

Dempster, E. 7 als. (Ed.). (1991). *Writing on Dance and the Authors. 7. Privilege and Presence.* (p.50-60)

**Mine Kaylan**

## **Performance Act**

### **The presence of the performer**

Annie Griffin is an extraordinarily charismatic performer and when she delivers her central solo narrative, the glint in her eye is so bright it seems to illuminate her whole face. <sup>1</sup>

STEVE ROGERS' description of a powerful performer is very familiar as a common attempt by an otherwise experienced and articulate critic, to isolate a particularly engaging quality in the performance act: that of presence. The difficulty that Rogers experiences in articulating this quality in terms of a critical language of the kind available to him for 'reading' the other elements of the performance text is, of course, not surprising. There is no such critical vocabulary. Thus the main problematic in investigating presence as an element in the signification process of live performance is the difficulty of placing it within the categories of analysis already offered by contemporary critical theory. The performance *act* of actor or performer, however, has been addressed in theatre semiotics, psycho-analytic film theory and in the writings of Roland Barthes. My project will be to try to locate whether and how *presence* fits into the existing analytic frameworks. I will use the term *presence* here in the way it is often used in the theatre, or in performance art, which is to refer to a particular quality of attention that the actor or performer invites from her/his audience. This term is loaded with a personal and emotional charge: personal to the reader using it, and to the actor or performer it refers to. Moreover, it connotes a mystifying and metaphysical quality of being, an essence ascribed to the person of the Individual actor or performer. Consequently, it makes an ambiguous and difficult object to fix for use as a yardstick in a critical enquiry. The other terms that are necessary to clarify are those of actor and performer. The former refers to one who acts in the theatre, the latter to one who performs in non-dramatic work- e.g. performance art. The work of each is different and distinct, but they share a common context in that both 'enact' in a performance text, as

physical and psychic bodies which are live and present to their audience: live in the act of 'performance. The quality of presence is ascribed to artists of either discipline.

In terms of the practical methodology of the performance act, presence refers to the most important *skill* of the actor or performer; a skill which comes into play during the act of performance ie. it is not a technique, independent of an audience like Juggling or fencing. Presence is attributed to a quality of engagement between spectator and the performance text, where the performance act is foregrounded as the primary site of signification. It can be seen as the fundamental project underlying the actor's training. (I do not refer to the performer, in this instance, since a formal methodology of this kind for the performer in performance art work does not exist, as yet, in the Western schools training). Just as the dancer develops not only a physical attention in relation to the text; just as the painter learns not only a familiarity and an articulation of paints and tools, but also to direct his/her visual/perceptual attention in relation to the text: the actor learns vocal, physical, linguistic, etc. skills in order to articulate and direct the shifts of attention - vocal, physical, perceptual, mental, emotional, etc. - in accordance with the space/ the dynamic of the performance text *and in* accordance with the attention of the audience. Presence is related to the articulation of the dynamic of *attention* between reader and text. Since signification in the live moment of performance is primarily directed by the actor or performer, presence is experienced as a quality of acting. Presence is the ability to focus attention of the body and mind to each moment in the text, so that the attention is always in the present and it is always in the process; presence is the skill of an actor or a performer to be mentally and physically 'present' in the moment of signification between the performance text and the audience: it is, therefore, *present-ness*.

In his comprehensive study, *The Semiotic of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elarn affords great attention to the work of the actor. Having rigorously isolated every element of the actor's participation in what he calls 'theatrical communication', he concludes:

It is clear that the unifying of non-uniform messages of the kind discussed above-kinesic [physical], proxemic [spatial], linguistic, paralinguistic (vocal); etc, is very much dependent on the actor in his [or her] role as multi-channelled transmitter-in-chief. Over and above the mastery of specific codes and subcodes attached to each system, the actor *imposes histrionic* subcodes regulating his [or her] performance as a whole and so his (or her] combining of messages into

discourse. The actor, from this point of view, is the main agent of trans-codification on stage.<sup>2</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS: MY PARENTHESIS)

