

Mapping the “Non-representational”: Derrida and Artaud’s Metaphysics of Presence in Performance Practice

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The primary concern of this essay is to trace the conditions of possibility for what we came to understand as non-representational approaches to performance. In particular, in its first part, the essay considers the emergence of the “non-representational” as belonging to the creative radicalism that conditioned and initiated the “turn to performance” in the late 1960s and 1970s. The second part goes on to explore a philosophico-theatrical “dialogue” between Jacques Derrida and Antonin Artaud. Written from within a critical framework that breaks with representational theatre podiums, Derrida’s (2001 [1978]) account of Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” still functions as a valuable theoretical instance that suggests a direct, non-deviated relationship between theatre and theory, while paving the way for re-thinking a metaphysics of presence in performance practice.

PART I – “A TURN TO (NON-REPRESENTATIONAL) PERFORMANCE”

One of the most groundbreaking transformations that the 20th century theatre world experienced was the “turn to performance”. This important shift became possible in the latter half of the century, bringing forth a radical questioning of established theatrical and dramatic forms. Performance, and performance studies as an emergent field of analysis, widened the ways of experiencing and analysing theatrical acts infusing them with qualities that were parallel to the “performative turn” of social sciences. The advance of performance studies, as initiated by the intersection of the works of the director and professor Richard Schechner (1977; 2002) and the anthropologist Victor Turner (1982; 1986) spawned an immense analytical interest in sociocultural practices, claiming that “everything can be studied ‘as’ performance”

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(Schechner 2006: 38-9; original emphasis). Social enactments, rituals, politics, media appearances, and gender manifestations became objects of performance analysis by many theorists, as a way to substantiate the cultural significance, as well as the political possibilities of "showing doing" (Schechner 2002: 22). This form of analysis came forward partly in parallel to the academically emergent concept of *performativity*, an interdisciplinary term that encompassed the capacity of individuals to transform their "being" into "doing" with the use of language, speech or other non-verbal forms of expression (see Austin 1975 [1962]; Butler 1990).

The first question that I want to address in this essay is the way in which the "turn to performance" contributed to a productive destabilization of the politics of representation in theatre and performance contexts. It is widely acknowledged that the "postmodern condition," which manifested itself in a range of cultural and artistic practices, and the emergence of poststructuralist theory in France were directly linked to the advance of performance art and the development of performance-discourses. One of the key questions that this intersection brought to the fore was a rethinking of the ways in which theatrical sense is produced. Processes of interpretation, reception, subjectivity, and conveyance were placed under serious scrutiny by many practitioners and academics of performance. As Jon Mckenzie points out in a more general tone, "between 1955 and 1975 and across a wide range of cultural practice and research, there was an attempt to pass from product to process, from mediated expression to direct contact, from representation to presentation, from discourse to body, from absence to presence" (Mckenzie 2001: 38).

In the theatrical context, this radical attempt to break with normative systems of signification and to affirm the "live" qualities of theatrical events resulted in a creative decomposition of traditional forms of performing and engaging with audiences. In this period (from the late 1950s to the early 1970s), theatrical works began to acquire non-linear and more "micropolitical" narratives, while introducing a radical sense of ephemerality to the act of performing and engaging meaning. The previously uncontested authority of the dramatic text, the power of speech, and the supremacy of the author's and the performer's intentions were more than useful points of debate; they became areas of theoretical confrontation amongst practitioners and academics of performance. The historical instances that can serve as politically radical insights for the thorough exploration of this questioning are many and diverse. For example, Auslander reminds us of the experimentation of a non-fictional, non-representational approach to theatre that was embraced by companies such as The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, and The Performance Group back in the 1960s: "Whereas it is usually supposed that the function of actors is to represent fictional beings, the performers in the radical theatres of the 1960s were often present as themselves" (Auslander 2004: 109). Also, James Loxley highlights Artaud's response to a Balinese ritual dancing that the latter attended in Paris: "[this performance] could produce something directly striking and meaningful precisely because it was not either given over to narrative

or ideas or consumed in producing images of a world that was forever elsewhere" (Loxley 2007: 146).

The list of performance artists, directors, and collectives whose practice can be placed within this confrontational context is very long. Without any intention to hierarchize or even categorize the multiplicities of their performance projects, I suggest that this list would include: Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Julian Beck, John Cage, Richard Foreman, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, Allan Kaprow, Laurie Anderson, Marina Abramović, Forced Entertainment, Punchdrunk, Richard Schechner amongst many others. In very different ways, such artists either created the conditions for, or directly contributed to, a subversive rethinking of theatre's traditional use of representation and power. It is therefore crucial to note that the emergence of a "postmodern" politics of theatre (which in effect was largely a challenge to the mimetic function of representation on stage) became possible through the radical discourses of performance, while resonating with the poststructuralist attacks on the totalizing and teleological ways of constructing subjectivity and agency.

