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Signalling through the flames: gesture and memory in post-dramatic theatre

1. There is a sentence in a gat book on memory that I would like to cite (and citation is indeed the main theme of this essay).

It comes loaded with the details of dissolution, and with the opposing urge to preserve. It is in W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, and it is Austerlitz himself who is speaking:

“She was carrying a large bunch of rust-colored chrysanthemums in the crook of her right arm, and when we had walked side by side across the yard without a word and were standing in the doorway, she raised her free hand and pushed the hair back from my forehead, as if she knew, in this one gesture, that she had the gift of being remembered.”¹

The gift of being remembered: is not this one of the deepest desire of the scene? To disperse, to escape from the logics of the archive, and still remaining as a ghost, as a performance remains, as a citable gesture.

2. 2000, Rome: a child, dressed as the Mad Hatter, cuts the throat of another child, dressed as the White Rabbit.

2004, Avignon: Nora draws the gun on Helmer and with an abrupt and resolute gesture shoots him dead.

2005, Venice: a man – his body somewhat advanced from the back wall of the stage – opens his arms, from which emanates a sort of luminescence.

2006, Brussels: a woman takes out a bottle of whiskey from a sideboard and drinks secretly.

¹ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, London, Penguin, 2005.

2007, Berlin: a nineteenth century lady crosses the scene of a hippie commune.

Extracted from a personal diary of visions, these are some of the citable gestures of a memory of post-dramatic theatre from recent years.

3. Within the frame of post-dramatic theatre, with the annihilation of the dramatic text as the main resource of the theatrical scene, what has been radically renegotiated is the issue of memory. Unlike readings that see the space of the performance as consistently besieged by disappearance and oblivion, I would like to propose an approach aimed at highlighting those logics which make the stage a place (and often a privileged one) of memory practices, and at the same time takes into consideration the positioning of the spectator.

To remember is, indeed, a reflexive movement, as revealed by the pronominal form appearing, for example, in Italian and in French (*ricordarsi, se rappeller*). To remember is to have memory of oneself, as Augustine already knew: “the memory of ‘things’ and the memory of myself coincide: in them I also encounter myself, I remember myself, what I have done, when and how I did it and what impression I had at that time.”²

The citable gesture extracted from the scene, therefore/in this way, does not just demonstrate the possibility of retention of the performance, but becomes an attractor of memory crystals related to the subject’s own intimacy. In the end, the citable gesture signifies the point of collapse into which both individual and collective memory fall, if by collectivity we mean that instantaneous one joined together during the event.

4. a) Within the frame of scenic analysis, Walter Benjamin suggests a concept which is generally overlooked, although it is fertile with implications: the notion of the *citable gesture*, which is to say, the gesture which puts into question the very notion of ephemerality as constitutive of the status of theatre. This topic was introduced by Benjamin in an essay on Bertolt Brecht’s theatre, and it prefigures the memorial imperative which will inform Benjamin’s great work “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, where the task of the historian is to capture an actual image of the past, an instantaneous image that *darts away*, flashing for an instant and disappearing for ever. Likewise, the gesture – particularly in a scene which owes nothing to the dramatic text as a source of tradition and hence of memory, and thus of a possible “retention” according

² Augustine, *Confessions*, 10, 13, 220.

to archival logic – summarizes in itself the precariousness, the perishability of what appears once and is not repeated except by coming back, in the form of image and *citation*, to the stage of memory.

Furthermore, unlike any attempt at notation, reconstruction, filming or recording aimed at preserving the stage event, the citable gesture undermines the continuum of the show and, therefore, the logic of linear orientation which only strengthens the diegetic praxis of text-centered analyses founded on the merely horizontal development of the dramatic text. The citation of gesture, which in itself interrupts the continuity of the performance, pursues a principle of *vivification*, since, by selecting and isolating a particular gesture, the gesture is made topical in the scene of the present memory and thus, in the development of new viable points of view, actualizes the process of history.

In “What is Epic Theatre?” Benjamin defines Bertolt Brecht’s theatre as a gestural theatre, but – what is of more interest – as a theatre of citable gestures. “Making gestures citable, this is one of the essential achievements of epic theatre. The actor must be able to space his gesture as a compositor produces spaced type.”³ This hint, which is peremptory in its terseness, remains rather obscure: what does “creating spaces between gestures” mean? And what has this to do with citation? To this purpose, Giorgio Agamben reminds us that spacing defines a typographic convention – and not only in German – of replacing *italics* with spacings between the letters of a word that one intends to highlight for whatever reason. “Benjamin himself, every time he uses the typewriter, resorts to this convention. [...] The spaced terms are, so to say, hyper-read, twice read, and this double reading could be, as Benjamin suggests, the palimpsestic reading of the citation.”⁴ Thus, spacing the gestures means highlighting them.

