The Theater in Modernist Thought

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It is the peculiar fate of the theater to find itself suspended between two types of art. As a performing art, it relies on the physical presence of human beings executing their artistry the way musicians play music or dancers dance. As a mimetic art, however, it turns these performing human beings, along with stage props and light, into material used for the purpose of representation. This double allegiance has given rise to many of the theoretical debates, schools, and practices of the theater. In particular, it has fueled the recurring fantasy that theatrical mimesis can be unmediated. Characters, objects, and speech need not be translated into a different medium—descriptive prose, a flat canvas, celluloid—but can instead be transferred directly onto the stage where they may act as what they really are. This fantasy does not describe the actual practice of the theater, which inevitably relies on forms of abstraction, displacement, condensation, and estrangement, but it nonetheless remains a promise or theoretical possibility that has attracted the theater from its inception. Indeed, various poetic and aesthetic doctrines from the Aristotelian unities through naturalism to the rise of a new physical theater in the twentieth century legitimate themselves through the theater’s supposedly direct mimesis of space, time, and action.

Yet, despite its tendency towards the material, the theater has also fascinated a discipline that shuns immediate physicality: the discipline of philosophy or, more generally speaking, the domain of theory. From Plato to Hegel, there ranges a heterogeneous tradition of thought that is deeply intertwined with the theater, if in an often conflictual manner. Since the later nineteenth century, the interaction between theory and the theater seems to have reached a new level of intensity. Philosophers fascinated by theatricality, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but also theorists of the performativity of literature and of performance studies bespeak a new priority of masks over essence and theatricality over ontology.

In order to examine the relation between theory and the theater, between theoretical meditation and theatrical spectatorship, one may turn to the common origin of these two occupations in the Greek word...
This etymology reminds us that the sense of sight, *thea*, is central to both the act of going to the theater and of engaging in theoretical inquiry. However, this shared origin has not prevented these two endeavors from engaging in what Plato called the “ancient struggle” between them. His *Republic* takes the theater to be the antagonist of the emerging discipline of philosophy, a discipline that apparently needs to prove its dignity by distancing itself from everything associated with theatrical spectacles. This gesture of distancing remains the predominant mode in which philosophers from Plato through St. Augustine to Jean-Jacques Rousseau relate to the theater, giving expression to what Jonas Barish has called the “antitheatrical prejudice.” But far from proving that the theater and theory are enterprises that are independent from one another, the existence of philosophical antitheatricalism is a symptom of the conflictual entanglement that has bound the theater and theory together.

The best place to observe how closely antitheatricalism ties philosophy to the theater is the very origin of this “prejudice,” namely Plato’s dialogues. Commentators who focus on Plato’s attack on the theater encounter what at first looks like a simple contradiction between his critique of the theater’s mimetic embodiment and his own use of the dramatic form. How can Plato use different characters in his own texts, if he denounces with such vehemence the process of impersonation, the art of acting? Invariably, what these questions presume is that Plato should have chosen for his philosophy a form free from all connection to drama and theater, a choice that would certainly have been open to him, for pre-Socratic philosophy was not restricted to dramatic dialogue. Instead of assuming that Plato should have kept dialogue out of philosophy, we should ask what drew him to the dramatic form.

A more differentiated picture of Plato’s relation to the theater emerges when one considers his relation to the two dominant dramatic genres: tragedy and comedy. Plato is said to have written tragedies at an early age, and so we can presume that his rejection of theater was based on a fundamental engagement with it. Indeed, rather than simply attacking tragedy and comedy, Plato revises them constructively, offering his own version of tragedy in the *Apology* and a new comedy in the *Symposium*. Both revisions are substantial: Socrates’ suicide is justified by a specifically philosophical choice and not the product of a religious, mythological, or “tragic” dilemma; and Diotima’s abstracted mysticism sublates the physical and sexual repertoire that characterizes Greek comedy. Plato’s new comedy and tragedy thus do not simply reject, but also offer an alternative to, what is regularly presented at Athens’s Dionysus Theater. The theater of interaction and dialogue that emerges from Plato’s varied and rich dramatic dialogues follows a new set of
generic conventions: a limited number of male characters engaged in specific types of social interaction, set either in the countryside or the city of Athens, the most prominent of which is the symposium. What Plato presents is a social drama of the upper classes, a theater of manners as much as a theater of ideas, a new drama that revises comedy and tragedy.