Theatre and performance practices obtained a postmodern and post-structuralist polemics that "distrust[ed] claims to authenticity, originality, or coherence" and "deflat[ed] master narratives and totalizing theories" (Reinelt & Roach 1992: 1). According to Jill Dolan, "a postmodernist performance style" can be understood as one that "breaks with realist narrative strategies, heralds the death of unified characters, decentres the subject, and foregrounds conventions of perception" (Dolan 1989: 60). The conditions of possibility for what Marvin Carlson calls a "resistant performance" were created in the form of polemical responses to the hegemony of dramatic representation and the dogmatism of self-identical meanings (Carlson 1996). Of course, the development of such resistance was by no means simple and untroubled, since the problem of normative representation had to be found at the very core of performances' function. As Carlson notes, "[u]nable to move outside the operations of performance (or representation), and thus inevitably involved in its codes and reception assumptions, the contemporary performer seeking to resist, challenge, or even subvert these codes and assumptions must find some way of doing this 'from within'" (ibid.: 172). According to Carlson, this intricacy is always characteristic of the ways in which postmodern performances attempted to counter their somewhat inherent mimetic and normative elements. Echoing Auslander's postmodern theatrical theory, Carlson suggests that the development of resistant performance becomes possible always as a result of the interplay "between complicity and critique" (as cited in Carlson 1996: 174).

"Meaningless" performance

One of the most radical motivations of such performances was "to engage in a decidedly political resistance to narrative closure," that is, in a decomposition of the representational ways of signifying meanings that were absent and

external to the performance-event (Kaye 2000 [1994]: 276). In other words, the stimulus for resisting and subverting the function of mimetic representation in theatre and performance was rooted in the desire to challenge "the 'unification' and 'simplification' of mimesis and its ability to represent reality as an external and universal constant" (Murray 1997: 2). As Kaye argues, while commenting on Karen Finley's *Constant State of Desire*, "[t]he effect of such a resistance is not to be found in a particular import or articulation of a point of view, but occurs as a destabilizing of that which is 'assumed,' of that which would appear to the audience as something which is already 'known'" (Kaye 2000 [1994]: 276). I argue that it is by virtue of this general destabilization that postmodern performance practice substantiated its confrontation to the implications of mimetic representation; and it is on the basis of this longing for theatrical *presence*, for the creative possibilities of the "here and now" of the event that such a practice "resists the attempt to divorce its 'meanings' or political value from its immediate contexts" (ibid.). The 1982 essay of Josette Feral "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified," is a key instance of scholarship that examines and justifies performance's rejection of mimetic representation. In analysing the specificities of the performance genre and the renewed possibilities of experience that performance has offered, Feral argues that "[p]erformance is the absence of meaning" (Feral 1997 [1982]: 292). By referring to the performances of The Living Theatre and to the theatres of Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman, she clarifies this argument: "[p]erformance does not aim at a meaning, but rather *makes* meaning in so far as it works right in those extremely blurred junctures out of which the subject eventually emerges" (ibid.; original emphasis).

Indeed, the question of the ways in which meaning is constructed in performances has been of key importance in discussions of the theatrical politics of representation. In particular, the traditional relationship between text (or language) and the actual event of performance has been rendered problematic by many cultural theorists. Raymond Williams argued that "drama" should be "put at some relative distance from 'literature'" (Williams 1983: 5), being understood as "writing in performance" (Regan 2000: 49). The emergence of "[n]ew kinds of text, new kinds of notation, new media and new conventions" that Williams discussed in his essay "Drama in a Dramatized Society" contributed significantly to this end (Williams 1983: 11). At the same time, non-linguistic performance mediums came to be considered as non-representational "texts" or non-semiotic "languages." For instance, Theodor Adorno's 1956 essay "Music and Language: A Fragment," and Roland Barthes's 1972 essay *The Grain of the Voice* are two of the most notable analyses of the possibility of "music-as-language" to deconstruct normative processes of signification and representation in performance. For Adorno, "[m]usic creates no semiotic system," since its performance is experienced in the form of what he calls "recurring ciphers" (Adorno 1998 [1956]: 1-2). It is in a similar way that Barthes suggests the notion of the "geno-song" (elaborating on Kristeva's idea of "geno-text") to describe these musical melodies that have "nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression," but rather work

through volume and intonation (Barthes & Heath 1977: 182). The main focus of these discourses was to reveal the productive potential of performances in the process of creating, rather than representing, meaning. In the words of the anthropologist Edward Bruner,

performance does not release a preexisting meaning that lies dormant in the text [...] Rather, the performance itself is constitutive. Meaning is always in the present, in the here-and-now, not in such past manifestations as historical origins or the author's intentions. (Bruner 1986: 11)

Bruner argues for the always-performative and "active" aspect of texts, criticizing their supposedly "silent" and absent qualities that "haunt," rather than critically engage, meaning. In a sense, this view simultaneously echoes and criticises the idea of deconstructive semiotics, "that performance is always *more* than the text" (Reinelt 1992: 113; emphasis added); that is, it contends that the question of emancipating performance from textual and representational authority, is not only a question of "addition" but also a question of "presence". As Tim Etchells argues while describing the thrust of his work with *Forced Entertainment*, this question is "[a] concern with language not as text [...], but as an event" (Etchells 1999: 105).

