

Spirit to Ashes, Performance to Dust: Derrida, Theatre de Complicite, and the Question of a “Holy Theatre”

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I. Derrida, Heidegger, Hegel and the deconstruction of spirit

Peggy Phelan has noted that our encounter with bodies in the theatrical space is phantasmal and indeterminate, triggering a “radicality of unknowing who we are becoming” (Phelan 1997, 17). This ontological confusion is caused because we are seduced into an encounter with what is imaginary, what is “becoming” rather than “being”, something which is not really wholly present, but not really finally absent either. What might it mean to say that in theatre, in performance, we encounter an absent presence or a present absence, in other words: a spirit, a ghost?

In *De l'esprit* (Of Spirit) Derrida begins his account of spirit by stating: “I shall speak of ghost [*revenant*], of flame, and of ashes” and he ends it with the following: “The spirit which keeps watch in returning [*en revenant*, as a ghost] will always do the rest. Through flame or ash, but as the entirely other, inevitably” (Derrida 1989, 1, 113). How should we understand Derrida’s concern with the question of spirit within Western thought and his implied argument for its central significance? Why has Derrida effectively translated spirit as a ghost [*revenant*] which returns through flame or ash?¹ And what value is there to considering spirit as “entirely other”, in Derrida’s phrase, as opposed to being “other” to something specific or something that can at least be specified and named in advance as a teleological objective of spirit?

¹ In the German language “*Geist*” can mean mind, spirit, or ghost.

The concept of spirit has traditionally been constructed in terms of a binary opposition to corporeality (the sensible, the physical), and as a key principle of Western metaphysics it has various associations of infinity, transcendence, invisibility, and otherness. While we often think of this as religious inheritance and indeed it is, it is also noticeable in the German idealist tradition, such as in Kant and Hegel, which sought to secularize aspects of the theological. The Platonic-Christian tradition has elevated spirit to an absolute according to which pure spirit resides in the Idea, or God, and the physical world is perceived as an aberrant manifestation of impurity and imperfection. Spirit derives from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning “breath” or “soul”, which is a translation of the Greek *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah*. The question of how spirit becomes manifest is not only a question for religion then, but also for aesthetics, as Hegel’s well-known definition of art as the “sensuous appearance of spirit” has shown.²

In terms of theatre and performance, the possibility of spirit’s appearance or manifestation reveals the central paradox of spirit: the fact that its invisibility (non-materiality) is shown to be dependent on processes of making visible, on appearance, materialization, and indeed performance. In this respect, the ostensible materiality of the theatrical event sharpens the paradox of the non-material spirit’s appearance through what is effectively “other” to spirit. It is this intriguing paradox which lies at the heart of theatre and performance and which I will argue is the one exploited by the traditions of thinking of theatre as a “sacred” or “holy” space in Artaud, Brook and Grotowski. Furthermore, spirit’s otherness, while it is often viewed as a defined otherness to matter (and is therefore unlike the radical otherness or alterity of spirit that Derrida argues for in *De l’esprit*), depends on processes of certain kinds of materialization which are, however, not attempts at making spirit reducible to the body, the material, the thing. In insisting on this irreducibility, spirit also resists representation as it is

² See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Part I, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Classics, 2004).

that which logically cannot be represented; instead it can only make itself manifest as a seeming paradox of what is ontologically possible/impossible. Spirit in this view is, I would argue, an indication of the inherent crisis of theatrical representation that Phelan has analyzed, as it is a movement or process of avoidance that puts its own relationship to presence into question.

In order to understand where this logic of spirit/matter comes from we need to turn to Hegel, whose work is perhaps the most important modern example of an attempt to re-establish the traditional metaphysical understanding of spirit within a worldly or secular viewpoint. Following Hegel, spirit is a unifying principle; it is an idea that “finds itself.” Amongst the many names Hegel gives to this concept (Idea, Absolute, Self), the association of spirit as “free mind” is most resonant, for it expresses the overcoming (or resolution) of a dynamic which nevertheless is foundational for the emergence of spirit. In an attempt to overcome the Kantian dualism between reason and experience (understanding and sensibility, form and content), Hegelian idealism proposes the activity of the free mind (Spirit) as a consciousness of its own subjectivity and objectivity:

The principle of free mind is to make the merely given element [*das Seiende*] in consciousness into something mental [*Seelenhaftes*], and conversely to make what is mental into an objectivity. (Hegel, 1971)

Spirit, thus, is a process of transformation which frees itself from its internal divisions by mediating them within itself (the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, or sublation); Spirit is also a “self-knowing” presence, able to determine itself out of and against the constitutive differential relationship between the finite and the infinite, between the immanent and the transient.³

Hegel emphasized spirit as a consciousness of this movement between these various binary oppositions; spirit is thus defined as a process, as a becoming which paradoxically has

³ For an alternative view of Hegel which sees him as more deconstructive than Heidegger, Derrida and others have allowed him to be, see: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

the effect of solidifying the presence of its foundational substance. Spirit is therefore a principle of unity and identity in Hegel and becomes the definitive metaphysical concept and point of contention for anti-Hegelian philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. Spirit's "finding" of itself, its declaration of freedom and self-knowing presence, gestures towards a kind of positive transcendence of negativity (for example, of death). But Hegel emphasizes that this is achieved by a "looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it (Hegel 1977, sec. 32, 19), which suggests that this process is not conceivable in terms of an outright rejection or traceless overcoming of negativity.