In addition to his revision of tragedy and comedy, Plato views with the greatest suspicion imaginable the actual place of the theater and the people occupying this place, the gesturing actors on the skene pandering to the masses assembled in the theatron. Actors exhibiting themselves to an audience create a theater based on visual display and perception, what Aristotle called the problematic visuality or opsis of the theater. Plato’s most fundamental critique of the theater concerns the apparatus of theatrical representation, the scene, the theatron, and the actors. Again, however, this critique does not imply an outright rejection, but a constructive engagement. In response to his own critique of the theater, Plato invents a new form of theatricality, what one could call the first closet drama.6 Conceived by the declared enemy of the theater, the closet drama is a form specifically designed to keep the theater at bay, but also, and more importantly, to take its place. Far from abandoning theatricality altogether, Plato shifts the experience of watching theater to the act of reading a closet drama, which becomes the new forum for the activity of philosophizing. The theater is thus turned into a phantasmatic form, whose mimesis is mediated by the dramatic text; the eye of the philosopher is turned away from the bodies on the scene, but it is still engaged in a theater, if one that cannot be seen except in the interplay between a text and the imagination. Plato’s banishing of poets is not the act of a dictator who hates the arts, but the act of a writer who wants to get rid of his rivals.7 Indeed, the closet drama will remain the genre of choice for philosophers suspicious of the theater, and, conversely, for dramatists with philosophical aspirations from Seneca through John Milton to Percy Shelley. The closet drama satisfies their desire to have nothing to do with the actual theater, replacing it with a textually processed theater free from the presence of human actors and their seemingly unmediated mimesis.8 The theater of the philosophical closet drama relies on the literary as a bulwark against the spectacle.

II

Theory’s rivalry with the theater remains a dominant feature in the history of both fields. It is for this reason that philosophers invested in the theater can be found amongst the theater’s harshest critics. Given
this persistent antitheatrical reflex, it is all the more surprising that there exists a tradition within late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theory whose use of the theater is not accompanied by a critique of the institution and practice of the spectacle. On the contrary, central philosophical projects, from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* and Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler, develop paradigms steeped in the language of the theater without any direct antitheatrical attack. The ramifications of what one could call the *theatrical turn of philosophy* are registered in the recurring use of such terms as “performance,” “performativity,” “theatricality,” or “dramatism” as well as in a fascination with theatrical *topoi* such as “masks” and “enactment” that characterizes twentieth-century theory. Heidegger had captured the turn from ontology to language philosophy with the formulation “language is the house of being”; a diverse tradition of philosophy seems to believe that this house is a theater.