The role of feminism

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the role of feminism in discourses and practices of theatre, and the emergence of feminist performances have been pivotal in the development of challenges to mimetic processes of representation and signification. The polemics of attempting to subvert the mis-representations of women on stage, and the radicalism of introducing agency to women performers and spectators was fundamental in creating the conditions for critiques of the entire domain and function of representation in theatre. As Carlson notes, "[m]aterialist feminism has generally sought to utilise the post-modern decentering of the subject, not to reverse Lacan and to create a new 'subject' position for women, but to encourage both performers and spectators to think critically about the whole traditional apparatus of representation, including in particular the subject/object relationship" (Carlson 1996: 170). What feminist critique brought to performances was, crucially, a destabilization of a transcendent politics of identity as represented on stage. As Elin Diamond suggests, it managed to break with the fixed and self-identical positioning of women (and also of other mis-represented communities) creating spaces for more "unstable identifications" in performance (Diamond 1997: 36). This feminist focus on variations of identity positions and mobile subjectivities contributed significantly to challenging normative significations and "mapping discontinuities in representation" (Case 1990: 9). Sue-Ellen Case's (1990) *Performing Feminisms*, and Diamond's (1997) *Unmaking Mimesis* are two of the most extended analyses of the impact of feminist performances to the politics of representation.

Postdramatic and post-linear performance

Thus, the discourses that challenged the invariability of meaning, the political limits of mimesis, and the essentialism of binary positioning in theatre and performance created renewed conditions of performing that rethought theatrical processes beyond their submission to representation and text. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s (2006 [1999]) *Postdramatic Theatre* is a very comprehensive study of a movement in theatre that, from the 1980s onwards, pushed the boundaries of the use of “texts” in performances in order to emancipate the stage and the auditorium from the production of fixed dramatic representations. Lehmann focused on the virtue of theatrical fragmentation, suggesting that,

[postdramatic theatre] renounces the long-incontestable criteria of unity and synthesis and abandons itself to the chance (and risk) of trusting individual impulses, fragments and microstructures of texts in order to become a new kind of practice. In the process it discovers a new continent of performance, a new kind of ‘presence’ of the ‘performers’ (into which the ‘actors’ have mutated) and establishes a multifarious theatre landscape beyond forms focused on drama (Lehmann 2006 [1999]: 56-7).

The impact of Lehmann’s conceptualization of the “postdramatic paradigm” has been important and useful in theatre and performance discourses that looked for contemporary ways to articulate vocabularies, terminologies and general frameworks to encapsulate the complexity of theatre’s growing distrust of mimetic representation. Questions of post-linear and immersive performances have been widely addressed and thoroughly analysed, as a way to affirm a renewed Artaudian and “happening-like” recognition of performances as de-stratified *mise en scènes*; as spaces in which the multiple elements of performance (performers, spectators, lights, sounds, texts, space, technology) were considered as equally significant for a politics of present experiences – for a politics of the event (see Kaye 1994; Kozel 2000; Bay-Cheng et al 2010). Susan Kozel’s (2000) account of post-linear performance practice is demonstrative of the way in which the “political” has been transformed in theatrical contexts. She argues that this type of performance produces creative interruptions and gaps in which the engagement between the play and the audience becomes political:

Through post-linearity gaps are provided for us to insert our views, our experiences, or for us to self-consciously chart our own course through material based on our likes, dislikes, or habits [...] In this sense, post-linear performance can be called generative performance. If a dystopia is presented (for example racial prejudice or sexual abuse) it is rarely presented as fatalistic and unchangeable. Instead, it is presented as a strident revelation: ‘look at this – did you know this is happening?!’ followed by an implicit: ‘do something about this!’ [...] It is political, but it avoids being prescriptive (Kozel 2000: 260).

From this perspective, post-linear performance is a critique of theatrical representation's capacity to signify a teleological and transcendental politics. Kozel makes this clear when she argues that post-linear performance is political "by engineering a confrontation between the present and the absent, the visible and the invisible" (ibid.: 261).

Albeit different in scope and trajectory, I consider the aforementioned theories and practices as critical responses to the political implications of the normative and prescriptive ways of mimetically representing texts, identities, histories, ideas, cultures, and conflicts through theatre. These implications include: the normalization of discourses that compress critique's productive potentialities in performance, and its subsequent typification in the name of a certain commonsense; the production of self-identical meanings, the dissemination of prescriptive ideas and the use of politically dogmatic ways of engaging with audiences – in a word, the political "evangelism" of Western theatre; the transcendental approaches to political action, that is the perpetuation of meanings and values that are always absent from the "here and now" of a performance; and, finally, the resulting hierarchization or stratification of the relations between the constituent (human and non-human) elements of a theatrical process.

Non-representational theories

While the complexity of framing a non-representational approach and transforming it into a substantial theory or discourse is evident, there are several theoretical projects in contemporary social theory and human geography that have attempted to implement this task.