Returning to Derrida's *De l'esprit*, his argument is informed by a different account of spirit which is post-metaphysical and post-Hegelian in the sense that it does not constitute such an avowal of spirit as unified, self-knowing presence, but rather argues that spirit is always displaced and deferred from such presence. Spirit in Derrida's sense is always an uncanny supplement: *revenant* [ghost, but literally "that which returns"], phantom, cinder, ash. Derrida uses words that implicate spirit as a residue of the expired (hence performed) material where transcendence is necessarily problematic or uncompleted (a ghost or *revenant* would be the trace of the subject which has not ascended to the metaphysical world of pure spirit; its "return" thus presents a paradox within the logical opposition of matter and spirit.) In effect Derrida attempts to hold onto the negative move in Hegel's account without allowing it to be transformed into a positive by means of any Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation).⁴ Following Heidegger's earlier work in the deconstruction of metaphysics, Derrida employs spirit as a category that undermines the binary opposition between presence and absence and a traditional dualistic understanding of spirit and matter, framing spirit in a

⁴ In this respect Derrida's view is similar to Adorno's transformation of Hegel's positive dialectics into a "negative dialectics" which emphasises thinking as a movement of contradictions and foregrounds the "non-identical" moment inherent in the concept.

quite different fashion as a process of “ghosting” which produces significant shifts in our perception of and engagement with any performative event.

The figure of ghost appears in transient rather than immanent form. It is an apparition, but its appearance is not a direct indication of its existence or manifest presence. It is elusive, transparent, not really (manifestly) there but at the same time dependent on some form of materialization (for example, breath, fire or flame all depend on the material). The performance, in this sense, is an apparition (a ghostly appearance) which emerges from sensuous material and context (the stage, the performer’s physicality, and so on). The performance is neither reducible nor identical to this materiality but is nonetheless bound up with it. Adorno draws attention to this paradox: “In each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist” (Adorno 1997, 82). This is to say that while spirit may appear in art it does so in a way that intrinsically problematizes that very process of appearance.

In *Of Spirit*, Derrida engages with Heidegger’s project of “deconstructing”⁵ spirit (and its Platonic-Christian associations) as a metaphysical concept (variously identified with subjectivity and consciousness) in order to allow for a re-emergence of *Dasein* (a mode of being engaged in the world). In his reading of Heidegger, Derrida traces Heidegger’s changing uses of and attitudes to spirit (*Geist*): having initially (in *Being and Time*, for example) avoided the use of spirit due to its Platonic-metaphysical weight, Heidegger staged a defence of Nazism in terms of spirit.⁶ Finally, in his later period, he attempted to re-define the terms *Geist* and *Geistlichkeit* by invoking the metaphor of “spirit in-flames” as an originary way of thinking about spirit which is intended to overcome its idealist and

⁵ Derrida’s notion of deconstruction is a development of Heidegger’s *Destruktion* which he introduces in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) as a method of postmetaphysical thinking that grounds the meaning of *Dasein* (being-there) in temporality.

⁶ In his infamous Rectorship Address of 1933 Heidegger speaks of the “spiritual mission of the German Volk” and says that the German nation must “submit to the power of the *beginning* of our spiritual-historical existence.” Spirit is here associated with the Nietzschean will to power. See: Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University” in Richard Wolin, ed. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (MIT Press, 1993), 29-39.

metaphysical connotations. According to Heidegger, the concept of spirit has been degraded in the Western metaphysical tradition to a “contrary opposed to the material” and survives distorted as “the rational, the intellectual and the ideological” (Heidegger quoted in Derrida 1989, 95).⁷ With reference to the symbolist poetry of Georg Trakl who associates spirit with flame,⁸ Heidegger returns to the “originary meaning” of spirit as a mode of burning, devouring, inflaming itself.⁹ However, Derrida argues that Heidegger’s project of fundamental questioning of the metaphysics of subjectivity and spirituality, “the metaphysico-Platonic-Christian oppositions of the below and the beyond, of the low and the high, of the sensible and the intelligible” (Derrida 1989, 33) itself succumbs to a quasi-idealist gesturing by proposing an affirmation of an “original” kind of spirit, an essential notion of spirit: namely spirit as fire and flame as signifiers of presence. Furthermore, for Derrida this Heideggerian account of spirit through metaphorization reconnects with the Christian tradition of symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost) as tongues of fire (flames). But rather than emphasizing the flame-like appearance of spirit, Derrida is more interested in the event that is to come, the deferred promise that is inherent in spirit’s temporality. Spirit returns as a ghost which does not reside in fire: it emerges “[t]hrough flame or ash, but as the entirely other, inevitably” (ibid., 113). Spirit is that which was and which is yet to come; it is a returning and a haunting that resists the process of reification in/as a moment of presence.

In Heidegger’s discourse of spirit as flame, spirit is simultaneously an intangible product and an ephemeral process. Derrida is more interested in the ephemerality (and performance?) of spirit – in what does or does not remain at the end – rather than in the question of the Being and essential characteristics of spirit. The symbol of the flame is

⁷ See also Martin Heidegger, “Die Sprache im Gedicht. Eine Erörterung von Georg Trakls Gedicht” (1952) in: *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959).

⁸ In his last poem, *Grodek*, Trakl speaks of “die heisse Flamme des Geistes” – the ardent flame of spirit.

⁹ “To be thrown (*aufgebracht*), transported [or transposed, deported: *entsetzt*, (...)], outside itself (*ausser sich*).” See Derrida 1989, 98.

pertinent for explorations of the theatricality of the spirit because it highlights the double nature of spirit as something material but also as something that escapes the material and resists reification into an object. In the metaphor of flame or fire, spirit is given an ephemeral materiality which constitutes an important step towards non-metaphysical definitions of spirit. Derrida takes this further, not by focussing on the presence of spirit as flame but by exploring the material residue or trace of the flame, which he alludes to as cinders and ashes.