The most ambitious example of a theatrical, or protheatrical, theory is Gilles Deleuze’s recently translated, but still neglected, *Différence et Répétition*. Presented in the traditional form of the philosophical study—a form from which Deleuze would soon thereafter depart—*Difference and Repetition* is steeped in the language of the theater, which it embraces without apparent hesitation or scruple. Deleuze uses the terms *difference* and *repetition* as the two fundamental and complementary categories on which to build an entire explanatory system. “Surface” phenomena such as cyclical processes in nature, habits in everyday life, Freudian repetition compulsions, or the differentiation caused by the evolutionary process are all produced, according to Deleuze, by the interplay of two fundamental forces: repetition and difference. All this sounds rather speculative, and it is difficult to picture what these two forces of difference and repetition really are; Deleuze himself even admits that what he calls “difference” is “the noumenon closest to the phenomenon” (*DR* 286). At this point, in order to push this “almost” perceptible noumenon into visibility, the theater enters Deleuze’s text. For Deleuze asks us to imagine that repetition and difference make their appearance, as singular events, in the form of a particular kind of theater, a theater that is neither a philosophical study of the theater nor a “philosophical theater,” a term that designates, presumably, a theater of ideas. Instead, he attempts to “invent, in philosophy, an equivalent of the theater” (*DR* 17). Clearly, the theater, here, is not simply a metaphor or a communicative device, but lies at the heart of Deleuze’s project, determining its terms, constructions, and arguments. What happened to the theater and to theory that the former has suddenly become amenable to the latter?
One reason that Deleuze takes the theater as model for his theory of singular events lies in the fact that as a performing art, the theater is based on presence, on actions and events happening live in front of our eyes, without always inciting us to attribute to them a representational status. This presentational, as opposed to representational, character is precisely what Deleuze needs for his theater of singular events, for these events form series of differences that cannot be reduced to a stabilizing identity behind them. But doesn’t the theater nevertheless try to somehow represent a world? In addition, different performances of a single play imply precisely a model of difference that is anchored by an identity, namely, the identity of the play that is being rehearsed over and over again. The traditional theater, which Deleuze calls “theater of representation,” is thus certainly not what Deleuze has in mind when he talks about a “theater of events”; on the contrary, he must struggle hard to keep his distance from everything in the theater that would mediate, through mimesis, the eventful presence of live performance, a theater consisting of “unmediated movement,” “pure forces,” “gestures,” and “specters and phantoms,” a theater without prewritten text and “without actors” (DR 19). In other words, Deleuze must insist on the theater as a performing art and repress the function of the theater as a (representational) medium. Michel Foucault, in a review of *Differénce et Rêpétition* entitled “Theatrum Philosophicum,” repeats this theatrical characterization of Deleuze’s philosophy diligently: “a theater . . . . where we encounter, without any trace of representation (copying or imitating) . . . . the cries of bodies, and the gesturing of hands and fingers.” But from where does Deleuze derive this speculative theater without representation, which seems so much at odds with the actual practices of the theater as we know it? While Plato had to invent his philosophical closet drama, Deleuze had a name and model available for his fantasy of a theater reduced to a pure, nonrepresentational performing art: Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty*. We can understand the emergence of Deleuze’s theater of events without representation only if we recognize the position of Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty* within early-twentieth-century avant-garde theater, in particular Artaud’s opposition to mediation and representation. The single most important component of Artaud’s theater is its violent and uncompromising critique of dramatic masterworks and, by extension, of the dramatic text as such, which it considers to be an oppressive authority from which the theater must be liberated. Artaud here participates in a long and diverse tradition that pits unmediated theatricality against the literary text, a tradition which ranges from turn-of-the-century theater reformers such as E. G. Craig and Adolphe Appia though the early avant-garde and all the way to our contemporary performance art. The avant-garde theater tends to view the dramatic text as a detour that
keeps the theater from realizing its immediate force. Any theater devoted to the staging of established and canonized literary texts is therefore anathema to this avant-garde tradition, which tends to see the essence of the theater in the creation of spectacles based on gestures, movement, sounds, and action.

The polarization between literature and theatricality is mirrored in the sphere of philosophy. In order to recognize what is at stake in Deleuze’s borrowing from the *Theater of Cruelty*, one might contrast Deleuze’s use of Artaud’s antiliterary and antitextual theater with a tradition of theory based explicitly on a literary and textual paradigm, a tradition of which Jacques Derrida is the most prominent proponent. The most fundamental differences between Derrida and Deleuze can be seen as the consequence of their respective reliance on the model of the text and of the theater. While Derrida’s insistence that any form of presence is forever interrupted and displaced in a chain of signifiers is derived from the fact that text displaces presence, Deleuze’s understanding of singular events is based on the precarious form of presence that characterizes live human bodies on a stage.15