The citable gesture is, then, a gesture capable of survival and also, in some cases, of rebirth. The *remainder* it produces are not simply material; rather, they are first a phantasmal and then a living residue (and it is surely not by chance that Rebecca Schneider’s notion of “living remains” recalls Burckhardt’s “lebensfähige Reste”, from which Aby Warburg originated his theory of *Nachleben*. But I will insist later upon this aspect). It is a question of some residual energy impressed upon the memory of the spectator, the historian and the witness; energy which feeds other gestures deployed both on the present scene and in historical writing concerned with the stage.

³ W. Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre?”, in Id., *Understanding Brecht*, translated by Anna Bostock, introduction by Stanley Mitchell, London: Verso, 1983, p. 131.

⁴ G. Agamben, *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, (2000) 2005, p. 129.

A concept such as *citable gesture*, which designates an indissoluble intertwining of a movement charge and an iconographic formula, in which it is impossible to distinguish between flux and pose, event and remembrance, originality and re-emergence, suffices to demonstrate that Brecht's thought (at least according to the Benjaminian interpretation that I intend here to take into account, since Brecht's idea of *gestus* is quite different from the one I am considering now) cannot in any sense be interpreted in terms of such oppositions as those between theatre and performance (or theatricality and performativity), dramatic and postdramatic, modernism and postmodernism.

In this perspective, what is unique and significant about Brecht's model is not so much that he adopts a new way of making theatre, as that he seems to direct his research toward the overcoming of the borders of the dramatic theatre. It is as if Brecht were interested in theatre solely to place within it the seed that would cause it to explode.

Thus, if post-dramatic theatre is certainly a post-Brechtian theatre in terms of its treatment of the *fable*, it nonetheless does not exceed Brecht in terms of the logic of gesture. For gesture to be citable it has to interrupt and suspend, in a process of separation, the intentional, teleological movement of the fable itself, arresting, dislocating and reconfiguring it precisely as a gesture.

If we pay attention to this interruption, we can see it to be the basis of the most radical logics of memorization: from the ancient rhetoric with the 'ars memorandi', to the Warburgian concept of *Nachleben*, to Eisenstein's ex-stasis, to the idea of the montage of History proposed by Jean-Luc Godard, to Chris Marker's composition of time, to Bill Viola's citation of the Renaissance, to the composition of the photographic image in Jeff Wall up to Romeo Castellucci's theatre-making methods.

b) Analyzing the possibility for the performance to remain, to impress the spectator's memory, Rebecca Schneider has suggested that other modes of remembering exist, which might be situated precisely in ways by which the performance remains, but remains differently⁵. Schneider insists on the memory's retention of gesture, in a network of body-to-body transmission and oral narrations; and, in particular, on the concept of performance as archive *per se*. Indeed, in the post-dramatic theatre, the issue of memory as an organized archive of "originals", or as a collection of written remains becomes complicated – necessarily imbricated, chiasmatically, with the living body. As Schneider has stated: "if theatre refuses to remain, it is precisely in the repeatedly live theatre

⁵ See R. Schneider, "Performance Remains", in *Performance Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2001) pp. 100–108.

or installation space that a host of recent artists explore history – the recomposition of remains”, the citation of gestures. The issue, then, relocates, moving from a logic of post-dramatic theatre that escapes its preservation in the archives towards a consideration of performance itself as archive. It should be useful here to remember that this is the position of historiographers like Pierre Nora, of anthropologists like Carlo Severi (the inaugurator of the anthropology of memory) and of art historians and philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Georges Didi-Huberman, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Giovanni Careri and Ackbar Abbas interested in the idea of survival or *living on* proposed by Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin. It is also interesting to remember Michael Taussig’s acknowledgement of his debt to Benjamin’s thought about epic theatre in his understanding and analysis of the Putumayo healing sessions.⁶ In this account, theatre studies’ work on the post-dramatic may play a fundamental role, since their objects are constitutively imbricated with the issue of memory remains and re-birth, or better, after-life (*Nachleben*), with citation and transmission other than that of the traditional archive.