Heidegger's use of the metaphor of flame to describe spirit, while it is intended to show spirit as non-metaphysical, nevertheless is still too anchored in an idea of presence, and this is what Derrida seeks to deconstruct by replacing flame (the French *flamme*) with ashes and ghosts. In the context of material activity, flame is something which burns while material is present, but in contrast ashes and ghosts are what is still there after material has been reduced to its furthest limit, after the metaphorical fire is extinguished. Flame for Heidegger is not a remainder but something which points to the fact that spirit shows the intrinsic relationship between matter and Being. While for Derrida the ghosts and ashes of spirit are something that exists apart from presence or without the requirement of an illumination by Being. Pertinent here is Derrida's remark in *Cinders*:

I understand that the cinder is nothing that can be in the world, nothing that remains as an entity [*étant*]. It is the being [*l'être*], rather, that there is – this is a name of the being that is there but which, giving itself (*es gibt* ashes), is nothing, remains beyond everything that is (*konis epekeina tes ousias*), remains unpronounceable in order to make saying it possible although it is nothing. (Derrida 1991, 73)

Spirit for Derrida is therefore associated not with presence but rather with “nothing”, a “nothing” that is not “something” (nor a traditional “nothing” that is the opposite of “something”). Spirit's radical negativity cannot be reclaimed or recuperated and can only be said in a broken fashion, because it cannot be properly spoken, that is to say it cannot simply appear in language and signification. In contrast, Heidegger's translation of spirit as flame is a something that points to his continued preoccupation with how to re-engage with the

question of nothingness as a way of reframing humanity's "forgotten" relationship with Being.¹⁰

In terms of the event of performance, a Heideggerian analysis would argue for spirit-as-flame as providing an opening into our apprehending Being to be glimpsed through performance, as a process by which spirit is shown as consuming and devouring itself and by its dislocation of the opposition between spirit and matter. This opening allows Being to be momentarily seen through the activities of physical embodiment in art, without being reduced to any metaphysical logic of identity or immanence within that performance itself.¹¹ In contrast, for Derrida spirit is always what comes after, what is left within the traces of memory and representation after the event of performance itself has happened, a "nothing" that can be performed or be said to appear in performance only because it cannot properly be performed. Instead of pointing us towards the existential question of how to engage with the question of nothingness, as a way of reframing humanity's "forgotten" relationship with Being, it embodies a singular "nothing" that cannot be converted into a general rapprochement with the problem of nothingness nor which permits an origin of presence to lie either within the performance or outside of it (for instance in terms of Being).

Heidegger's "flame" opens up the space of non-transcendent Being, but flame, while it varies in terms of size and quality, is always essentially the same and like Being is for all its difference surprisingly unitary. Whereas cinders and ghosts are always marked by a trace of peculiar singularity that can never be completely erased or lost, despite or because of the fact they are examples of nothing, left after being-as-flame has consumed itself, has burned down to virtually "nothing."

¹⁰ The theme of nothingness is developed in Heidegger's lecture "What is Metaphysics?" where he states that Nothing is what shapes Being. See: Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in David Farrell Krell, ed. *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, revised ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 89-110.

¹¹ Heidegger defines the essence of art as a movement through which the truth of Being (the "setting-itself-into-work of truth") is realised. "It is due to art's poetic essence that, in the midst of beings, art breaks opens an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual." Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in David Farrell Krell, ed. *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, 197.

II. The Holy Theatre revisited: Artaud, Brook, Grotowski, and the reconstruction of spirit in performance

The performance tradition that Peter Brook refers to as the “holy theatre” in *The Empty Space* (1968) has a peculiar relationship to the idea of the spiritual. First of all, he argues that much of contemporary (twentieth-century) theatre, labouring under commercial pressures and unable (or unwilling) to take creative risks, is “deadly theatre”: sterile, predictable, meaningless. Audiences and critics have become “deadly” too, and as a culture we have “lost all sense of ritual and ceremony . . . and now find ourselves rejecting the very notion of a holy stage” (Brook 1990, 51). However, Brook contends that whilst it is true that in the West “[a]ll the forms of sacred art have certainly been destroyed by bourgeois values”, theatre must nevertheless attempt to address the human spiritual “need for a true contact with a sacred invisibility” (54). The quality of the sacred or holy, for Brook, makes itself felt as a process of transformation from the invisible to the visible in the art of the theatre and performance.

Christopher Innes argues in *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde* that the holy theatre is an “aspiration to transcendence, to the spiritual in its widest sense” and an “idealisation of the primitive and elemental in theatre” (Innes 1981, 3). In one respect the spirituality of this holy theatre should be considered part of a more general and familiar modernist tendency to find a form of spirituality in art that was different from existing Christian religious practices. The radicalization of ritualistic practices in surrealist theatre and the adoption of performative strategies from non-Western theatre make sense in this paradigm. Innes situates the holy theatre, for example in the work of Artaud, Brook and Grotowski, within the context of the history of the modernist avant-garde which reveals a preoccupation with the irrational, the “primitive”, and the ritualistic (usually found in non-

Western theatrical modes) in order to renew what they regarded as a Western theatre that had lost its way. However, Innes does not pay attention to the meaning of spirit within this discourse of performance nor set it within any form of philosophical framework that allows it to be critically engaged with.