The opposition between Derrida’s textualism and Deleuze’s theatricalism must be qualified in a number of ways. The most important one is that Derrida related his notion of text or *écriture* to the domain of the theater as well, namely to the closet dramas of Stéphane Mallarmé. Like Plato’s dialogues, Mallarmé’s closet dramas reject the material mimesis of the theater. In this, Mallarmé’s closet dramas are part of a larger antitheatrical trend within French symbolism. Writers from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam to Maurice Maeterlinck wrote so-called metaphysical plays, which in many ways resisted the contemporary *mise-en-scène* and were only hesitantly performed once a new type of avant-garde staging practice was established, as it was in such theaters as the *Théâtre de l’Œuvre* or the *Théâtre d’Art*.16 In the absence of an actual theater, the theatrical gestures of the mime, described in one of Mallarmé’s texts, become, in Derrida’s famous reading, nothing but a peculiar form of writing; the theater is thus assimilated to the condition of text and writing.17 (A similar attempt to turn a theory based on the theater into one based on text can be observed in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, when Benjamin imposes the notion of textual allegory onto Baroque theater.) We can thus trace back the difference between Derrida’s (and Benjamin’s) textualism and Deleuze’s theatricalism not to a simple opposition between text and theater, but to a difference within the field of drama, namely the difference between the purely textual closet drama and the antitextual theater of the avant-garde.

While Derrida’s affinity to the closet drama is situated squarely within the philosophical, Platonist tradition, Deleuze’s interest in an explicitly
antitextual theater, a theater opposed to any form of mediation, constitutes a more surprising choice and therefore warrants an explanation. Is not the pursuit of philosophy, dependent as it is on the written word, on distancing abstraction and mediating reflection, entirely at odds with an antitextual theater of unmediated presence? There is one feature of the Theater of Cruelty that enabled the intrusion of theatricality into Deleuze’s theory, and that is the utopian character of Artaud’s theater. No matter how far Artaud ventured—from the rituals of the Tahahumeras to Balinese theater, from the Marx Brothers to the Plague—nothing resembling his idea of a theater without representation was anywhere to be found. Nor was Artaud ever able to institute such a theater himself. The only place where the Theater of Cruelty came into existence was the journal La Nouvelle Revue Francaise. More specifically, Artaud’s fantasy of a nontextual theater without mediation was realized only in the entirely textual form of the manifesto. This is not so much a bitter irony as an indication that the manifesto is a particular mode of textual mediation, one that is entirely devoted to the force of its speech acts. At the same time, these speech acts are presented as preliminary: soon all words and all manifestos will stop and the Theater of Cruelty itself will emerge. The fact that this promise might not be fulfilled, that it might be impossible to realize something as utopian and manifesto-driven as the Theater of Cruelty, does not in the least diminish this textual effect. The dependence of the utopian and phantasmatic Theater of Cruelty on the manifesto is not an anomaly within the spectrum of avant-garde theater, but rather the rule. The more the avant-garde wanted from the theater, the more it grew dissatisfied with the actual, existing theater. It ultimately turned against all existing forms of theater not because it did not value the theater, but because it invested all its programmatic and theoretical energy in the construction of impossible theaters.18

What we begin to see here is that the difference between Plato and Deleuze is not so much one between an anti-theatrical and a pro-theatrical stance, but rather a shift within the sphere of the theater, a shift in which one imaginary theater is replaced by another, and one genre, the literary closet drama, by another, namely the avant-garde manifesto. While Plato competed with Greek tragedy, Deleuze borrowed from a theater that was itself already divorced from theatrical representation, a theater as much at odds with the theater as any Platonist philosopher could have wanted it to be. Deleuze’s turn towards the theater thus was made possible by Artaud’s own turn away from it. The emergence within the early-twentieth-century avant-garde of a programmatic and necessarily imaginary theater thus has fundamental consequences for the interaction between theory and the theater. It is the reason why theory no longer needs to turn against the theater’s representational practices; the avant-garde theater itself has
taken over this critical role in the aggressive formulation of its own imaginary theaters.¹⁹

