](#); [119](#)
Hipponax [345](#)
Hitler, Adolf [132](#); [174](#); [175](#);
[261](#); [297](#)
Hölderlin, Friedrich [352](#); [364](#)
Homer [344](#)
Hopper, Dennis [317](#)
Horace [314](#); [344](#); [352](#); [364](#)
Hsiao-hsien, Hou [312](#)
Hume, David [207](#); [315](#)
Husserl, Edmund [375](#); [376](#);
[392](#)

I

ideology [33](#); [37](#); [50](#); [84](#); [87](#);
[88](#); [91](#); [105](#); [116](#); [166](#);
[174](#); [181](#); [183](#); [239](#); [254](#);
[319](#); [320](#); [406](#)
de-ideologisation [111](#); [115](#)
impurity [8](#); [13](#); [191](#); [194](#); [205](#);
[216](#)
infelicitous speech acts [34](#);
[413](#)
interpellation [33](#); [50](#); [166](#);
[170](#); [174](#); [178](#); [179](#)
intersubjectivity [369](#); [375](#); [376](#)
iterability [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [87](#); [163](#);
[388](#)
iteration [35](#); [44](#); [98](#); [149](#)

J

Jackson, J.B. [319](#); [330](#)
Jakobson, Roman [25](#); [68](#); [82](#);
[87](#); [119](#)
James, Henry [49](#); [58](#); [218](#)
Jameson, Fredric [191](#); [217](#)
Jancsó, Miklós [317](#)
Jay, Martin [329](#)
Jefferson, Ann [370](#); [371](#); [375](#);
[377](#); [392](#)
Jeffers, Robinson [318](#)

Jespersen, Otto [68](#)

Joad, C.E.M. [172](#); [184](#)

Joyce, James [195](#)

K

Kafka, Franz [73](#); [76](#); [79](#); [80](#);
[81](#); [82](#); [272](#); [371](#); [401](#);
[402](#); [408](#); [421](#)

Kant, Immanuel [65](#); [218](#)

Keats, JoY [338](#)

Kierkegaard, Søren [8](#)

Kittang, Atle [7](#); [10](#); [18](#); [223](#);
[424](#)

Knapp, Bettina L. [84](#); [119](#)

Koppen, Randi [16](#); [165](#); [424](#)

L

Lacan, Jacques [84](#); [119](#); [406](#);
[421](#)

Lamba, Jacqueline [237](#); [240](#)

landscape [12](#); [18](#); [80](#); [81](#); [87](#);
[88](#); [100](#); [102](#); [104](#); [107](#);
[108](#); [115](#); [116](#); [189](#); [190](#);
[263](#); [266](#); [269](#); [270](#); [311](#);
[312](#); [313](#); [314](#); [315](#); [316](#);
[317](#); [318](#); [319](#); [320](#); [321](#);
[322](#); [326](#); [327](#); [328](#); [330](#);
[331](#); [340](#); [364](#)

Lang, Fritz [191](#); [218](#)

Larsen, Svend Erik [7](#); [10](#); [12](#);
[16](#); [21](#); [25](#); [59](#); [61](#); [67](#); [69](#);
[82](#); [424](#)

Laub, Dori [67](#); [82](#)

Le Corbusier [296](#); [308](#)

Lefebvre, Henri [12](#); [25](#); [311](#);
[312](#)

Lefebvre, Martin [319](#); [322](#);
[330](#)

legibility [88](#); [109](#); [116](#)

Lehmann, Hans-Thies [25](#)

Les Cahiers du Cinéma [17](#);

[119](#); [189](#); [192](#); [197](#)

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim [25](#)

Lévinas, Emmanuel [47](#); [376](#);
[377](#); [389](#); [390](#); [392](#)

Light, Alison [287](#); [288](#)

liminality [16](#); [124](#); [134](#); [135](#);
[136](#); [137](#); [138](#); [144](#); [159](#)

Lloyd, Margaret Glynne [336](#);
[337](#); [364](#)

Locke, JoY [315](#)

locutionary [374](#); [412](#)

illocutionary [11](#); [67](#); [236](#); [412](#)

perlocutionary [179](#); [183](#); [236](#);
[412](#)

logos [89](#); [99](#)