Elam is pointing to the fact that the actor is the most privileged, (if not crucial), site of signification, and that the clarity or 'the unifying' of his/ her communication, therefore of theatrical communication is dependent on the actor's ability or skill: the skill of bringing together the different semiotic levels of the text and his bodily communication in one time/space. This skill in the theatre practitioner's vocabulary is referred to as 'making present'. Elam also refers to another actor-specific he calls 'histrionic': the cultural, historical, stylistic determinants of the actor's performance. If, as he also states, theatrical communication is 'semantically over-determined and relatively non-redundant'<sup>3</sup> [compared to social communication], then is the whole of the transmission of 'the multi-channelled transmitter-in-chief (2) equal to the sum of its structural parts? If so, why is it not an identical experience to watch a group of life-like puppets perform the identical messages, codes and subcodes that he enumerates?

Barthes's essay 'Lesson In Writing' appears to be making just such a comparison. He makes observations about the Japanese Bunraku puppet performance in order to comment on Western theatre traditions, and in particular on the work of the Western actor. He criticizes the psychological interiority coded in the role of the latter which he says, signals the *concept hiding behind all animation of matter, that... of 'the soul.'*<sup>4</sup> However, Barthes is not comparing the Western drama to a puppet show. He compares the formal and structural animate/inanimate correlation between the performative elements; the puppets, the puppeteer, the narrator/singer and musicians in Bunraku to the performance structure of Western drama.

What is expelled from the stage is hysteria, that is theatre itself, and what is put in its place is the action necessary for the production of the spectacle - work is substituted for interiority.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Barthes is actually pointing to a comparative aspect of the performance act which Elam's category of histrionics does not entirely encompass; one which relies on *the attention of the actor or performer*. The kind of attention on 'production of the spectacle' in Bunraku (above), which he admires, and rightly attributes to Brecht in Western theatre,

has been experimented with in performance art works. An important, and perhaps characteristic, point he makes in this essay - one which belies the title of the work - is to highlight the structures of practice in the Bunraku and Brecht's theories: the collective participation in constructing the text which he uses as an analogy to those of the modern text. But just as his comment is about writing in general, so it is about the performance process and correlation between the performance text and the performance act in general:

the reign of the quotation, the pinch of writing, the fragment of code, none of the promoters of the action being able to take responsibility in his own person for what he is never alone in writing. As in the modern text, the stressing of codes, references, discontinuous observations, anthological gestures, multiplies the written line, and this is not by virtue of some metaphysical appeal but the play of a combinatory set which opens the entire space of the theatre: what is started by one is continued by another, unendingly."<sup>6</sup>

Barthes foregrounds the implicit participation of the performer in the correlation he makes between 'the entire space of the theatre', of the modern text and of writing itself. Thus, the performance act is positioned within the critical frameworks which he calls 'semiotic consciousnesses', the realm of signification and *significance*. Brecht's theories on acting were articulated around the process of meaning production (what he called 'aesthetic production') between audience and actor, and focused on the operations of identification as an ideological force. Thus, by highlighting the correspondence between Brecht's ideas on the practice of the actor, the performance act and the practice of reading/writing the modern text, he is actually foregrounding questions of identification: what part does identification play in reading/writing the modern text? in performance (which is of itself a modern text)? in Brechtian and or modern approaches to performance? These questions put critical attention on the site of *meaning between* audience and text, a site which, as Pistotnik points out, theatre semiotics does not address, since,

it presupposes that a sign is defined primarily, if not exclusively, by the performance context, and therefore does not seem to take into account the audience factor... it treats them [performances] as isolated -objects which possess meaning in themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The questions on the process of identification between reader and text that are implied in Barthes's article, call for a psycho-analytic approach to a critical understanding of the

performance text. However, Bertolt Brecht introduced the problematic of identification in reading the live performance text long before the development of contemporary (post-Lacan) psycho-analytic-critique.