The question one needs to ask in response to Brook and Innes is: to what extent is the holy theatre able to save the category of spirit in theatre and performance in what it would probably contend is a non-religious and non-metaphysical way? As a result of a grounding of the uniqueness and power of the theatrical event in radical expositions of corporeality, the assumption is often made that physical theatre constitutes an attempt to overcome the mind-body split of Western logocentrism. But such a conclusion is satisfactory only if one refrains from essentializing the body and instead takes account of the complex ontology of spirit and its relationship to the material practice of performance, i.e. to that which it seemingly resists. The finite space that is created in the theatre, through performance, stands in juxtaposition with the infinity that is the being of spirit. To think both concepts together, that is the challenge. “How spirit is the finite that finds itself to be infinite in the exposition of its finitude, this is what is to be thought – which is to say, this is what it is to ‘think’” (Nancy 2002, 31). Essentially, this involves a dialectical thinking of the relation between the material and the immaterial.

There is a tradition of thinking about the aesthetics of spirituality or spiritualization as a violent process which denies the particularity (and uniqueness) of the material body in favour of abstract idealization. Such anamnesis of the body has been traced in the development of canonical Western art (for example, in the various representations of Christ’s passion and its transfiguration in idealized pictorial form).¹² Much of twentieth-century

¹² See Crispin Sartwell, “Venus/Intra-Venus: Art against and as the Body” in *Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art*, ed. Perlmutter and Koppman, 1999. Sartwell discusses the “etherealised” body of Christ in *The Resurrection* of Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the flawless, transparent female body of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* as

theatrical performance practice (for example, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook) aims at a similar preservation of the notion of spirit/spirituality in and through a recovery of the material particularity of the human body. In the context of theatre, the added dimension of live spectatorship (the preferred term here is “witnessing”) and the ephemeral temporality of the theatrical event give rise to a complex set of definitions of the process of spiritualization and the meaning of spirit. Following Hegel (and a tradition of philosophical and aesthetic thought that reaches back to Plato), art can be defined as a spiritualization (spiritual transformation) of the sensuous; in art the spiritual becomes manifest and realises itself. Such understanding of the spiritualized artwork is overly rational and in idealist-metaphysical discourse presupposes an autonomous spirit (Idea), a duality of spirit (mind) and body.

One cannot simply divorce spirit from its aesthetic form and appearance, as Kandinsky attempted by declaring that spirit is concealed by matter and awaiting its release.¹³ On the other hand, the concept of spirit is eschewed if it is reductively tied to an experience of corporeality and our affective, sensuous response to physical presence (of the essential or “authentic” body in performance, for example). Both are ways of reifying the subject into an object (a “thing” to be had or experienced or witnessed) rather than thinking of spirit as an immanent process, a (dialectical) movement of unresolved tension between elements.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the gesture of giving superior emphasis and value to the body in performance, as evident in the modernist physical theatre experiments of Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook, has been described as essentialist¹⁴ due to the one-sided ways in

examples of a violent process of spiritualization, as idealized transformation and disembodiment. Sartwell argues that in much of contemporary performance art the tropes of Christian spirituality (e.g. the work of Chris Burden) and aesthetic idealization (Saint Orlan’s plastic surgery project) are self-consciously deployed in order to reveal the destructive aspects and effects of such spiritualization as an overcoming of the material reality of the body, by means of a conscious return to and affirmation of the intractability of the “animal” body.

¹³ “The veiling of the spirit in matter is often so thick that, generally, only a few people can see through it to the spirit. There are many people who cannot even see through it to the spirit.” Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Problem of Form” (1912) in: Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds, *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, trans., Henning Falkenstein (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 147.

¹⁴ See Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997).

which notions of authenticity and immediate self-expression are linked to physical performance and corporeality. What is interesting to see, however, is that the idea of spirituality re-emerges precisely in these materialist approaches to acting and performance. Artaud, Grotowski and Brook make spiritual claims for their projects, which range from suggestions that a focussed encounter with the body can lead to spiritual renewal (of performers and spectators alike), to beliefs that the elementary, pure physicality of the performing body may present a critical riposte to the ideologically distorted, “socialized” human body. For Brook, Grotowski’s theatre is “a vehicle, a means for self-study, self-exploration, a possibility of salvation” (Brook 1990, 66). And, following “Artaud’s ideal,” Grotowski’s actors “have given up everything except their own bodies” (ibid, 67). What unites these arguments for a renewed attention to the performing body out of which or through which a re-emergence of the spiritual might become a possibility, is the concept of presence: the irreducible presence of the body in performance is taken as a signifier for authenticity and immediacy, and the spiritual experience becomes associated with an experience of heightened temporality, vaguely expressed as “being in the present moment.”¹⁵

However, if the theatrical set-up and structure (and the movement of bodies within it) are primarily framed as indices of unrepeatable presence, it becomes difficult to accommodate the transformational operations of spirituality (which Derrida re-thinks as difference) within the theatrical framework. Since the moment of performance is by nature transitory and ephemeral (Brook) it will not be possible to ground spirit in a fixed moment of embodied presence. Derrida’s approach resists such reifying tendencies. From a Derridean perspective, spirit does not lie *within* the performative event or gesture, but *after* it (bearing in mind, however, that the after, the “post”, is inconceivable without what has come before);

¹⁵ Adorno and post-metaphysical philosophy also focus on the body and the somatic element of thought, but in Adorno physicality is not defended as a sign of authenticity or self-identical presence. Rather, the post-Auschwitz cultural condition draws our attention to the suffering body as a locus of non-identity; or, in the Deleuzian sense, as a singularity whose presence is based on difference rather than identity.

and in thus denoting the peculiar “ghostliness” of the event and performative gesture, spirit displaces the originary moment of performance and presents itself as a liminal force which challenges the metaphysics of presence and identity. Thus it could be argued that the operation of spirit in the context of performance constitutes a self-reflexive exposition of the nature of spirit as a mode of deconstruction of both presence and absence. Moreover, spirit in performance offers a revision of its own history and grounding in the (German idealist) discourse of metaphysics.