Lombardo, Patrizia [7](#); [17](#); [25](#);
[187](#); [246](#); [425](#)

London [49](#); [294](#); [296](#)

Lorrain, Claude [314](#)

Los Angeles [23](#); [310](#); [324](#); [364](#)

Lynch, David [188](#); [189](#); [217](#)

Lytard, Jean-François [38](#); [58](#);
[277](#); [280](#)

M

MacCarthy, Desmond [294](#);
[296](#); [308](#)

Mallarmé, Stéphane [197](#)

Manet, Édouard [294](#)

Mansfelt, Jaap [364](#)

Mao, Douglas [165](#); [184](#)

Marder, Elissa [322](#); [330](#)

Marx, Karl [26](#); [87](#); [254](#); [280](#);
[281](#)

Marx, Leo [401](#); [421](#)

materiality [40](#); [66](#); [74](#); [87](#); [89](#);
[100](#); [101](#); [115](#); [117](#); [126](#);

[127](#); [133](#); [150](#); [157](#); [166](#);

[177](#); [258](#); [264](#); [266](#); [278](#)

Matisse, Henri [296](#); [298](#)

- Maturana, Humberto and
Francisco Varela [142](#)
- Mazzaro, Jerome [337](#); [364](#)
- McCall, Dan [397](#); [421](#)
- McCarthy, Todd [209](#); [218](#)
- mediality [63](#); [80](#)
- Meinig, D.W. [319](#); [330](#)
- Melville, Herman [20](#); [396](#);
[397](#); [398](#); [400](#); [401](#); [402](#);
[405](#); [406](#); [407](#); [408](#); [414](#);
[415](#); [416](#); [417](#); [418](#); [419](#);
[420](#); [421](#); [424](#)
- memory [19](#); [133](#); [195](#); [210](#);
[215](#); [253](#); [254](#); [255](#); [259](#);
[260](#); [261](#); [262](#); [267](#); [269](#);
[270](#); [276](#); [277](#); [278](#); [279](#);
[288](#); [289](#); [319](#); [327](#); [331](#);
[418](#)
- Michelangelo [195](#)
- Miller, Jacques-Alain [119](#)
- Miller, J. Hillis [10](#); [12](#); [15](#); [16](#);
[17](#); [20](#); [26](#); [31](#); [55](#); [57](#); [87](#);
[88](#); [110](#); [116](#); [143](#); [157](#);
[158](#); [187](#); [189](#); [190](#); [192](#);
[193](#); [197](#); [201](#); [216](#); [218](#);
[254](#); [277](#); [281](#); [341](#); [342](#);
[357](#); [364](#); [373](#); [374](#); [375](#);
[376](#); [389](#); [392](#); [410](#); [411](#);
[412](#); [418](#); [419](#); [421](#); [425](#)
- Milton, JoY [314](#)
- mimesis [11](#); [86](#); [98](#); [99](#); [101](#);
[110](#); [112](#); [149](#); [189](#); [232](#);
[235](#); [236](#); [240](#); [241](#); [271](#);
[327](#); [356](#)
- Ming-liang, Tsai [312](#)
- Minogue, Valerie [368](#); [392](#)
- minor literature [408](#); [414](#); [419](#)
- Mitchell, W.T.J. [310](#); [313](#);
[319](#); [320](#); [330](#)
- mode(s), of experience, re-
presentation, knowledge,
perception, speech acts,
etc. [34](#); [83](#); [95](#); [111](#); [112](#);
[114](#); [115](#); [124](#); [129](#); [133](#);
[135](#); [136](#); [157](#); [168](#); [177](#);
[182](#); [191](#); [196](#); [244](#); [245](#);
[315](#); [326](#); [328](#); [356](#); [369](#);
[381](#); [405](#); [414](#)
obliqueness [83](#); [107](#); [111](#)
slowness [83](#); [107](#); [111](#); [192](#);
[324](#)
- Montaigne, Michel de [45](#)
- Moore, G.E. [291](#)
- Moravia, Alberto [323](#)
- Mottet, Jean [311](#); [330](#)
- Moxey, Keith [328](#); [330](#)
- Murray, Gilbert [176](#)
- Mussolini, Benito [132](#); [174](#);
[175](#); [297](#)
- mythos [89](#); [93](#); [99](#)
- N**
- Nancy, Jean-Luc [321](#); [330](#)
- Natali, Maurizia [311](#); [330](#)
- nature [64](#); [268](#); [284](#); [314](#);
[315](#); [319](#); [336](#); [340](#); [355](#);
[356](#); [359](#); [360](#); [362](#)
- Neeson, Liam [204](#)
- Neruda, Pablo [336](#)
- New York [191](#); [192](#); [193](#);
[202](#); [203](#); [204](#); [206](#); [208](#);
[209](#); [210](#); [212](#); [213](#); [214](#);
[216](#); [398](#); [403](#)
- Nietzsche, Friedrich [8](#); [10](#); [26](#);
[174](#); [176](#); [182](#)
- Noé, Gaspar [326](#)
- Nouvelle Vague [190](#); [192](#)
- Nussbaum, Martha [188](#); [218](#)
- O**
- O'Beirne, Emer [386](#); [387](#); [392](#)