In his description of what he terms "non-representational theory," Nigel Thrift identifies affects and sensations as "concept-percepts" alternative to signs and significations (Thrift 2008: 12-3). Thrift's thesis emphasizes that social theory needs to pay attention to practices – which he mostly understands as "performances" (e.g. he is particularly interested in dance) – in order to come into contact with experiences of human geography that become possible through affective relations, rather than through representation. In making this argument, Thrift proposes that if theory wants to follow its own potential as a developing and always-current platform of observation, critique, and understanding, it should embrace and affirm the "pre-cognitive" and "playful" becomings (which he identifies as non-representational) that occur in performances and everyday practices. He goes on to argue for a "radical empiricism (the lived immediacy of actual experience, before any reflection on it)" which in being different "from a sense-perception or observation-based empiricism" (ibid.: 5), creates the appropriate conditions for exploring "modes of perception that are not subject-based" (ibid.: 7). Also, in keeping with Thrift's theoretical agenda, John-David Dewsbury (2003) elaborates on non-representational theory suggesting that acts and practices of "witnessing" map out spaces prior to reflection and thinking; and in so doing they generate "knowledge without contemplation."

Although Thrift’s and Dewsbury’s theoretical projects have been confronted by several critiques that challenge their conceptualization of a non-representational theory, it is worth noting that such critiques are mostly conducted on a formalist basis. For instance, Smith (2003) suggests that Thrift should not exclude Baudrillard’s thought on the non-representational, arguing that the latter provides us with a theoretical framework through which we can develop multiple non-representational *theories*, rather than an all-encompassing non-representational *theory* (Smith 2003). According to Smith, while Baudrillard’s theories of simulacra can become adequate critiques of representation, providing us with non-representational tools, Thrift’s project is rather *anti-representational*. Similarly, Lorimer (2005) attempts to depart from certain terminologies and linguistic constructions of non-representational theory, suggesting the term “more-than-representational” as a more appropriate and realistic one.

What all these discourses on non-, anti-, or more-than-representational theory(ies) have achieved is not essentially to mark a specific turning point in social theory, human geography, and performance – since their theoretical trajectories are not only directly informed, but are also strongly bound to post-structuralist debates on the politics of representation as well as to many questions that have already been posed by performance studies; they have, however, managed to reinforce the challenges to theoretical plateaus that still inquire into impersonal and affective phenomena by using representational tools of observation and critique. In a sense, they re-pronounced the “end of theory” as a closed-up platform that is essentially bound to representation and textuality, by proposing more practiced-based approaches to the ways of engaging with sociopolitical reality; approaches which in destabilizing the canonical conditions (i.e. cognitive, reflective, mimetic, representational) of exploring human and non-human experience and interaction, produce a politics of presence – “a politics of opening the event to [...] more action, more imagination, more light, more fun, even” (Thrift 2008: 20). As Thrift points out, “[non-representational work] has tried to enhance ‘performance consciousness’ [...] by turning to examples of the intensification of presence provided by the performing arts – art, sculpture, theatre, dance, poetry, music” (ibid.: 148).

It is worth noting that the use of the term *non-representational approach* or *challenge* throughout the text is, in a sense, a way of insisting on the mobile, non-static character of critical challenges to mimetic representation in theatre and performance; thus, considering the questions addressed by “non-representational theory” as a part of a wider context of examining challenges to normative representation, the essay is not an attempt to provide a non-representational theoretical model or even a non-representational paradigm. It is an attempt to theorize non-representational possibilities, mappings and directions in theatre practice and theory that point towards a reconsideration of what makes theatre so important in the realm of sociocultural and political critique.

“Theatrical” – “Theoretical”

Now, before moving on to the second section of the essay, I would like to make a very brief claim about the way that theory has been related to theatre – and vice versa. Discussing the problems of representational theatre entails, I suggest, an understanding of the interaction between the “theatrical” and the “theoretical” as one that needs to become more reciprocal and direct.

The role that theatre and performance has taken in theoretical writing has been indeed a very active one. In particular, from the 1960s onwards, theatrical terminology has become embedded in discourses whose mode of analysis entails either a “turn to performance,” or a dramatization of theoretical narratives and methods. Maria Minich Brewer notes in her 1985 essay “Performing Theory” that, “[m]etaphors of the theatre such as *mise-en-scène*, staging, performance, production, play, and act pervade the major discourses of contemporary theory” (Brewer 1985: 13; original emphasis). As Kelleher and Ridout highlight, “the practices of theatre and philosophy have for so long worked hand in hand (or wrestled arm against arm) over similar questions (representation, human nature, truth, illusion)” (Kelleher & Ridout 2006: 4). The reference to the theatre as a theoretical tool was endorsed especially by French critical thought, giving rise to discourses that problematized the politics of representation – focusing particularly on its mimetic function – in different ways. As Timothy Murray observes, “[r]egardless of the particular school or method being advanced, whether feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, or ideology critique, French theoreticians invariably reflect on the structural and epistemological status of mimesis” (Murray 1997: 1). From Greek tragedy to Shakespeare, and from Moliere to Artaud, theatrical languages have been valorized by theory both for their potential to provide methodologies with performative directions, as well as for their capacity to describe cultural conditions of enactment and social performances. Dramaturgy, theatricality, and performativity are only few of the most important concepts-methods that have been used complementarily, as “add-on” tools to the methodological designs and philosophical narratives of critical and cultural theory.