There is a sense that in Artaud’s work and vision the body is an ungovernable, unpenetrable substance, a *Grund* (ground), a Thing which cannot be understood *per se* but which provides the originary foundation for all intellectualization. “My body can never be touched,” Artaud proclaims in his famous radio play “To have done with the judgment of God” (1947) (Artaud 1976, 568). Artaud’s project sought to rejuvenate Western theatre by drawing on influences from Eastern performance styles (for example, Balinese Dance), the ritualistic and mythic qualities and effects of which, he claimed, offer the spectator an experience of transformation and depersonalization which opposes the Western, text-based, logocentric tradition of dramatic theatre. The spiritual dimension of this type of performance is aligned with the sacred and emerges from Oriental theatre’s “new physical language, based upon signs and no longer upon words,” a language which addresses the senses (Artaud 1993, 54). This theatre’s power to transform, to give us a (primarily sensuous) impression of what lies beyond reality (its “double” or “other”), is immanent and transcendental at the same time, but not psychological. According to Artaud, ritual sacred theatre is anti-psychological because it is not interested in analyzing the individual’s mind with a view to making human experience intelligible. This kind of “holy” theatre does not return the self to itself in any idealist fashion (which would engender a fuller consciousness of itself, even of its unconscious drives) but takes the self out of itself and, through exposure to sounds, noises,

gestures and signs, presents the spectator with a peculiar “physical knowledge” which can only be enabled by the live event of theatre. The limitations of Western psychological theatre¹⁶ are said to be overcome by a focus on the physical language of the theatre (its embodied sounds, noises, cries, gestures and signs), which might have the power to re-energize the imagination and spiritual powers of the spectator. As Susan Sontag explains, “Artaud defines the theatre as a place where the obscure facets of ‘the spirit’ are revealed in a real, material projection” (Artaud 1976, xxxiii). A holy theatre emerging from such performance in the theatrical space is primarily a performance of the (sacred) human body – a spiritualized (transformed) body that is liberated from the stultifying effects of socialization.

Artaud’s theatre of cruelty is a form of total theatre which seeks to regenerate the spirit by producing a physical knowledge and sensibility emerging from a confrontation with concentrated violent imagery and gestures. The aim of such confrontation with primary forces and repressed conflicts is to unite the individual performer and spectator with the realm of the infinite and thus to create a consciousness of freedom; or, as Auslander suggests, “to re-establish life on healthier spiritual terms” (Auslander 1997, 21).

Artaud attempts to re-sacralize the theatre (to “rediscover a religious, mystical meaning our theatre has forgotten”) by returning to it an experience of physicality which has been denied by Western, text-based, psychological theatre (Artaud 1993, 35). What was Artaud’s attitude to metaphysics? Derrida has shown that he was not able to overcome it because his emphasis on the body is also essentializing, aiming to return the self to a sense of pure presence and identity. Artaud is not able to escape the framework of representation (even in his onslaught against the logocentric ideology of traditional theatre). Metaphysics, the philosophy of duality (mind-body split) which Artaud’s project seeks to overcome by establishing the presence of the body in theatre, returns (like a ghost) not only in his notion of

¹⁶ “Psychology persists in bringing the unknown down to a level with the known, that is to say with the everyday and pedestrian” (Artaud 1993, 58).

the theatre of cruelty (as a return to the pure presence of primary, violent conflicts within the individual), but also in his very Gnostic perception of the material world.

The Gnostic sensibility of Artaud's work has been emphasized (by Sontag and Goodall) and variously defined as a critique of the imperfection and falsity of the material/sensible appearance of the world with a view of liberating the human being from its existence under conditions of material distortion and alienation, from its false worldliness. Gnosticism is a radically individualist worldview which is "concerned with self-transformation dissociated from social, political, or cultural concerns" (Goodall 1994, 4) and this finds expression in Artaud's calls for a revolutionary rejuvenation of theatre, which will be an "individual affair." The body in Artaud's theory signifies an irreducible presence and is thus the locus of a possible self-transformation.

Self-transformation is also a key idea in Grotowski's project. As Paul Allain has stated, the legacy of Grotowski is wide-spread and complex. One of his guiding principles, as Brook also pointed out, was the idea of "art as vehicle": a concept and practice that seeks to destabilize conventional performer – audience relationships, and according to which the spectator becomes a witness and the boundaries between life and art are questioned. The notion of "art as vehicle" implies art's ability to reach towards an experience that exists in a different temporal dimension: the art of performance becomes a primary vehicle for transformation. Grotowski, in his application of this notion to the performance practice he developed at the Pontedera Workcentre in Italy, differentiates it from "art as presentation": the objectification of art in conventional theatre as production. Theatre is primarily an "actor's act . . . an invitation to the spectator" (Grotowski 1968, 212, 216) and the emphasis is, again, on "free[ing] ourselves" and "fulfill[ing] ourselves." The "total act" of performance, in which physical and mental impulses unite, creates a different kind of ritual or holy theatre: The aim is not to de-individualize the actor (and spectator) in the process of theatre but to

encourage a ritual of self-exploration, self-discovery, self-transformation. It is interesting to note how the (idealist) discourse of spirit (the connection between spirit and self, the notion of spirit as self-expression and return to itself in an Hegelian sense) is maintained in this kind of avant-garde performance tradition of physical training which attempts to re-sacralize or re-enchant the theatre and create rituals of individualization – a holy theatre of the “actor’s act.”