- Ohmann, Richard [10](#); [26](#); [236](#); [251](#)
- Olson, Charles [333](#); [334](#); [336](#); [364](#)
- Omega Workshops, the [297](#); [298](#); [300](#); [304](#); [307](#); [309](#)
- opsis [89](#); [99](#); [100](#); [101](#); [104](#)
- OULIPO Group, the [115](#)
- Ovid [314](#)
- P**
- parasitic, aesthetic speech acts
as [11](#); [18](#); [36](#); [143](#); [144](#); [159](#); [162](#); [236](#); [424](#)
- Paris [18](#); [102](#); [199](#); [223](#); [224](#); [225](#); [226](#); [227](#); [228](#); [229](#); [230](#); [231](#); [233](#); [238](#); [242](#); [243](#); [246](#); [250](#); [255](#); [261](#); [267](#); [268](#); [269](#); [317](#); [374](#)
- pathos [89](#); [99](#); [405](#)
- Patinir, Joachim [314](#)
- Paulicelli, Eugenia [172](#); [185](#)
- perception [9](#); [11](#); [17](#); [90](#); [110](#); [125](#); [128](#); [132](#); [133](#); [134](#); [136](#); [137](#); [138](#); [140](#); [145](#); [177](#); [190](#); [191](#); [193](#); [194](#); [202](#); [269](#); [270](#); [273](#); [274](#); [302](#); [306](#); [316](#); [325](#); [328](#); [353](#)
- Perec, George [115](#)
- Perez, Gilberto [312](#); [318](#); [330](#)
- performance [14](#); [16](#); [31](#); [32](#); [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [38](#); [39](#); [42](#); [45](#); [46](#); [48](#); [50](#); [56](#); [59](#); [60](#); [61](#); [62](#); [63](#); [64](#); [65](#); [66](#); [67](#); [68](#); [69](#); [70](#); [71](#); [72](#); [73](#); [74](#); [75](#); [76](#); [77](#); [78](#); [79](#); [80](#); [81](#); [123](#); [124](#); [125](#); [126](#); [127](#); [128](#); [129](#); [130](#); [131](#); [132](#); [134](#); [135](#); [136](#); [137](#); [138](#); [139](#); [140](#); [141](#); [142](#); [143](#); [145](#); [147](#); [148](#); [149](#); [150](#); [151](#); [152](#); [153](#); [154](#); [155](#); [159](#); [160](#); [162](#); [165](#); [166](#); [167](#); [168](#); [169](#); [170](#); [174](#); [175](#); [177](#); [179](#); [183](#); [188](#); [206](#); [212](#); [213](#); [214](#); [236](#); [238](#); [313](#); [320](#); [412](#); [424](#)
- performative [9](#); [11](#); [14](#); [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [43](#); [44](#); [56](#); [85](#); [86](#); [90](#); [98](#); [144](#); [152](#); [157](#); [158](#); [159](#); [162](#); [215](#); [236](#); [375](#); [409](#); [410](#)
- performativity [8](#); [9](#); [10](#); [11](#); [12](#); [13](#); [14](#); [15](#); [16](#); [17](#); [18](#); [19](#); [24](#); [26](#); [27](#); [31](#); [32](#); [34](#); [35](#); [36](#); [37](#); [38](#); [39](#); [41](#); [42](#); [43](#); [44](#); [45](#); [46](#); [50](#); [51](#); [53](#); [54](#); [55](#); [56](#); [58](#); [60](#); [61](#); [62](#); [63](#); [64](#); [65](#); [66](#); [67](#); [68](#); [69](#); [70](#); [72](#); [73](#); [76](#); [80](#); [81](#); [84](#); [85](#); [86](#); [100](#); [110](#); [115](#); [128](#); [130](#); [140](#); [143](#); [149](#); [152](#); [155](#); [156](#); [157](#); [158](#); [159](#); [160](#); [161](#); [162](#); [163](#); [165](#); [166](#); [167](#); [168](#); [170](#); [171](#); [172](#); [173](#); [174](#); [175](#); [176](#); [177](#); [178](#); [179](#); [180](#); [181](#); [182](#); [183](#); [184](#); [187](#); [188](#); [190](#); [191](#); [192](#); [193](#); [194](#); [197](#); [198](#); [201](#); [202](#); [206](#); [207](#); [208](#); [209](#); [212](#); [213](#); [214](#); [215](#); [216](#); [235](#); [236](#); [245](#); [248](#); [250](#); [253](#); [254](#); [255](#); [256](#); [260](#); [278](#); [279](#); [320](#); [321](#); [323](#); [344](#); [367](#); [369](#); [370](#); [373](#); [374](#); [376](#); [377](#); [388](#); [389](#); [395](#); [410](#); [411](#); [412](#)
- Perloff, Marjorie [334](#); [337](#); [342](#); [364](#)
- Petrey, Sandy [26](#); [396](#); [421](#)