Although Brecht wrote and experimented with many elements of the performance text, his theories on alienation/distanciation technique are the key concept in his practice. His approach to acting is as a reader rather than as a practitioner, (exemplified by the fact that his methodology is useful to the theoretician, and/or director/writer, but not the actor). Brecht focused on reader/text relation in the live theatre as the site of meaning production, indicating that the relation of signification between text and reader was one of identification. Furthermore, he located the performance act as the primary site for the problematics of identification. Brecht's practice and theory has to be seen within the context in which he was working. He was reacting to and as such working against the theatre forms that he inherited. These forms, that are now called naturalistic, represented the bourgeois theatre: they were about and for such an audience. The drama texts as well as the theatrical conditions (spatial relation of stage/auditorium, lighting etc.) all perpetuated a passive relation of the spectator to the text. Brecht's ingenuity lies in the fact that he foregrounded the process of identification as an *ideological* area of enquiry: that he indicated a correlation between the process of identification and the active/passive position of the reader; that he located the performance act as a site of identification. Brecht advocates an acting technique which resists psychological and emotional identification as privileged in the naturalistic drama, not one which denies or refuses identification altogether. If he believed that theatre without identification was possible, then why did he go to the trouble of presenting the audience with characters of different social classes, no heroic characters etc. Why not a stage full of gentry, or puppets? His theories, in actuality, were more about shifting the reference point and the level (the intensity) of identification from a psychologically foregrounded one (as in the naturalistic work) to other, social, economic, cultural ones. This is exemplified by the fact that although his characters contradict themselves they are not inconsistent (in that they behave like social, psychological and emotional human beings); they are never motivated by their psychological conditions, but they arouse an emotional as well as an intellectual/critical response. The most important contribution that Brecht made to a critical understanding of acting was to articulate that the relation of identification between reader/subject and actor/subject depended on the shift of attention of the actor. His explanation of the alienation technique as a third person re-enactment (one which indicates the idea, but is worthless as an instruction for an actor), is about *the focus of attention of the*

actor during the performance act. Brecht's theory charts a trajectory of connections between the politics or ideology of a piece of work and the *attention of* the performer or actor.

I have argued that the quality of presence is practically locatable at the level of the actor's or performer's *attention*. The word attention implies a direction (a vector) and object, that is, attention to something, and a volume or intensity (force). This introduces a variability factor: a vector quantity, and force quantity. Therefore, what is isolated here as attention is something that the performer or actor can control by changing the direction, the Volume and object of his/her attention. This concept is, of course, not unfamiliar to artists who are practically involved in the business of the performance act. Brecht's theories on acting indicate a direct correlation between the *attention* of the actor/performer and the process of identification (between reader and performance text). Since the operation of identification is implicit in the signification process of the performance text, and therefore, the politics (the ideological tendency), the presence factor of the performance act must also bear a direct relation to the politics of the signification process. In terms of the practice of performing or acting, as I have suggested, this trajectory of correlations is gauged or controlled by the various executions of *attention*. Is it possible however to trace such a trajectory, critically i.e. in terms of an analysis of reading the performance text?

The concept of presence has not been addressed by any of the critical or analytical approaches for performance that have been covered so far. It is a level that seems to work over and above the structures of theatre performance language that are usually articulated. It is, however, possible to locate presence at the level of the signifier; at a level of signification that Barthes describes as *significance*. Like the term *presence*, *significance* is a slippery notion, not least because it is about the very slippage of meaning/s in a text:

when the text is read (or written) as a moving play of signifiers, without any possible reference to one or some signifieds, it becomes necessary to distinguish signification, which belongs to the plane of the product, of the enounced, of communication, and the work of the signifier, which belongs to the plane of the production of the enunciation, of symbolization - this work being called *significance*.<sup>8</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