While acknowledging the creative use of teatrologies as methodological mediums, I would like to emphasize the critical potential of theatre and performance to *make theoretical claims*. Theatre and performance art create theoretical spaces and mappings that transgress the representational imperatives of drama’s historical development, while introducing revolutionary ways to experience and produce theory in the “here and now”. To elaborate on this point, the essay draws attention to one of the most radical discussions of theatrical practices – that is, Jacques Derrida on Antonin Artaud in his 1978 essay “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” – considering this work as a very important theoretical instance that becomes constitutive of a direct relation between theatre and theory. The task that Derrida’s analysis undertake is, I argue, neither to explain theatrical practice through a specific theoretical “lens,” nor to somehow “apply” a finite theoretical model (manifested as a theorem) to performances. Rather, it is to emphasize the need

to *allow* theatrical practices to become theoretical; that is, to function in theoretical ways without being utilized by theory, but also without representing theory in abstractly mimetic modes. At the same time, I suggest that such a rethinking of the relation between the "theatrical" and the "theoretical" becomes a critique of theatre's representational function – to the extent that the latter introduces a mimetic rigidity to the act of performing and engaging theory, ideology, and dramatic texts. The essay challenges representational performance by mapping out radical possibilities of a theatre that is not only an object of theory, but also one of its producers.

PART II – ARTAUD THROUGH DERRIDA: RE-PRESENTATION AND METAPHYSICS IN THEATRE

Jacques Derrida's 1978 essay "The Theatre of Cruelty and The Closure of Representation" is a theoretical contribution that places the questions of representation and spectatorship at the heart of a rethinking of metaphysics in political theatre. Derrida's discussion of Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty is a very useful theoretical instance here for two reasons: first, it departs from a hegemonic or fictional manner of approaching theatre and performance – aiming at a direct relation between the "theatrical" and the "theoretical"; secondly, it considers the problem of representation as rooted in the entire underlying structuration of Western theatre. In Artaud's writings and theatrical practice, Derrida finds an affirmative way of challenging normative and mimetic representational mediums in Western theatre. He neither draws on Artaud, nor he reflects upon the theatre of cruelty. Rather, I suggest, what Derrida sees in Artaudian *praxis* is a "radically theoretical potential" that is actualized as a critique of representational theatre.

As he notes, "more than any other art, [theatre] has been marked by the labor of total representation in which the affirmation of life lets itself be doubled and emptied by negation" (Derrida 2001 [1978]: 295). What Derrida identifies as problematic in the representational function of theatre is the act of signifying something absent from the event, as a mimetic image of thought or action; the act of symbolizing a transcendental idea, text, or "message" to be conveyed, whose reality is external to the performance itself. According to Derrida, this external reality functions as a self-identical presence, as an underlying substance of the work, as the *hypokeimenon* of a theatrical performance. Thus, one of the problems of mimetic representation, according to Derrida, is the fixed condition of theatrical meanings and the static character of theatrical forms that it perpetuates. This insistence on static forms and fixed images of meaning is for Derrida what confines *creation* within Western theatre. In discussing the nature of the author in theatre, Derrida points out that he (sic) "creates nothing, [he] has only the illusion of having created, because he only transcribes and makes available for reading a text whose nature is itself necessarily representative" (ibid.: 296). Although Derrida seems to be distrustful of theatre's historical attempts to revolutionize the relation between the author and the performance, between the stage and the auditorium (as he

believes that they occurred within ideological or sociopolitical conditions in which the structure of representation was always considered to be an invariable theatrical domain), he identifies a unique possibility to challenge theatrical representation and its implications in the Artaudian proposal for a theatre of cruelty.

Cruelty as life

The theatre of cruelty is Artaud’s radical theory and practice of performance. It is a non-representational approach (or challenge) to theatrical normativity. Artaud’s concept of cruelty refers to a sequence of unmediated actions that are rooted in what he terms as “cruel” foundations of the self. “Everything that acts is cruelty,” writes Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double*, insisting that “[i]t is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theatre must be rebuilt” (Artaud 1958: 85). Artaud understands the notion of cruelty not as a static condition, but rather as a process or a “becoming” through which every human or non-human element of the performance acquires an agential drive by being exposed to the centre of the event. The shocking implications of this exposure constitute, for Artaud, a cruel, yet utterly essential step away from the complacency he felt existed in Western theatre.

Transgressing the boundaries of mimesis and representation, the theatre of cruelty rejects the transcendence of a dominant author and the existence of a “static” dramatic text, suggesting a renewed idea of *life*; an immanent concept of life perceived and experienced not as the hypokeimenon or the substrata of a theatrical event, but as an experience of cruelty and an actualization of magic: “I have therefore said “cruelty” as I might have said “life” or “necessity,” because I want to indicate especially that for me the theatre is act and perpetual emanation, and that there is nothing congealed about it, that I turn it into a true act, hence living, hence magical,” writes Artaud (*ibid.*: 114); and Derrida responds that,

[t]he theatre of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation (Derrida 2001 [1978]: 294; original emphasis).