### III

The conjunction between avant-garde theater and an openly protheatrical philosophy emerges in the late nineteenth century in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is Deleuze himself who attributes to Nietzsche the articulation of a theory, “conceived completely within philosophy but also fully for the stage” (DR 18). Nietzsche’s philosophy appears to Deleuze to be a theater characterized by “sonority,” “visuality,” “movement,” and “dance”; Nietzsche’s text “is drama, and this means theater” (DR 124).²⁰ Even Deleuze’s theory of repetition can be understood as a long commentary on Nietzsche’s, or Zarathustra’s, prophecy of the Eternal Return. Since Nietzsche is located right at the historical shift from a seemingly antitheatrical to a protheatrical stance, we may turn to him to test a type of analysis that links the history of theory with the history of the theater.

In order to observe the relation between theater and theory, it is not enough to follow Deleuze’s celebration of Nietzsche’s theatrical philosophy; we must ground Nietzsche’s use of the theater in theater history. The particular complexity of Nietzsche’s theory lies in the fact that, for him, Greek tragedy is not derived directly from the hypothetical Dionysian origin itself, but rather it is the product of a compromise between Apollinian representation and Dionysian destruction of representation. Since the Dionysian is a name for that which escapes all representation, in particular visual representation, it can only be described negatively; even music, whose special relation to the Dionysian Nietzsche inherits from Schopenhauer, is little more than a stand-in for the absence of representability. The origin, in music, of Greek tragedy is the construction of a theater without representation, actors, and beholders, the hallucination of an invisible theater that isn’t one.

However, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* is concerned not so much with the origin of Greek tragedy as with the promise of Wagner’s work. But how can the pretheatrical, Dionysian origin of tragedy return in Wagner’s *œuvre*? Originally, Nietzsche had considered Wagner’s operas to be the first sign of a far-reaching, programmatic revolution in the theater. At that time, none of Wagner’s operas had received full-fledged stagings, they were still what Wagner himself had called “the music of the future,” and Prince Ludwig II had not yet sponsored the institution Nietzsche would never tire of ridiculing: Bayreuth. The programmatic call for a theater of the future and the
increasing realization and institutionalization of Wagner’s works are the two faces of the Wagnerian legacy. Wagner was, on the one hand, a precursor of the programmatic and impossible theaters of the avant-garde; at times he even suggested that his operas were just shallow realizations of a much more ambitious conceptual theater yet to come.21 On the other hand, however, Wagner invested considerable time and energy in the realization of his theatrical utopia, a realization for which Bayreuth is the external sign.22 As long as Nietzsche could still see in Wagner’s oeuvre the programmatic sketch of what Wagner might have called the “Theater of the Future,” Nietzsche could project onto these sketches the pretheatrical origin of Greek tragedy. However, as soon as he had to face Wagner’s commitment to full realization and institutionalization of a compromised theater at the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Nietzsche had to start attacking Wagner’s theatrical practice, which was now carved into stone. At the moment when Wagner’s work loses its conceptual and programmatic character, committing instead to an unapologetic theatrical practice, Nietzsche turns from a seeming protheatrical position to an antitheatrical one. Now, he sees in Wagner “the Theatocracy of the mime, the craziness of believing in the dominance of the theater over the arts” and scolds him for having introduced theatricality into music.23 As in the case of Plato, we can see here that what motivates antitheatricalism is not an ideological aversion to the theater, but, on the contrary, a dependence on it.24 Nietzsche’s enthusiasm for Dionysian rituals and his attack on Wagner are both the effects of his own reliance on the theater. Just as Wagner’s work stands between a commitment to theatrical mimesis and the conceptual theater of the avant-garde, so Nietzsche’s theory is poised between the protheatrical theory of Deleuze and an antitheatrical attitude.