- Picasso, Pablo [296](#); [298](#); [300](#)
 Pindar [344](#)
 place. *See* space
 Plato [344](#); [352](#)
 Pliny [314](#)
 Pluth, Ed [406](#); [421](#)
 Polkinghorne, Donald [67](#); [82](#)
 Poole, William [211](#)
 Porter, Edwin S. [312](#)
 Poulet, Georges [12](#); [26](#)
 Pound, Ezra [333](#); [334](#); [335](#);
 [359](#); [363](#)
 Poussin, Claude [314](#)
 Pratt, Mary Louise [10](#); [26](#)
 preference [159](#); [414](#); [415](#); [417](#)
 non-preference [19](#); [395](#); [397](#);
 [405](#); [416](#); [417](#)
 presence [36](#); [83](#); [89](#); [96](#); [101](#);
 [102](#); [115](#); [128](#); [130](#); [131](#);
 [132](#); [133](#); [134](#); [136](#); [151](#);
 [152](#); [179](#); [182](#); [183](#); [200](#);
 [206](#); [208](#); [209](#); [212](#); [226](#);
 [237](#); [244](#); [256](#); [278](#); [311](#);
 [314](#); [327](#); [328](#); [361](#); [381](#);
 [383](#); [386](#); [387](#); [389](#); [416](#)
 co-presence [17](#); [61](#); [63](#); [64](#);
 [65](#); [67](#); [124](#); [129](#); [136](#);
 [140](#); [142](#)
 Proust, Marcel [260](#); [270](#); [273](#);
 [277](#); [280](#); [425](#); [426](#)
- Q**
 Queliz, Sasa [154](#)
 Quick, Jonathan R. [297](#); [304](#);
 [309](#)
- R**
 Racine, Jean [195](#)
 Rafelson, Bob [317](#)
 Rancière, Jacques [10](#); [17](#); [19](#);
 [26](#); [89](#); [90](#); [91](#); [95](#); [99](#);
 [105](#); [110](#); [111](#); [120](#); [256](#);
 [257](#); [258](#); [266](#); [267](#); [272](#);
 [273](#); [274](#); [275](#); [281](#); [397](#)
 aesthetic regime of art,
 the [89](#); [91](#); [111](#); [257](#);
 [258](#); [259](#); [266](#); [270](#)
 ethical regime of images,
 the [257](#)
 representative regime of art,
 the [89](#); [93](#); [257](#); [266](#)
 reader address [367](#); [368](#); [369](#);
 [378](#); [381](#); [384](#); [386](#); [387](#)
 Reed, Christopher [288](#); [300](#);
 [301](#); [307](#); [309](#)
 Reed, Naomi C. [402](#); [403](#);
 [405](#); [421](#)
 Reinach, Adolf [207](#); [218](#)
 Reinhardt, Max [168](#)
 Reinton, Ragnhild Evang [7](#);
 [19](#); [253](#); [425](#)
 remembrance [19](#); [255](#); [257](#);
 [259](#); [270](#); [277](#); [278](#)
 Renoir, Jean [318](#)
 repetition [32](#); [33](#); [35](#); [87](#); [157](#);
 [198](#); [256](#); [277](#)
 representation, the order
 of [133](#); [134](#); [136](#)
 Rexroth, Kenneth [359](#); [365](#)
 Reygadas, Carlos [18](#); [312](#);
 [317](#); [320](#); [322](#); [326](#); [327](#)
 Richard, Jean-Pierre [10](#); [12](#);
 [27](#)
 Ricœur, Paul [67](#); [82](#)
 Riddel, Joseph N. [337](#); [365](#)
 Rimbaud, Arthur [241](#); [246](#);
 [334](#); [357](#)
 Roberts, JoY Hawley [304](#);
 [309](#)
 Rohdie, Sam [323](#); [330](#)
 Rohmer, Eric [192](#)
 Rorty, Richard [399](#)