Thus, Derrida understands representation as a limitation of life – a cultural limitation that prevents an experiencing of its nonrepresentable origin. He continues by stating that,

[t]his life carries man along with it, but it is not primarily the life of man. The latter is only a representation of life, and such is the limit – the humanist limit – of the metaphysics of classical theatre (*ibid.*: 294-95).

A non-theological theatre

Both Artaud and Derrida challenged an abstract and finite idea of “man”. As Artaud argues, “[t]heatre was never meant to describe man and what he does,”

thereby emphasizing that the aim of theatre is to *produce* experiences and desires, and not to describe or symbolize abstractions (Artaud 1989: 171). According to Artaud and Derrida, the idea of man – as the author of texts, as the actor who represents, and as the ultimate narrator and “designer” of theatrical space – is conceived as a messianic manifestation of Western theatre and for Western theatre; both its origin and telos. In short, the domain of representational theatre transforms man into a God.

Derrida argues that, “[t]he theatre of cruelty expulses God from the stage,” but without constructing a platform for a “new atheist discourse on stage” (Derrida, 2001 [1978]: 296). It is precisely within this seeming irony that Derrida’s inquiry into a new metaphysics of theatre resides. For Derrida, the theatre of cruelty does not announce a “death of God”. Rather, it challenges Western theatre’s *logocentricism*, in so far as the latter becomes transcendental, authoritative and, therefore, *theological*. He argues that, “[t]he theatrical practice of cruelty, in its action and structure, inhabits or rather *produces* a nontheological space” (ibid.; original emphasis). Derrida is looking for a vocabulary that renders a space nontheological, emphasizing that such a space is not a non-sacred one. A “nontheological” process is not the opposite of a sacred one, in so far as we perceive it in the “present tense”. It is however fundamentally different from a theological process, in as much as the latter is dictated by speech, by the transcendental *Logos* that becomes the authoritative power that transforms performance into mimesis.

In Artaud’s theatre, Derrida discovers a metaphysics of theatre, a process of sacred presence that destabilizes the theatrical stage emancipating it from the domination of speech. He suggests that the theatrical stage should break free from its subjection to the author, the speech and the text, transforming itself into a space in which “magic” is experienced not as an absence, but as a presence. He argues for a stage in which the actors themselves are truly emancipated from a given identity or position as “interpretive slaves” of the author and the director (ibid.). For Derrida, the poetics of cruelty urge the actors to act, rather than execute; to create rather than represent. This approach also reshapes the relationship between the performance and the audience. In his critique of the conditions that create a passive spectator, Derrida argues that, “the theological stage comports a passive, seated public, a public of spectators, of consumers, of “enjoyers” – as Nietzsche and Artaud both say – attending a production that lacks true volume or depth, a production that is level, offered to their voyeuristic scrutiny” (ibid.: 296-7). He thus describes the nontheological stage as a space in which the passivity and submissiveness of the audience are forcefully deconstructed; a space in which the spectators are rather immersed in the experiencing of the event, than merely watching it. As he notes, “[i]n the theatre of cruelty, pure visibility is not exposed to voyeurism” (ibid.: 297).

Artaud’s *mise en scène*: a sacred stage without “Speech”

Derrida understands the theatre of cruelty as a theory and practice that destabilizes the existence of a “pure” reality that exists outside of the event. As Artaud asks, “why not conceive of a play composed directly on the stage, realized on the stage” (Artaud 1958: 41). In Artaud’s theatre, Derrida sees a possibility of creating and experiencing a different kind of theatrico-theoretical space; an inclusive and autonomous space that is not constructed in relation to exteriorities, and does not function through representational binaries (subject-object, performance-audience, stage-auditorium). He argues for the reconstitution of the *mise en scène*, as Artaud theorized it. For Artaud, the *mise en scène* is the sacred space that needs to be reconstituted as an open synthesis or an assemblage of the elements that exist, act, and create experience and meaning within the event – the experiencing of lights, colors, sounds, props, actors, spectators, and stage. Artaud writes: “it is the *mise en scène* that is theatre, much more than the written and spoken play,” (Artaud 1958; original emphasis); and Derrida continues:

Released from the text and the author-god, *mise en scène* would be returned to its creative and founding freedom. The director and the participants (who would no longer be actors *or* spectators) would cease to be the instruments and organs of representation (Derrida 2001 [1978]: 299, original emphasis).

In the Artaudian conception of the *mise en scène*, Derrida identifies a potential of the performance to produce a present which will be impossible to be reiterated; that is, to be imitatively *re-presented*. He argues that, “[t]he stage, certainly, *will no longer represent*, since it will not operate as an addition, as the sensory illustration of a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage, which the stage would then only repeat but whose fabric it would not constitute” (ibid.; original emphasis). Thus, Derrida describes a performance-event without a prescriptive content, a transcendental origin, or an eventual catharsis.