The intimate, if contentious, relation between theory and the theater indicates that the history of theory cannot be conceived of independently from the history of the theater. The two are intertwined enterprises, which therefore must be approached by way of a double path: Plato/Greek Tragedy; Deleuze/Artaud; Nietzsche/Wagner; Derrida/Mallarmé; Benjamin/ Trauerspiel. Each of these pairings constitutes a different historical constellation between theory and the theater. In Plato’s case, we have an explicit critique of the theater, paired with a revisionist use of the dramatic form, a combination which is set not only against Greek tragedy and comedy, but also against the concept of theatricality that stands behind Greek theater. Deleuze, by contrast, presents a theory that openly embraces the theater and assigns to it the central role of conceptualizing what he calls the event; such a theater of events, however, is derived from Artaud’s manifestos. In light of these two constellations—antitheatricalism as philosophical closet drama;
protheatricalism as impossible avant-garde manifesto theater—we can see that the case of Nietzsche and Wagner constitutes a transition from the one to the other. Driven by the increasing realization and institutionalization of Wagner’s theater in Bayreuth, Nietzsche transforms his original protheatricalism into an antitheatrical stance.

The specific cases mentioned here certainly do not exhaust all the possibilities of the interaction between theater and theory. Nevertheless we can draw some conclusions from this limited set of instances. The theater and theory are engaged in a struggle over visibility, material mimesis, and the presence and liveness of the theater, notions that theory wants to wrest from the theater in order to revise and integrate them into its own apparatus. Theory thus creates its own concepts of theatricality, which are prone to be at odds with the real theater. The struggle between theory and the theater is fought through a variety of genres and art forms, including the closet drama and the manifestos of the avant-garde’s conceptual theater. It is important to recognize that the critique of the theater and its modes of representation is not limited to theory, but can occur within the domain of the theater itself, as in Wagner’s programmatic designs and Artaud’s utopian hallucinations. And as soon as the critique of the theater is launched from within the domain of the theater, theory is free to use theatrical concepts and models that are no longer firmly tied to actual bodies on a stage. This turn on the part of theory to the theater, the theatrical turn, is thus made possible by the fundamental self-critique of avant-garde theater.

The ramifications of the theatrical turn are visible everywhere today. Whether we consider the history of gender, of ethnicity, or even of the human body itself, there is a widespread consensus among critics that what we used to think of as an underlying, stable essence turns out to be the product of a performance: attributes are worn like costumes; identities are masks; and corporeality becomes embodiment. Victor Turner’s and Richard Schechner’s analyses of scripted performance, Erwin Goffman’s theatrical frame analysis, Kenneth Burke’s dramatism, or the application of speech act theory to the study of literary texts from Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler to Hillis Miller—all these concepts are indebted to the theatrical turn of theory. Finally, this turn changes the way we think about the history of theory: theatrical theory and the history of the theater become interrelated systems so that changes in the one will cause changes in the other. This is not to say that the study of theater, literature, and theory are one and the same thing. But it is to say that an understanding of theatrical theory is only possible through a knowledge of the contentious intimacy that has bound the theater and theory closely, if not always happily, together.
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NOTES

1 I would like to thank Barbara Johnson, Tom Conley, David Damrosch, and Martin Meisel as well as the members of the colloquium on literary theory at Harvard University for reading and commenting on this essay so generously.

2 The verb form of theoína, theóro, means seeing or viewing, including the particular meaning of viewing games. Theoína ta Olympa, for example, became an idiom for travelling to the Olympic games (Gemoll, 374). The middle-passive form theoamai, which is derived from the word theater or theatron, likewise means seeing or viewing, but also, in conjunction with the word aithés, seeing what is really the case or seeing reality in the sense that for Heidegger became the definition of philosophy (theoamai to aithés). Indeed, Heidegger, in his essay “Wissenschaft und Besinnung” (Vorträge und Aufsätze, Stuttgart, 1959), explicitly relates theory to the root thea which means seeing in all of these forms, including the seeing that takes place in the theater (p. 48).

3 Jonas Barish, The Antitheatrical Prejudice (Berkeley, 1981). For a more detailed critique of Barish, see my Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama (Baltimore, 2002).