Roselt, Jens [142](#); [164](#)
Rosner, Victoria [291](#); [300](#);
[305](#); [309](#)
Rossellini, Roberto [189](#); [190](#);
[216](#); [323](#)
Rushdie, Salman [73](#)
Ruskin, JoY [314](#); [425](#)
Rykner, Arnaud [375](#); [392](#)

S

Sætre, Lars [7](#); [10](#); [17](#); [18](#); [43](#);
[83](#); [120](#); [426](#)
Salecl, Renata [84](#); [120](#)
Sankey, Benjamin [337](#); [365](#)
Sarraute, Nathalie [19](#); [367](#);
[368](#); [369](#); [370](#); [371](#); [372](#);
[373](#); [375](#); [376](#); [377](#); [378](#);
[379](#); [381](#); [386](#); [387](#); [388](#);
[389](#); [390](#); [391](#); [392](#); [423](#)
sartorial [16](#); [165](#); [166](#); [169](#);
[171](#); [173](#); [176](#); [178](#); [180](#);
[181](#)
Sartre, Jean-Paul [99](#); [120](#); [323](#)
Sauter, Willmar [142](#); [164](#)
sayability [89](#); [105](#); [111](#)
Schama, Simon [319](#); [331](#)
Schelling, Friedrich von [315](#)
Schiller, Friedrich [258](#); [271](#);
[279](#)
Schmidt, Peter [336](#); [365](#)
Schoeser, Mary [298](#); [309](#)
Schurl, Katia [145](#); [146](#); [147](#);
[148](#); [164](#)
Scorsese, Martin [17](#); [25](#); [187](#);
[190](#); [192](#); [193](#); [201](#); [203](#);
[204](#); [206](#); [208](#); [209](#); [210](#);
[211](#); [212](#); [213](#); [218](#); [425](#)
Searle, JoY [15](#); [27](#); [67](#); [82](#);
[207](#); [236](#)
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky [10](#);
[26](#); [27](#); [32](#); [184](#)

