

PERFORMANCE

Critical Concepts in Literary
and Cultural Studies

Edited by Philip Auslander



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2003
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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Typeset in Times by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-25511-2 (Set)
ISBN 0-415-25514-7 (Volume III)

Publisher's Note

References within each chapter are as they appear in the
original complete work.

PERFORMANCE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

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Literature in Performance 5(2) (1985): 1–13. © 1985 by the Interpretation Division, Speech Communication Association.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Taylor & Francis Ltd for permission to reprint Peggy Phelan, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction", in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 146–166.

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Part 1

SCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

FROM SCIENCE TO THEATRE

Dramas of speculative thought

Gautam Dasgupta

Source: *Performing Arts Journal* 9(2-3) (1985): 237-246.

Artistic practice and scientific inquiry are commonly perceived as distinctly opposed modes of thought. The underlying assumption is that art—specifically theatre in this case—concerns itself with human and social relations, while science purveys the domain of physical reality. Since at least the early nineteenth century, however, such divergences have on occasion been breached. The incursions of newer forms of investigative disciplines—Darwinism, Freudianism, behaviorism, social sciences—have all made their mark on the drama and theatre of recent times. It can be argued, though, that as the above disciplines are not rigidly scientific in approach, their usurpation by the artistic mind has been made that much easier. Their referent is the human mind, not formulations about the nature of reality.

Of course, aligning such humanistic disciplines with artistic practice betrays a myopic view of how ideas in various spheres of activity interpenetrate one another. To take just one instance from an earlier century, did not Herbert Spencer, precursor of Darwin and theorist of social evolution, support his claims by acknowledging the physical principles of the conservation of energy? Could we not, then, resurrect this missing scientific link in discussing the dramatic works of Zola, Hauptmann and Strindberg, for example, as instances of a deterministic dramaturgy where aesthetic and structural laws derive from an accepted scientific paradigm? The preferred methodology has been to study their plays as expressive of evolutionary processes that have been “humanized,” i.e., for their residual implications in the realm of human activity. What I am proposing instead is a re-working of dramatic and artistic thought as the locus of prevalent scientific ideas of the time. Hopefully, in pursuing this line of inquiry, it may help us understand from the dominant perspective of scientific development through the ages what brought about the emergence of certain styles of drama at given historical periods. We may then,

at one stroke, be able to overcome the traditional bias against the unification of science and theatre, a deeply ingrained prejudice that continues unabated not only in the minds of the general public but on the part of artists and scholars alike.

The issue here is not so much one of influence but of correspondences that may emerge when the theatre is subjected to a mode of inquiry sustained by discoveries in the sciences. If both science and theatre seek to comprehend the nature of reality in all its varied manifestations, surely they must converge at some point in their individual searches. Such correlations, when and if they can be determined, do not necessarily have to present themselves in the structure and language of the corresponding discipline. Transpositions along metaphorical lines allow all art to subsume ideas prevalent in other fields. Could we not speculate, for instance, that Aristotle's emphasis on dramatic action as the first principle of dramaturgy may have reflected his own scientific studies on motion? Furthermore, did his placement of tragedy as superior to comedy in the hierarchy of dramatic genres stem from his belief in the idea of Final Causes, as opposed to that of Efficient Causes? From the alternate viewpoint of scientific inquiry, we find subatomic physics borrowing the metaphor of the "quark" from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and the ongoing debate about determinate and indeterminate workings of physical reality not only replay ancient philosophical concerns but also reflect opposed dramatic strategies that lie imbedded in the plays of, for example, Sophocles and Euripedes, or Corneille and Racine. What concerns me here is not which came first, the chicken or the egg. The goal is far more modest: to outline on a provisional basis modalities of thought that seem to recur in the exercises of the theatrical imagination and of the scientific temper.