In a letter to Benjamin Crémieux (Paris, 15 September 1931), Artaud notes that, “the theatre, an independent and autonomous art, must, in order to revive or simply to live, realize what differentiates it from text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means” (as cited in Artaud 1958: 106). In making this claim, Artaud is not trying to denounce speech and language as such. Rather, he wants to subordinate the authoritative importance that speech has acquired in the structuration of Western theatre. As Derrida comments accordingly, “speech and writing will be erased on the stage of cruelty only in the extent to which they were allegedly *dictation*” (Derrida 2001 [1978]: 302; original emphasis); understanding “dictation” as a fixed relation that exists between a subject-author of the “real” and an object-interpreter of the “virtual”. Therefore, the theatre of cruelty does not suggest a mute performance, but an event, an experiencing of a *mise en scène* that functions not through words, but *before* words. Speech and writing, Derrida suggests, “will

once more become *gestures*; and the logical and discursive intentions which speech ordinarily uses to ensure its rational transparency, [...] will be reduced or subordinated” (ibid.; original emphasis). This notion of language-prior-to-words will function “as the visual and plastic materialization of speech” (Artaud 1958: 69). It is, thus, a reinvention of language – or a “glossopoeia” as Derrida calls it – in theatre through intonations, vibrations, visibility, movements, and gestural contact. Artaud describes this potential of language in “*Mise en scène* and *Metaphysics*”:

To make metaphysics out of spoken language is to make language convey what it does not normally convey. That is to use it in a new, exceptional and unusual way, to give it its full, physical shock potential, to split it up and distribute it actively in space, to treat inflections in a completely tangible manner and restore their shattering power and really to manifest something; to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one might almost say alimentary, sources, against its origins as a haunted beast, and finally to consider language in the form of *Incantation* (ibid.: 46; original emphasis).

Artaud is calling for a transformation of prescriptive language into a destratified glossopoeia. One could perhaps understand this Artaudian approach to language by listening to his 1947 censored radio broadcast “To Have Done with the Judgement of God,” in which Artaud’s voice gets much closer to music than to ordinary speech. In this radio play, he expresses his thoughts using what we could call a destratified voice; a voice that resembles weep, laughter, a song or animal talk, through continuously changing language’s pitch, intonation, and content. As Nicholas Ridout notes, “[w]hat Artaud is proposing is a use of sound for its material, vibratory qualities as much as for its organization into musical form” (Ridout 2008: 229). Artaud does not denounce language. He rather activates its potential to be “concrete” in “an actual spatial sense,” in as much as he attempts to break with the immobile semantics of the *keimenon*, that is the codified substrata of language (Artaud 1989: 123). As Laura Cull clarifies, “[i]t is not language itself that is the problem [for Artaud], so much as the codified ways in which it is used” (Cull 2009: 248).

CONCLUSION: DERRIDA’S TEXTUALISM AND “ACTUAL” METAPHYSICS

The “Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” is one of Derrida’s most “romantic” moments of thought. It is the essay in which Derrida is more affirmative and positive in his argumentation than ever. In Artaud’s work, Derrida finds an opening of a discourse that could challenge the barriers of the “text”. In this particular essay, Derrida sees a potential of performance to produce a language that challenges the mimetic function of representation; even if he understands it as an impossibility. As he notes, “if the idea of a theatre without representation, the idea of the impossible, does not help us to regulate theatrical practice, it does, perhaps, permit us to conceive its origin, eve and limit, and the horizon of its death” (Derrida 2001 [1978]: 314).

Thus, it is worth noting that Derrida seems to perceive his own analysis as a brainstorming process which, however, aims at an unattainable theatre. Even while deconstructing Artaud’s theory, Derrida insists on *textualism* and the inevitability of repetition. His analysis seems like a thought experiment since his conclusions “affirm” the inescapability from representation to the extent that the latter is a re-presentation of presence. He wants to deconstruct the function of representation, emancipating it from mimesis and transcendence; but his search is one of a lost presence, rather than of a possibility of presence. Thus, claiming that representation is inescapable in actual terms, Derrida argues for a renewed politics of representation since, for Derrida, “presence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has already begun to represent itself, has always already been penetrated” (ibid.). Derrida claims that the creative force of Artaud’s theatre is rather its potential to challenge the transcendentalism of repetition and representation, and not its possibility to somehow subvert it in theatre practice. It is the possibility of converting the substance of representation into a non-repetitive re-presentation. In other words, he argues that the virtue of the theatre of cruelty rests in its capacity to break the association of representation with transcendental repetition.