Seel, Martin [27](#); [150](#); [151](#);
[164](#); [327](#); [331](#)
Selboe, Tone [19](#); [283](#); [426](#)
Selz, Jean [259](#)
Sennett, Richard [141](#); [147](#)
Seurat, Georges [296](#)
Shakespeare, William [51](#); [52](#);
[212](#)
shifter [87](#)
shifter functions [11](#); [68](#); [87](#);
[385](#)
SÛlovsky, Viktor [342](#)
Silverman, Kaja [326](#); [331](#)
Simmel, Georg [27](#); [165](#); [168](#);
[185](#)
Sitney, P. Adams [311](#); [331](#)
Smith, Herbert F. [421](#)
Sokurov, Aleksandr [317](#)
Sophocles [181](#); [185](#)
space [8](#); [9](#); [11](#); [12](#); [13](#); [17](#); [18](#);
[36](#); [37](#); [51](#); [52](#); [61](#); [62](#); [63](#);
[64](#); [65](#); [67](#); [68](#); [69](#); [70](#); [71](#);
[72](#); [74](#); [75](#); [83](#); [84](#); [85](#); [86](#);
[87](#); [88](#); [89](#); [90](#); [93](#); [94](#);
[95](#); [98](#); [99](#); [100](#); [101](#); [102](#);
[104](#); [105](#); [106](#); [107](#); [109](#);
[110](#); [111](#); [113](#); [114](#); [115](#);
[116](#); [117](#); [124](#); [127](#); [128](#);
[129](#); [130](#); [132](#); [136](#); [138](#);
[142](#); [147](#); [150](#); [152](#); [153](#);
[155](#); [159](#); [160](#); [173](#); [188](#);
[191](#); [192](#); [199](#); [200](#); [202](#);
[203](#); [204](#); [206](#); [207](#); [214](#);
[215](#); [216](#); [224](#); [229](#); [231](#);
[234](#); [247](#); [250](#); [255](#); [262](#);
[267](#); [269](#); [270](#); [275](#); [278](#);
[283](#); [286](#); [289](#); [295](#); [303](#);
[306](#); [307](#); [312](#); [313](#); [314](#);
[317](#); [320](#); [321](#); [322](#); [323](#);
[328](#); [333](#); [335](#); [338](#); [343](#);

[347](#); [355](#); [358](#); [362](#); [382](#);
[385](#); [388](#); [406](#)
 speech-act theory [15](#); [18](#); [20](#);
[32](#); [86](#); [167](#); [236](#); [245](#);
[395](#); [398](#); [409](#); [412](#); [419](#)
 Spencer, Herbert [168](#); [185](#)
 Stalin [132](#); [297](#)
 Stephen, Karen [177](#)
 Sterne, Laurence [45](#)
 Stocker, Karl [145](#); [146](#); [147](#);
[148](#); [164](#)
 St Paul [180](#); [396](#); [397](#); [420](#)
 Strachey, Lytton [288](#); [290](#);
[291](#)
 Strand, Anders Kristian [18](#);
[333](#); [426](#)
 Stüssi, Anna [271](#); [281](#)
 sublime, the [230](#); [315](#); [322](#);
[350](#)
 Symonds, Joÿ Addington [345](#)
 Szondi, Peter [27](#); [277](#); [281](#)

T

tableau [113](#); [114](#); [313](#); [327](#);
[328](#)
 Tarkovsky, Andrei [317](#); [327](#);
[329](#)
 temps mort [112](#); [113](#); [115](#);
[116](#); [313](#); [322](#); [323](#); [327](#)
 textual action (see also ac-
 tion) [9](#); [10](#); [11](#); [13](#); [17](#);
[18](#); [20](#); [83](#); [84](#); [85](#); [86](#); [88](#);
[89](#); [90](#); [91](#); [99](#); [100](#); [105](#);
[110](#); [111](#); [115](#); [116](#); [117](#);
[190](#); [194](#); [212](#); [213](#); [216](#);
[223](#); [224](#); [231](#); [232](#); [233](#);
[235](#); [236](#); [237](#); [240](#); [246](#);
[249](#); [250](#); [253](#); [255](#); [260](#);
[270](#); [278](#); [279](#); [284](#); [333](#);
[334](#); [337](#); [343](#); [360](#); [362](#);
[426](#)

Theocritus [314](#)
 Thygesen, Mads [16](#); [141](#); [427](#)
 Tolstoy, Leo [45](#)
 Tönnies, Ferdinand [168](#); [169](#);
[185](#)
 topography [7](#); [8](#); [9](#); [11](#); [12](#);
[13](#); [26](#); [84](#); [85](#); [88](#); [90](#); [98](#);
[100](#); [101](#); [102](#); [103](#); [104](#);
[107](#); [109](#); [110](#); [112](#); [116](#);
[202](#); [223](#); [231](#); [232](#); [233](#);
[235](#); [239](#); [250](#); [267](#); [313](#);
[344](#); [349](#); [363](#); [426](#)
 tropisms [19](#); [370](#); [373](#); [375](#);
[378](#); [387](#); [388](#); [390](#)
 Truffaut, François [191](#); [192](#);
[194](#); [218](#)
 Tuan, Yi-Fu [12](#); [27](#)
 Turner, Frederick Jackson [315](#);
[331](#)
 Turner, Victor [134](#); [140](#)