For the purposes of my remarks here, and as an initial foray into this field of research, I have narrowed the subject of my inquiry to two contemporary artists who best exemplify the advanced theatricality of our time. The choice of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson is arbitrary insofar as drawing links between theatrical practice and scientific discourse is concerned, although it may be safe to suggest that such correspondences are more easily identified in works that radically break with traditional patterns of dramaturgy and accepted modes of theatrical representation. The schism itself announces an altered strategy to reflect upon the world, a move that has much in common with the scientific spirit. And though many of my observations below could be applied in slightly modified form to the works of other contemporary artists, I have, for reasons of specificity, relied on the theatrical careers of Foreman and Wilson.

* * * * *

The very naming of Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre clues us in to the philosophical premise on which his theatre is grounded. Although the philosophic component is by now old hat, Foreman's coming to terms with

ontology in our century lead to complexities that are bounded by scientific theories. His ontological quest to deal with the nature of being or reality as manifested in his consciousness, of real existences deduced from his thoughts, align the enterprise with a Cartesian approach to metaphysics. From the legendary predicate “cogito ergo sum” he chooses rather to focus on what constitutes the being of thought, in other words of how to make his thinking visible (and audible). If, for Descartes, physical reality was an extension of pure reason, for Foreman the issue is whether reason (or thought) itself has physical attributes. Can thought be materialized such that it can be perceived “clearly and distinctly” and beyond the criterion of indubitability (to borrow Descartes’s methodological principle). Put another way, can consciousness perceive thought, and analogously, can consciousness itself be the subject of consciousness?

In a single stroke Foreman, through his theatrical practice, raises issues that rest within the realm of science: what makes matter (thinking matter) visible, and the relevant accompanying question of perception, what are the possibilities of a dual consciousness and a bicameral mind, already under investigation in split-brain research? Can thought be analyzed within the coordinates of space and time in a manner that will convince me of the reality and truth of my thoughts? From a philosophical perspective, this leads Foreman, via Descartes, to Husserl and his formulation of the “transcendental ego.” Phenomenology assures Foreman of a “pure consciousness” that subsumes consciousness, as we know it, as an object for contemplation. From the viewpoint of science, it is obvious that the shadow of neuro- and psychobiology creeps into the picture.

Furthermore, since perception itself is a thematic component of his theatrical enterprise, Foreman’s explorations are not dissimilar from inquiries that have plagued quantum physicists now for over half a century. The paradox of observation and its effect on reality, vividly pictorialized in the image of Schrödinger’s Cat, which dissolves all attempts to reconcile reality as a stable fixture “out there,” has led to bewildering conclusions regarding the very nature of reality. This in turn has led various later physicists, such as Eugene Wigner, David Bohm, and Hugh Everett III to submit models of potential and/or parallel universes. In fact, consciousness theories are now as much a subject of study for brain researchers as they are for physicists working in the quirky domain of fundamental particles. For the moment, however, I shall stay with Foreman’s coming to terms with the concepts of space and time, two of the determinants of physical reality.

Once Foreman accomplishes the task of corporealizing his thought, its physical contours exist on stage. But unlike in traditional theatre, where a completed thought process emerges through language and gesture, he chooses to find metaphorical cognates of discrete quantities of his thought. To study thought (and consciousness) is to analyze it at its moment of coming into being, the essence of its ontological thrust. Atomization of thought in space

becomes a prerequisite if Foreman is to analyze it with clarity and precision. It must be isolated and held in place, the stage action frozen in tableaux, so that thought may be contemplated in its stasis.

But to contemplate this atomized, spatial configuration of thought as an isolated phenomenon, it proves impossible to ground in certainty what the configuration implies in Foreman's scheme of thinking. Although he wants us to perceive distinctly a stage image within its spatial coordinates, the image also exists in time (and duration), a coordinate that Foreman views as problematic in nature. Like Gertrude Stein, he wants us to engage in the act of perception within a continuous present, of vision sustained by the idea of a landscape. But matter and the act of perceiving it, as modern physics has demonstrated, exists in a space-time continuum. Foreman, on the other hand, would rather hold time in abeyance so as to properly situate his experiments with ontology. Just as Wittgenstein found time a problematic factor in his investigations along the path of logical atomism, so too Foreman who would rather present experiences as autonomous entities of thought minus its referential attributes.