As Joseph Roach points out, analyzing the role of the transmission and revision of unwritten history, and coining the concept of “performance genealogies”, these “draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonical reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in the silence between them), and imaginary movements dreamed in minds, not prior to language but constitutive of it, a psychic rehearsal for physical actions drawn from the repertoire that a culture provides”⁷. What he calls “expressive movements” are nothing other than citable gestures.

c) A famous and problematic sentence by Peggy Phelan states that: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of

⁶ “What I was being invited to do in those hallucinatory curing sessions of magical practicality on the frontier where Indians cured colonists, was to rethink the mode of work in which I was involved as work better approached from the perspective of the tension involved in the disconcerting experiments in representation tried out by European and (as I later learnt to appreciate) early Soviet Modernism – e.g. Joyce, Cubism, Woolf, Myerhold, Zurich Dada, Berlin Dada, Constructivism, Brecht, Eisenstein, and Benjamin, moving from allegory to the shock of montage and the liberating (messianic) mimetic snapshot of the ‘dialectical/dialectical image’”, M. Taussig, *The Nervous System*, New York–London, Routledge, 1992, p. 7.

⁷ J. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 26.

representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. Performance... becomes itself through disappearance”⁸.

Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his turn, has stated that *postdramatic theatre is a theatre of the present*.

Citation, on the contrary, is a figure extracted from the past, even if in Benjamin’s reading its action appears in present time, as a salvation and exhibition of the past in the “now”, being at the same time a prefiguration of things to come.

If theatre’s only time is the present, the time of the citation being the past, what is the time of the citable gesture? The specific signature of the citable gesture, I insist, is that it cuts the three instances of temporality – present, past and future – into an intermittent continuity.

In theatre, there are two subjects that create the present, as Lehmann has written – the present of the co-presence. But these two presents are completely different from one another. They differ not in the way in which chronological times or verbal times differ, but, I would want to suggest, in an ontological way.

I would propose that, on stage, the specific time of the citable gesture is the pregnant instant that turns it into an event. It is not by chance that, in his definition of “event”, Deleuze uses the figure of the actor: “The actor’s present is the most narrow, the most contracted, the most instantaneous, and the most punctual. It is the point on a straight line which divides the line endlessly, and is itself divided into past-future.” “The actor maintains himself in the instant in order to act out something perpetually anticipated and delayed, hoped for and recalled.”⁹

Thus, the present of the actor, which is the present of the esthetical event in theatre, is what *darts away*. The present of the spectator, on the other hand, realizes itself through the capture and recognition of such an event – that is to say, of such a citable gesture. Time rolls itself out in the actor’s gesture when this gesture is citable. The performance event cannot be saved as an objective fact, but it may become substantial as a fact of memory, or as something continuously in movement, in which the citation works on the re-emergence of time, from the actuality of the present to the possibility of the future.

That is why the citational movement of post-dramatic theatre can refer not just to the past, but in referring to the past yet to come, the past to be re-cited,

⁸ P. Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 146.

⁹ J. Deleuze, *The Logic of Ssense*, London, Continuum, (2001) 2005, p. 170.

but also point forward to a future that might be otherwise. Looking at the citable gesture impressed in the spectator's memory, the present does not stop to reconfigure itself, looking at the citable gesture produced there in front of the spectator. The past continues to flash out as a constellation of returning signs, while the future gesture marks the spot of an absence that is necessarily our absence: the gesture keeping for itself all its future. The element of duration is in it, not in ourselves.

Even if no gesture comes to be *the* gesture, if no spectacle is ever absolutely completed and done with, gesture still constantly changes, alters, enlightens, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates in advance all the others. If theatrical events are not a possession, it is not only because, like all things, they pass away; it is also because they have almost all their life still before them.

Gesture represents in this way the abbreviated figure, or, better, the recapitulated figure of presence; it draws an obscured view of what will be remembered about that presence, it traces its prehistory and its posthistory. Here a montage is operating: a montage of different times.

5. Or maybe, if *the* citable gesture exists, if the very gesture of postdramatic theatre exists, impressed in *the* postdramatic memory, such a gesture is the only one that fully realizes the great prophecy of Antonin Artaud: a gesture that nobody has ever seen, that has no symbolic meaning, that is a pure *means without an end*, that enacts, in a word, that condition of being like victims burnt at the stake, signalling through the flames.