Peter Brook defines the function and power of spirit in the “holy theatre” as that which makes the invisible appear visible and the non-present present. But what does it mean to say that spirit comes to presence in the theatre? Do the very mechanisms of self-exposition in performance not generate a continual erasure and deferral of the present moment, of the event? Brook’s holy theatre, a theatre of the “Invisible-Made-Visible” (Brook 1990, 47), expresses a dimension of potentiality (an “empty space”) within which the unknown can emerge. If one follows this notion of emptiness-as-potentiality through, one could argue that the spirituality of the encounter with the unknown does not reside in the specific event-character of performance (as “happening”) but in that which comes after. The holy theatre in Brook is an “adventist” space where an encounter with the unknown becomes imminent. From a Derridean perspective one could argue that an actual encounter with spirit cannot strictly be tied to the structure of an event in the sense of immediate happening, unless the very notion of event is reconsidered (for example, in Badiou’s sense of the event as an exceptional occurrence). This is implied in the definition of Derridean deconstruction as the “wisdom of the failed encounter” (Žižek 1999, 133). The notions of deferral, postponement, and the non-identity of spirit and appearance (performance) articulate a sense of spirit and spirituality in terms of promise; rather than constituting an event as such, spirit is a promise, a desire for “a coming of the event” (Derrida 1989, 94). Derrida’s emphasis on otherness and deferral, his conception of ghostliness (spirituality) as a not-yet, shows performance to be a

displaced (and thus unfinished, incomplete) realization which becomes manifest only in/through the precarious traces that the performance leaves or might leave.

III. Theatre de Complicite and the performance of spirit as trace

The discourse of spirit in relation to theatre and performance, especially in the tradition of experimental physical theatre practice and theory as discussed above, often centres on the argument that the authentic aesthetic experience is qualitatively akin to a spiritual experience. Accordingly, the concepts of spirit and spiritual experience are commonly defined as a challenge to the limitations inherent in conventional structures of thinking, and as ways of transcending the oppressive aspects of material reality (its social constraints and moral prescriptions). In Ralph Yarrow's discussion of "sacred theatre" spirituality is divorced from purely religious discourse (where it is often linked to rituals of power, convention, and authority) and considered in its wider meanings.¹⁷ One aspect that is stressed is the effect of spirit's "liberation" from the subject-object relationships that structure our experience of the everyday. The contributors to *Sacred Theatre* acknowledge the dependence of the discourse of spirituality (in the West but also in non-Western traditions) on a binary structure of thinking which places spirit in opposition to matter. Cited examples of spiritual experience are, for example, the experience of love (when it transcends physical sexuality) and forms of ecstatic group experiences such as shamanism, various forms of religious fundamentalism, political revolutions, and even the consumption of popular music. Such manifestations of spirituality can be characterised as an effect of "entranced abandon" (Yarrow 2007, 13) - the experience of boundless identity ("collapse of habitual roles"), which

¹⁷ See Ralph Yarrow, ed. *Sacred Theatre* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

could be described as a loss of self.¹⁸ But spirit here returns as a metaphysical category, especially when it appears in the guise of the concept of consciousness as an atemporal, “non-relative” kind of fullness which is not differential in itself but supposedly “pre-exists . . . differentiation” (Malekin and Yarrow 1997, 151). Yet, despite the connections to theatre and performance, spirit in this discourse is not considered as an aesthetic and performative category in itself. It has been the contention of this essay that when performance practitioners evoke the idea of spirit (in their attempts to resurrect the spirit through physical performance as seen in Artaud and Grotowski) they hypostatize spirit as a fixed identity (in effect, as an object) because they situate it in opposition to corporeality, even though they argue that spirit arises out of the performing body. These are tendencies of reification which eliminate the force of differentiation inherent in spirit as an aesthetic category and process. As art, spirit is impure, not identical to itself and not to be divorced from that which it conventionally is placed in opposition to. As art, spirit carries within it the trace of its otherness, or, to extend this thought, it may even be considered *as* the trace of its own otherness. In the following section this notion of spirit as trace will be considered with reference to the recent work of international touring theatre company Theatre de Complicite whose work has implications for a post-metaphysical understanding of spirit in a Derridean sense.

Complicite’s *A Disappearing Number* (first performed at the Barbican in London, 2007) traces the collaboration between the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan and the British mathematician G.H. Hardy. Hardy is the author of *A Mathematician’s Apology* (1940), a treatise on the aesthetics of mathematics combined with personal views. It provides some of the thematic leitmotifs of the production, such as arguments relating to the beauty of pure (abstract) mathematics which has an end in itself and needs no external justification or

¹⁸ Philosophers such as Bataille have ascribed spirituality to the concept of the erotic as an experience of transgression and continuity (as opposed to the individual’s experience of discontinuity and alienation in daily social life.)

application; the tension between the finite and the infinite; and the creative power of abstract thought. Hardy's and Ramanujan's story begins in 1913 when Hardy, after having received letters from Ramanujan, persuades the gifted Indian mathematician to travel to Cambridge and together they embark on an intensive period of mathematical investigation and discovery. Complicite's devised show hints at the significance of this encounter for mathematical research without unnecessarily confusing the audience with complex scientific theory. The pleasure of witnessing this performance lies in Complicite's ability to forge connections between abstract theoretical thought and the historical and cultural contexts of its origination. There are intercultural and interpersonal challenges, rewards, and surprises, arising from the two mathematicians' different working methods and world views: Hardy's atheistic Western approach, based on logics and proof, is juxtaposed with Ramanujan's reliance on instinct, surprise, and inspiration, which are rooted in his religiously orthodox upbringing.