In atomized behavior, which Heisenberg theorized as a consequence of the space-time, four-dimensional nature of reality, certainty is not attainable (his Uncertainty Principle would also hold for our normal world were it not for the masses of objects being so huge). It is this same uncertainty that gets transposed to Foreman's atomized reality, which is perhaps why he feels compelled to deny the temporal axis of his experiments and thoughts. It is the only way that he could arrive at the Cartesian certainty postulated as one of the crucial determinants of his theatrical premise.

In following the Cartesian dictate of matter as extension, Foreman necessarily succumbs to a rigidly geometric conception of stage movement. Even the moments of stasis in his theatre are established within strict Cartesian coordinates. In fact, even the stage spaces employed by him betray this notion of matter in extension. The elongated frontal imagery with which he first began then gave way to an extension in depth, and the physical attributes of matter were discarded in favor of placement and movement that adhered to a science of kinematics. At times, objects were framed within the parameters of a door or opening and the playing area itself compartmentalized with strings, the latter a familiar trademark of his staging. Geometry as the art (or science) of spatial extension (and also the art of pure ideation) is close to Foreman's heart. It is a construct of pure thought, as is mathematical formulation. It is hardly a coincidence that many of the titles of his plays take on the form of algebraic equations, while his manifestos on theatre are cluttered with tautologies, syllogisms, and other computational linguistic systems.

When matter is viewed as extension, it follows that the actor too becomes merely a property of the geometric model. In addition, speech too takes on a monotonal quality. Acting and diction do not refer to anything that would subtract from their attributes as matter in motion. Furthermore, if all matter is extension, then, as in Descartes, the notion of empty space has no validity.

Matter and space become a contiguous, infinite whole, and space is nothing other than matter in a state of continuous extension. Consequently, the stage space in a Foreman production is a space of ceaseless visual and aural stimuli. The relentless bombardment of the audience with sounds, lights, and rapid physical movement suggest that not only nature, but being and thought themselves abhor a vacuum.

Oddly enough, however, although Cartesian physics was superseded by Newtonian mechanics, since Faraday on to the present time, science has showed reality to be more and more consonant with many aspects of Descartes's theories. The Newtonian distinction between matter and space gave way, through the discoveries of fields of force and the concept of energy, to a mechanical philosophy and new physics itself has been geometrized to a large extent. In keeping with the emergence of concepts such as energy and fields of force, Foreman's theatre increasingly took on the mechanisms of an interactive system, with the director himself firmly located within his theatrical system. The equivalence of matter and energy (as in Einstein's formulation) became the crux of all O-H Theatre exercises. All perception of stage reality leads, in equationary fashion, to the energies of thought expended by Foreman. Thought, as fundamental neural energy, becomes theatre, turns into matter, and the increasing complexity of his stagings betray the increasing complexity of energy displayed in his thoughts. In fanciful terms, one could suggest that Foreman's theatre is a black hole (curiously, the O-H Theatre in its heyday employed black as the sole color of its props and scenic elements) into which is poured the density of his thought-energies. And in reverse (or, as I suspect, in the right direction), since what we perceive on stage are all emanations from his mind, it is as if in the final analysis Foreman's own mind is the black hole where all reality is trapped beyond redemption. Theatre, or artistic praxis, for Foreman cannot lead to communicability or expressivity; it stays trapped within a solipsistic exercise.

Of course, Foreman's theatre is not all an extension of the mind. The mind-body dualism of Descartes is implied in the Hysterical half of his theatre. Hysteria (derived from the Greek *hysteria*, meaning uterus) suggests a neurotic condition stemming from somatic traits and assuming strange mental configurations. Again, in an equationary mode, if ontology partakes of the presence of being, hysteria subsumes both body and mental states. In addition, from the semantic point of view, the uterus, source of the becoming of being, joins forces with the ontological quest. The naked body (more often female than male), a quintessential part of the O-H Theatre, points to this interrelationship between the mind-body, ontology-hysteria dualism. Is body as matter a further extension to be attributed to pure reason? Or does the body generate thought and actions of the mind? These are questions for neurobiologists (and that discipline may well be one of the last frontiers of science today), but they are also questions with which Robert Wilson has concerned himself with these past few years.