As readers/ audience, we experience presence as an extra dimension of signification, situated at the very surface of the performance text, at the very interstices of performer/audience contact. It is dependent on the actual presence of the actor/ performer. For example, an animated puppet does not generate a similar experience. It also depends on the particular actor/ performer in the sense that not all actors/ performers appear to 'have presence'. Presence is an element in the language of live performance which participates in the production of meanings; it affects the reading process. It is a disruptive quality of the language, it does not work towards the resolution of meanings, but towards the subversion of meanings. The disruption is a pleasurable one; it is the very sense that generates descriptions like 'powerful', 'electric', 'magnetic' and 'magical' about the performance or about a particular actor or performer. The disruption is sensed as moments of explosion of meanings, a multiplicity, and excess of meanings: a centrifugal rather than a centripetal action of textuality, of readings.

*Signifiante* is a process in the course of which the 'subject' of the text, escaping the logic of the *ego-cogito* and engaging in other logics (of the signifier, of contradiction), struggles with meaning and is deconstructed ("lost").<sup>9</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

In the live context, what we ascribe to the performer or actor is actually our moment of *presence* as a collective body, of optimum engagement with the text as an audience. As such it is simultaneously an *absence* of our consciousness as discrete bodies, as individual members of the audience: as Barthes says, the *ego-cogito* is lost. This experience of the dynamic force or action of signification between text and reader is the erotics of performance, identical to Barthes's articulation of 'jouissance'. Presence in the live performance is the site of desire. It is not surprising, therefore, that presence is often ascribed to the reference point for the engagement of our desire in the performance text, namely the actor/ performer; and that it is described, as Rogers does (above) in a language connoting desire.

Contrary to signification, *signifiante* cannot be reduced, therefore, to communication, representation, expression ... Hence its identification with the pleasure of *jouissance* the text becomes erotic through *signifiante*.<sup>10</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

Barthes writes about *jouissance* particularly in terms of the open text. Thus, the signification at the level of presence of the performer is implicated in the characteristic openness of the performance text. Such a trajectory of correlations between the discourse of desire and that of presence places the latter within an existing field of theoretic discourse; indicating a critical method of analysis for presence as a signifying element in the text and pointing to methodologies for innovative or radical practice in performance which acknowledge presence as a critical factor.

In much of his writing, Barthes has pioneered a sophisticated level of attention on the surface of the text, generating new vocabularies, and using them to address a diverse mixture of cultural forms. I will focus on two essays by Barthes, 'The Third Meaning' and 'The Grain of the Voice' in which he explores some of the subtler areas of textuality, which he says are *theoretically locatable but not describable*.<sup>11</sup> «As such, these works throw some theoretical light on the problematics of presence. The key theoretic concept in both is that of *signifiance*. In the 'The Third Meaning', Barthes contemplates the images from S.M. Eisenstein films and isolates two levels of textual signification at work in the film text, (or any text): the obvious meaning and the obtuse meaning. He proposes that the former area can be analyzed within the given vocabulary of signification that is, within the parameters of the symbolic, the denotative and connotative structures of analysis. The obtuse meaning, however, operates in the realm of the signifier 'without a signified', and as such it is outside the language system: *outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution*,<sup>12</sup> an excess of meaning in the signification and communication process. He describes it as an accent which not only subverts the obvious meaning but also disrupts the meta-language of criticism. This site of the other, the third meaning, *carries a certain emotion... an emotional value which for Barthes is the site of the erotics of its signifiance*."<sup>13</sup>

In 'The Grain of The Voice', Barthes undertakes a theoretical investigation of what he states as, *the impossible account of an individual thrill, something that I constantly experience in listening to singing*." He locates this quality as a signifier at the level of *signifiance* in the vocal performance: the signifier, he calls the grain of the voice. Barthes's account of the grain as a differential between qualities of vocal performance: as a differential which is independent of the technical competence or accuracy of the singing, is directly analogous to that of presence in the performance text. He uses Julia Kristeva's

terms, *genotext* and *phenotext* to distinguish between the song of the voice with grain and that without: the *geno-song* and *pheno-song*, respectively. Kristeva explains some features of the *genotext*:

the *genotext* is not linguistic (in the sense understood by structural or generative linguistics). It is rather, a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, 'quanta', rather than 'marks') and non-signifying.<sup>15</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