Their story is interwoven with another story, the relationship between modern-day mathematician Ruth and her husband Al who struggles to understand Ruth's enthusiasm for the beauty and mystery of mathematics, such as infinite series and continued fractions. Complicite's trademark performance aesthetics of non-linear, fragmented narratives, innovative multi-media designs and staging techniques, physical theatre choreography, total-theatre techniques combining physical movement, dance, projections, music and sound effects (live and pre-recorded), are employed in this production to astonishing and emotionally moving effects. The production rises to the challenge of rendering the difficult discourse of abstract mathematics in performance terms by dramaturgically and scenographically foregrounding the aesthetic beauty of mathematical theories of continuation and infinity. This is achieved by means of employing the above-mentioned complex yet fluid stylistic techniques and also by situating the theoretical and philosophical concerns of the story in the at once specific (personal) and universal contexts of love, death, and memory. Al

struggles with deep feelings of loss after the death of his wife, mathematician Ruth, but eventually he realises that his memories, which the plot re-enacts, are in effect a proof of her absent presence and his continuing love for her. The painful realization of the lover's absence, marking the reality of life's finitude in the face of death, is juxtaposed with a sense that love, like a spirit, is infinite in its possible manifestations, continuous, and transformational. As Ruth says, "There are no gaps between the numbers, like there are no gaps in time or space; they are continuous. And if time is continuous, then we are linked to the past and future. And if space is continuous we are linked to the absent." Or in other words: everything is a trace of something else, and perhaps spirit can be reconceived as this force of connection or connectedness with an (absent) other.

Both stories, Hardy's and Ramanujan's as well as Al's and Ruth's, deal with the human need for permanence and stability, which love also creates, in seeming opposition to the potentially seductive power of the unknown and the impossible. Yet ultimately the reality of death, loss, and failure – aspects of human finitude – is unavoidable and cannot be adequately theorized. The two parallel narratives are driven by a "relentless need to understand" which in a curious way connects the aims of scientific and romantic labour but also pushes the narrative to the point where abstract thought and deep emotion touch on the mystical by revealing a spiritual dimension which challenges our understanding. Appearance is necessarily complemented by disappearance; the knowable world is a shadow of the incomprehensible and unknowable realm which surrounds our actions and desires. Whilst it is necessary to resist the positing of spirit as a kind of all-encompassing, totalizing notion of transformation or translucence, as might be invited by the thematic concerns of this play, it can be argued that the specific dynamics of theatrical representation and appearance (the moving bodies on a stage space flooded with projected images, colours and rhythmical soundscapes) already counteract such metaphysical tendencies. The theatrical presentation of

scientific-philosophical ideas (infinity, continuity, fractionality) remains grounded in the realm of the physically immediate (corporeal), which constitutes the present-ness of the performance event. Our encounter with this “ground” of the theatrical event provides the point of origin and return for any transcendent flight of the spirit which might otherwise result in the reification of spirit as a self-identical idea. After all, spirit in the theatre must be a gesture, because theatre in itself is a gesture, and if we are to resist reductive associations of spirit with embodied presence and essence, the locus of spirit cannot be found within the gesture itself but only in what it points towards.

The powerful final stage image shows the woman pouring sand from a bowl onto the stage floor. What appears to be a metaphor for the passing of time reconnects the audience to the play’s main themes concerning the beauty of abstract thought and the intractability of love. It is humanly impossible to count the grains of sand. They represent the infinite and disappearing number, yet they can be touched, experienced, brought into play. The final image and accompanying poetic speech tell of the lovers’ bones intertwined:

What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered together. They are strewn there pell-mell. One of your ribs leans against my skull. A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis. (Against my broken ribs your breast like a flower.) The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel. It is strange that this image of our proximity, concerning as it does mere phosphate of calcium, should bestow a sense of peace. Yet it does. With you I can imagine a place where to be phosphate of calcium is enough.

“Spirit is a bone” (Hegel 1977, 208), says Hegel, but in being a bone it is infinitely more than a bone. It is the trace of the bone inherent in the bone itself, an originary difference without which the distinctiveness of an aesthetic object (for example, a bone) would not be recognisable as such. The process of spiritualization, central to all art as Adorno (following Hegel) maintained, means that “[i]n no artwork is the element of spirit something that exists; rather, it is something in a process of development and formation” (Adorno 1997, 91). This

also means that spirit cannot become autonomous or fully emancipate itself from its sensuous, material “other” with which it remains intertwined in a dialectical process. Spirit refuses to become abstract (and thus never fully realizes its own aim) by engaging in the performance of memory, in a not being-there, by appearing as a trace.