Summary

In the era of postdramatic theatre, with the annihilation of the dramatic text as the main resource of the theatrical scene, what is being radically renegotiated is the memory issue. We have to recognize that the advent of postdramatic theatre entails a radical reorientation in the representation and experience of memory, from a text-based culture to an approach more connected with other visual and material logics. As a consequence of the loss of centrality of the written text, artists, scholars and critics, as well as the "generic" audience, have to use particular memory strategies in order to remember the performance. Unlike readings which see the space of the performance as consistently besieged by disappearance and oblivion, my essay proposes an approach aimed at highlighting those logics which make the stage a place (and often a privileged one) of memory practice.

Within the frame of scenic analysis, Walter Benjamin suggests a concept which is generally overlooked, although it is fertile with implications: the notion of the *citable gesture*, i.e. a gesture which puts into question the very notion of ephemerality as constitutive of the status of theatre. This topic was introduced by Benjamin in an essay on Bertolt Brecht's theatre, and it prefigures the memory imperative which will inform Benjamin's great work "Theses on the Philosophy of History", where the task of the historian is to capture an actual image of the past, an instantaneous image that *darts away*, flashing for an instant, to appear no more. Likewise, the gesture – particularly in a scene which yields nothing to the dramatic text as a source of tradition and hence of memory – summarizes in itself the precariousness, the perishability of what appears once and does not repeat, except by coming back, in the form of image and citation, to the stage of memory. The citable gesture is, then, a gesture capable of survival and also, in some cases, of rebirth. The remainder it produces is not simply material; rather, it is first a phantasmal and then a living residue – a residual energy impressed upon the memory of the spectator, the historian, and the witness; an energy which feeds other gestures deployed both in the present scene and in historical writing concerned with the stage.

Analiza Saki

SIGNALIZIRANJE BAKLJAMA: GEST I SEĆANJE U POSTDRAMSKOM POZORIŠTU

Rezime

U eri postdramskog pozorišta, koje karakteriše poništavanje dramskog teksta kao glavnog izvora pozorišne scene, ono što se radikalno ponovo ispituje jeste – *pitanje sećanja*. Mora se priznati da dolazak postdramskog pozorišta povlači za sobom radikalnu promenu orijentacije u pogledu reprezentacije i iskustva sećanja, od na-tekstu-zasnovane kulture do pristupa koji je više zasnovan na drugačijim vizuelnim i materijalnim logikama. Kao posledica toga što je pisani tekst izgubio središnje mesto, umetnici, naučnici, kritičari, kao i „generička” publika, moraju da koriste posebne strategije sećanja na predstavu. Za razliku od tumačenja koja prostor predstave sagledavaju kao neprekidno opsednut pitanjem iščezavanja i zaborava, moj rad predlaže pristup koji je usmeren na osvetljavanje logika koje od scene čine mesto (često privilegovano) za praksu sećanja.

U okviru scenske analize, Valter Benjamin predlaže koncept koji se generalno previđa, iako je plodan u svojim implikacijama – pojam *citacije gesta*, tj. gesta koji dovodi u pitanje tezu da je efemernost konstitutivni pojam za status pozorišta. Ovu temu Valter Benjamin uvodi u svom eseju o teatru Bertolta Brehta,

ali ona nagoveštava imperativ sećanja koji će prožeti i Benjaminovo čuveno delo „Teze o filozofiji istorije”, po kojima je zadatak istoričara da uhvati aktuelnu sliku prošlosti, momentalnu sliku koja proleće kao strela, blesne na trenutak i više se ne pojavljuje. Slično tome, pokret – posebno na sceni, koja ništa ne prepušta dramskom tekstu kako bi on bio izvor tradicije i odatle sećanja – sumira nesigurnost, nepouzdanost, prolaznost nečega što se pojavi jednom i nikada više, osim što se vraća, u formi slike i citata, na scenu sećanja. Citacija gesta je, dakle, sposobnost pokreta da preživi i takođe – u nekim slučajevima – ponovo se rodi. Ostatak koji proizvodi nije jednostavno materijalan: pre bi se moglo reći da je najpre fantazmatski, a zatim i živi trag: neka vrsta rezidualne energije utisnute u sećanje gledaoca, istoričara i svedoka, energija koja hrani druge gestove korišćene i na današnjoj sceni i u istorijskim tekstovima o pozorištu.