4 Barish discusses Plato as the origin of the “antitheatrical prejudice,” contenting himself with pointing to the “contradiction” between dramatic form and anti-theatrical content Antitheatrical Prejudice, pp. 5–30.

5 Charles Rosen is one of those critics who attempt to integrate the dramatic form of Plato’s dialogues into their analysis without, however, placing this dramatic form in the history of either drama or the theater. The Quartel between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought (New York, 1988).

6 The first to recognize the extent to which Plato not only rejected, but also directly competed with, the theater was Friedrich Nietzsche, who described Plato’s dialogues as a composite of Greek tragedy and comedy, the creation of a new, synthetic genre, namely the novel. Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music) (1872; Stuttgart, 1976), p. 122. This argument was to be repeated by Mikhail Bakhtin, who does not attribute it to Nietzsche. M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), p. 22.

7 Martha Nussbaum also refers to Plato’s dialogues as drama, namely as Plato’s “anti-tragic theater,” without, however, reflecting on their relation, or rejection, of the stage that emerges when one recognizes Plato’s dialogues as closet dramas. The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 122 and following.

8 Evlyn Gould’s Virtual Theater from Diderot to Mallarmé (Baltimore, 1989) traces a history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century virtual theater, a tradition that she also relates back to Plato. This excellent study is one of the few attempts to analyze the history of imaginary theater.

9 The turn to the theater, in the late nineteenth century, was in many ways prepared by German Idealism, in particular its fascination with Greek tragedy, a fascination that found its most influential manifestation in Hegel’s reading of Antigone. See in particular Christoph Menke, Tragödie im Sittlichen: Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel (Frankfurt, 1996).

10 In addition, a group of primarily French theorists indebted to Freudian thought, itself infused with theatrical “scenes,” added to the theatrical vocabulary of twentieth-century thought. Their work is available now in a excellent collection of essays edited by Timothy Murray, Mimesis, Massochism, Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought (Ann Arbor, 1997); hereafter cited in text as M. Reiner Naegele’s Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity (Baltimore, 1991), which includes a study of Benjamin’s Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerplays (The Origin of German Tragic Drama, tr. John Osborne [London, 1977]), is an exemplary study of the relation between theater and theory.
Other attempts to subject the terms of performance studies to a critical analysis have been undertaken by Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach in Critical Theory and Performance (Ann Arbor, 1992) and by Judith Butler’s critique of her appropriation by performance studies in Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (London, 1993). See also The Ends of Performance, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York, 1997), and Jon McKenzie, Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance (London, 2001).

12 Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, tr. Paul Patton (New York, 1994); hereafter cited in text as DR.


15 For an extended study on the notion of liveness in the theater and performance studies see Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London, 1999). This difference also accounts for the opposition, constructed by Giorgio Agamben, between Deleuze’s philosophy of immanent life and Derrida’s philosophy of the transcendent name. Giorgio Agamben, Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, 1999), p. 239.

16 A detailed analysis of this process can be found in Pierre Bourdieu, The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field, tr. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, 1995).


19 See Julia Kristeva, “Modern theater does not take (a) place,” in Murray’s Mimesis, Masochism, Mime.

20 This interpretation of Nietzsche as the philosopher of masks has become a standard reading, thanks to Deleuze’s subsequent book on Nietzsche and a number of other commentators, from Gianni Vattimo to Peter Sloterdijk, who cast Nietzsche as a “thinker on stage.” Gianni Vattimo, I Soggetto e la Maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione (Milano, 1974). Peter Sloterdijk, Der Denker auf der Bühne: Nietzsche’s Materialismus (Frankfurt am Main, 1986).

21 This reception of Wagner as avant-garde theater was promoted, for example, by Kandinsky, whose entirely conceptual theater Der gelbe Klang is presented as a critical revision of Wagner’s theater of the future.


24 Nietzsche’s anti-theatrical critique of Wagner was continued by Theodor Adorno in his, “Versuch über Wagner,” in Die musikalischen Monographien (Frankfurt am Main, 1971).