A concern with questions of love, loss, death, beauty, and memory is also evident in Complicite’s next devised show, *Shun-kin* (first performed at the Setagaya Public Theatre, Tokyo in 2008). In addition to the above themes, this production specifically addresses the eroticism of servitude, submission and transgressive love. *Shun-kin* is based on two texts by the famous Japanese writer Junichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965): *In Praise of Shadows*, an essay on aesthetics, and the story *A Portrait of Shunkin*, a fictitious biography of a 19th-century blind female *shamisen*¹⁹ player, which traces her sado-masochistic relationship with her servant Sasuke who eventually becomes her pupil, lover, and the play’s narrator. In rendering visual the arguably transcendental themes of love, loss and memory as central to the story, Complicite’s sensual devised approach manages to capture Tanizaki’s extraordinary aesthetic vision of indeterminacy, contradiction and infinity, which is articulated in his praise for the beauty of darkness and shadows. The main character, the aged Sasuke, narrates the development and (intimate) details of his volatile relationship with his blind master Shun-kin, revealing her extraordinary doll-like physical beauty, capriciousness, and sadistic desires, and also his utterly self-less devotion and love for her, which culminates in his ultimate gift: the sacrificial act of self-blinding. His narrated memory of their complex and contradictory, violent and beautiful love affair is framed by another narrator: a modern-day actress who records Tanizaki’s story of Shunkin in an Osaka radio station and who is contemplating whether or not to leave her lover. In *A Disappearing Number*, the parallel stories are presented in an interwoven, counterpointed, and fragmented manner, both revealing aspects

¹⁹ *Shamisen* is an ancient Japanese string instrument.

that are central to both narratives but enacted across different temporal dimensions and spatial arrangements. *Shun-kin* also employs distancing techniques provided by the two narrative frameworks in the form of the old servant narrator and the modern-day recording actress. But by comparison with *A Disappearing Number* and other *Complicite* productions, *Shun-kin*'s story is rendered in a more linear and focused manner, its progression interrupted only at a few poignant moments, and this helps to produce dramatic tension. Effects of distancing and stylization are further produced through the incorporation of Japanese performance techniques drawn from Bunraku puppet theatre, *shamisen* music, and Nō. The young Shun-kin first appears as a doll whose head, hands, and feet are manipulated by two actors dressed in black. Later on, to mark her transformation into a sexually active and dominating woman, she turns into human form, but throughout the performance her manipulative and violent character remains an aspect of her uncanny, doll-like beauty. The audience's imagination is enveloped in different degrees of darkness (literally and figuratively), which emanates from the two lovers' tragic attachment and is enhanced by the Nō-inspired simplicity and austerity of architectural stage space, slow movement, and creation of shadows. The show's evocative and atmospheric lighting design produces shadows that gain equal weight with the actors' movements and dialogue. In most scenes candles and lamps define the contours of the moving bodies and naked skin against a void of pitch-black darkness. It is the lighting design and effective uses of voice, music (the distinctive sound of the *shamisen*), and sound (of water pouring and dripping) which provide a sense of mystery, tragedy, and, ultimately, beauty. The performance creates in the audience a sensibility for darkness and shadows; we are invited to visit the dark spaces of love and desire, encouraged "to seek beauty in darkness" (Tanizaki 2001, 47). Therefore, the final moments of the play come as a shock when we are suddenly torn away from the fictional reality of Sasuke's memory, leave the past, and are "blinded": the backdrop screen slowly

risers and our gaze, so accustomed to the shadowy colors and stylized movements of the previous action, is hit by the painfully dazzling light and noise of modernity (modern-day Osaka) into which the actors' black silhouettes disappear.

Spirit is not reducible to presence or absence; instead like a shadow it occupies a transient place in-between: the liminal. Various experiments in theatre and performance, for example the rediscovery of ritual, have attempted to undermine the duality between mind and body by emphasizing the liminality (the condition of in-between-ness) of the theatrical experience. The experience of spirituality, or the holy and sacred, in theatre has been described as liminal, as a simultaneous encounter of the sacred and the profane, the intelligible and the sensuous, in which oppositions disappear as the result of a "shift in consciousness that effects a blurring of boundaries between subject and object, self and other" (Yarrow 2007, 68). A Derridean reading of spirituality, such as has been attempted here, shows support for discussing the performance of spirit as an experience of liminality (transition and transformation), but this experience avoids reductive metaphysical and idealist interpretations because spirit as trace refuses to sublimate itself (into an abstract idea). Spirit, thus, is never disassociated from the conditions of performance.

There is an internal division in everything, including the body. As Derrida says, "The division of the body into organs, the difference interior to the flesh, opens the lack through which the body becomes absent from itself, passing itself off as, and taking itself for, the mind" (Derrida 1978, 186). This perspective holds as a critique of unity, totality, identity, presence and proposes the value of non-identity, contradiction and repetition. The "holy" theatres of Artaud, Brook and Grotowski attempt to eschew repetition (memory); they celebrate the presence of the theatrical event as a unique, singular, unrepeatable moment (as Artaud says: "the theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice" (Artaud 1993, 75), which is undoubtedly true). But in doing so

they forget that the performance event itself is an impure presence, a divided present-ness.

Theatre captures the real by framing it, by producing memories and shadows which de-centre the spirit from itself, as is demonstrated in *Complicite*'s dramatizations of the fruitful and ultimately mysterious tensions between the material and immaterial dimensions of human existence, desire, love and death.

In "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" Derrida states that "[t]he present offers itself as such, appears, presents itself, opens the stage of time or the time of the stage only by harboring its own intestine difference, and only in the interior fold of its original repetition, in representation. In dialectics" (Derrida 1978, 248). Here Derrida suggests that Artaud and more generally what I have argued is the tradition of the "holy theatre" and its existing critical interpretations and manifestations, cannot fulfil its own (secret) desire to resist repetition and representation. Rather, the transcendent status of spirit is to be explained dialectically, which in our context means that spirit is tied to its other (material status) by means of the process of performance. The spirit in performance is what is left over after the performance has gone, in the same way that spirit or ghost traces the lost or dead human subject – a spirit-subject that was never fully itself nor simply reducible to matter. Spirit resides in the memory of the performance and the performance of memory itself.

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