U

uptake, securing of [35](#); [207](#);
[412](#); [413](#)
 utterance [9](#); [11](#); [34](#); [36](#); [41](#);
[42](#); [62](#); [68](#); [69](#); [79](#); [80](#);
[143](#); [152](#); [155](#); [156](#); [158](#);
[159](#); [161](#); [162](#); [163](#); [207](#);
[208](#); [214](#); [277](#); [367](#); [370](#);
[371](#); [372](#); [374](#); [381](#); [384](#);
[400](#); [409](#); [412](#); [417](#)

V

Velde, Henry van de [169](#); [185](#)
 Virgil [314](#)
 Virilio, Paul [12](#); [27](#); [203](#); [218](#)
 visibility [89](#); [93](#); [102](#); [105](#);
[106](#); [110](#); [111](#); [113](#); [114](#);
[115](#)
 Vismann, Cornelia [400](#); [411](#);
[422](#)

W

Wagner, Linda Welshimer [337](#);

[365](#)

Wajda, Andrzej [317](#)

Walton, Kendall L. [27](#); [188](#);

[218](#); [365](#)

Waltz, Sasha [16](#); [141](#); [142](#);

[143](#); [144](#); [145](#); [150](#); [151](#);

[152](#); [160](#); [162](#); [163](#)

Wamberg, Jacob [314](#); [331](#)

Watney, Simon [298](#); [309](#)

Weir, Peter [317](#)

Wenders, Wim [317](#)

Wharton, Edith [203](#)

Whitaker, Thomas R. [337](#);

[365](#)

Whittemore, Reed [340](#); [365](#)

Whitworth, Michael H. [299](#);

[305](#); [309](#)

Williams, Raymond [27](#); [188](#);

[218](#)

Williams, W.C. [18](#); [333](#); [334](#);

[335](#); [336](#); [337](#); [338](#); [339](#);

[340](#); [341](#); [342](#); [343](#); [344](#);

[345](#); [346](#); [347](#); [348](#); [349](#);

[350](#); [351](#); [352](#); [353](#); [354](#);

[355](#); [356](#); [357](#); [358](#); [359](#);

[360](#); [361](#); [362](#); [363](#); [364](#);

[365](#)

Willis, Sharon [84](#); [86](#); [121](#)

Witte, Bernd [255](#); [261](#); [262](#);

[264](#); [281](#)

Wolf, Adrian [283](#)

Wolf, Leonard [170](#); [171](#);

[172](#); [174](#); [175](#); [176](#); [177](#);

[178](#); [182](#); [183](#); [185](#); [302](#);

[307](#); [309](#)

Wolf, Thoby [283](#); [291](#)

Wolf, Virginia [19](#); [45](#); [166](#);

[170](#); [174](#); [175](#); [176](#); [177](#);

[178](#); [179](#); [180](#); [181](#); [182](#);

[183](#); [184](#); [185](#); [283](#); [284](#);

[285](#); [286](#); [287](#); [288](#); [289](#);

[290](#); [291](#); [292](#); [293](#); [294](#);

[295](#); [296](#); [297](#); [298](#); [300](#);

[301](#); [302](#); [303](#); [304](#); [305](#);

[306](#); [307](#); [308](#); [309](#); [310](#);

[424](#)

Y

Yang, Edward [312](#)

Young, Laurie [74](#); [148](#); [149](#);

[154](#); [155](#); [156](#); [157](#); [160](#)

Z

Žižek, Slavoj [84](#); [120](#); [396](#);

[397](#); [403](#); [405](#); [406](#); [407](#);

[419](#); [421](#); [422](#)

Zvyagintsev, Andrei [317](#)

Zwerdling, Alex [310](#)