Derrida conceives Artaud’s theatre of cruelty as a possibility of critique, which is nevertheless trapped in the limit between a possible and an impossible theatre. In emphasizing the paradox of the theatre of cruelty, he notes that, “[Artaud] cannot resign himself to theatre as repetition, and cannot renounce theatre as nonrepetition” (ibid.: 315). He goes on to argue that fidelity to Artaud is impossible – even in Artaud’s own attempts to put the theatre of cruelty into practice. For Derrida, the contribution of the theatre of cruelty, or as he notes, its “grammar” is always “to be found” (ibid.: 313). He concludes that, “[the theatre of cruelty] will always remain the inaccessible limit of a representation which is not repetition, of a *re*-presentation which is full presence, which does not carry its double within itself as its death, of a present which does not repeat itself, that is, of a present outside time, a nonpresent” (ibid.).¹

Now, as a way to conclude this essay, I suggest it is crucial to make a claim about the way in which metaphysical processes and ideas have been understood in theatre and performance practices. I suggest that the analysis of notions such as “sacred stage,” “glossopoeia” and “magic-as-presence” should

¹ There exist a number of critical insights into Derrida’s discussion of theatre, and most of them draw their arguments from a bold opposition between Derrida and Deleuze. For example, Gordon C.F. Bearn argues that while Derrida insists by all means on negation and cynicism, Deleuze attempts to “break on through to the other side of representation,” moving toward an affirmation of possibilities beyond codifications (Bearn 2000: 441). Also, Martin Puchner states that the fundamental difference between Derrida and Deleuze in relation to theatre, lies in the opposition between the former’s “textualism” and the latter’s “theatricalism” – an opposition between drama and performance (Puchner 2002: 526). Further, Laura Cull criticizes Derrida’s insistence on representation as an essential precondition of presence, by proposing the Deleuzian concept of “differential presence,” as an encounter with “continuous variation” in theatrical performance (Cull 2009: 244).

be principally based on their potential to endorse a rethinking of metaphysics in theatrical performances, rather than providing specific “techniques” that could be directly – however, *in abstracto* – applied in theatrical plays. The purpose of such analyses therefore, should not be directed to outcomes that claim a definite and “romanticized” level of reality for such concepts, or a detailed method of “applying” them to theatrical practice. Rather, I argue, what is at stake in such an undertaking is the need to acknowledge the “real” elements – in terms of impact, engagement, and critical perception – that such metaphysical processes can contribute to political theatre; it is to affirm the non-representational potential of these processes to function in a level which is as real as the one attributed to affective qualities such as imagination, fear, affection, and intimacy. In doing so, I suggest that we address a “politics of the real” which bears less relation to mimesis as absence, than to *experience* as *presence*; we become more attentive to the ways in which a theatrical event is perceived – that is, to its conditions of possibility – rather than to its represented object, its “hidden meaning,” or its mimetic realism. As Murray notes,

the understanding of reality and realism depends on the frame, window, or perspective of its *mise-en-scène*. Reality must be categorized, that is, by reflecting not merely on *what* is represented but also, and most significantly, on *how* it is shown or re-presented and *how* it is seen, read, or received. What is theorized or understood as “real” or “material” or even “historical” remains contingent on its *mise-en-scène* [...] (Murray 1997:7; original emphasis).

Acknowledging the actual impact of theatrical processes that function in a sacred and ritualistic – but not transcendental – manner is giving importance to *how* something becomes possible in, rather than to *what* could be signified through, a theatrical work. It is paying more attention to what takes place in the present of a theatrical event (how it is actualized and realized), than to what mimics an external reality or symbolizes a fixed meaning.

Derrida finds this potential of theatre in Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. The construction of a sacred, yet non-theological, space that Derrida observes in Artaud’s theatre can be understood as a proposal of actualizing metaphysics on stage. Derrida argues for a *mise en scène* that is emancipated from transcendental impositions (Author, Text, Speech) while maintaining its capacity to produce ‘magical’ experiences; that is, experiences that cannot be articulated in words or described in normatively cognitive ways. He contends that the theatre of cruelty is a theatre that reconstitutes the *mise en scène* as a space in which metaphysics are incarnated in the present; as acts of re-presenting life without imitating an image of life.²

² It is in a very similar way that Peter Brook (1990 [1968]) suggests a holy theatre in his seminal book *The Empty Space*. Giving emphasis to the pre-cultural possibilities of performance, Brook proposes a “living theatre” in which performers and spectators engage in a communal experience of “magic”. For Brook, it is by virtue of immediacy and directness that one is able to experience theatre in a pre-cultural, affective and

It is evident that the question of metaphysics in theatre is not only complicated and demanding, but also forms an open-ended field of analysis in theatre and cultural studies. Considering the importance of unexplainable, inarticulate and even obscure experiences in performance practice is fundamental in discussions of the non-representational, non-dogmatic potential of theatre. I suggest that the decisive step in such an undertaking is a destabilization of the normative opposition between what is considered real and what is perceived as unreal in theatre practice. In other words, I would argue that classifying experiences that escape a definite linguistic articulation as *a priori* unreal, and in effect artificial, restricts our capacity to examine the non-representational possibilities of theatre and performance to a significant extent. These experiences should not be understood in normative terms, or they should not be “romantically discovered” as primal qualities of human expressivity; they need to be explored, felt, and discussed as actual, affective “presences” that function in live conditions of performing.

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magical level. His distinction between a holy theatre and a deadly theatre is drawn on the basis of the former to endorse a metaphysics of presence, rather than imitating images of metaphysical processes on stage.

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