When applied to the live performance such distinctions can be articulated as the *geno-act* and the *pheno-act*: The former - to use Barthes's analogy - is where the *signifiance* explodes, bringing not the soul, but *jouissance*.<sup>16</sup> Barthes describes the *pheno-song* in terms that are directly relevant to most Western methods of acting and performing: that it denotes symbolically, and it is about expression, communication and representation of feeling. The *geno-song* instead works in none of these ways, but it designates an erotic relation with the reader. In this essay, he makes two very important points which are inter-related. First that his insistence in articulating a theoretical value for the grain of the voice, for the level of signification he *calls signifiance*, is an insistence to listen to the text with his body - the kind of attention, perhaps that Sontag referred to as 'an erotics of art'. Barthes's essay is an attempt to de-mystify this level by acknowledging its signifiatory operation, and by distinguishing it from the 'psychological' engagement:

I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man singing or playing and that relation is erotic - in no way 'subjective' (it is not the psychological subject in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce - to express - that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it. «<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, by using Kristeva's paradigms for the *genotext* and *phenotext*, Barthes is placing his observations within an ideological framework. He is suggesting that 'the grain of the voice' as a signifier, as *signifiance*, is not an arbitrary level of signification - since it cannot be independent of language - but that its theoretical value relation to the signification of the *phenotext*, *pheno-song*, is at the same time an ideological relation. Kristeva makes such a distinction when she compares the socio-political implication of the 'traditional' literary texts to the 'modern' ones, (what Barthes might call the closed text and open text, respectively). She describes the writing in the former category as working within the

Symbolic, the language of The Law of The Father, the patriarchal ideology of society, and as such as presenting no challenge, no subversion at this level. Whereas the literary texts of the avant-garde, she argues, manage to *cover the infinity of the process [of signification], that is, reach the semiotic chora*"<sup>18</sup>; a subversive action she designates to the genotext. Barthes's line of argument in 'The Grain of The Voice' therefore, by analogy, opens the way for a theoretic investigation into the ideological process implicated in the *signifiante* of the live performance text, a signifiante that can be attributed to presence of the performance act.

Recent film analysis has foregrounded the performance of the actor in the film text, articulating its signification in terms of psycho-analytic theories on the process of identification. Grahain F. Thompson's article, 'Approaches to Performance', investigates the way in which psycho-semiotic articulations about performance in the text/reader relation apply to the performance act in film.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the obvious distinction between 'live' and non-live representational forms, there are some significant drawbacks in appropriating his analysis for the live performance text. Thompson deals primarily with the actor who plays a character. Since his analysis does not account for films in which the actor does not denote a character, it cannot account for their equivalent in live performance, for example, most performance art work. Although he indicates the relation of Barthes's theorization of the pheno-song and geno-song to performance act in film, he does not use them to differentiate between two levels of signification. He suggests instead that the performance act per se can be designated to the level of the geno-song (geno-text). The reason for this could be that the genotext, therefore *signifiante* in the film text, is entirely dependent on the structures of the film language, on image and editing – something which Barthes, himself, suggests in 'The Third Meaning'. Thompson's essay is useful, however, in outlining the correlation between the performance act, the process of identification and the construction of identity in psycho-semiotic theory. Orthodox psycho-analytic definitions of identification do not suggest any relation to construction of identity; they have been articulated specifically in terms of the performance of the subject in language:

the construction of this [in language] identity of the subject of the enounced and the subject of enunciation, between the symbolic and imaginary.<sup>19</sup> " *Thus there is a Permanent Performance of the subject in language itself--permanent and interminable to complete the incompletable production of identity and cohesion, to provide fictions and images, to make sense.*<sup>20</sup>

Such theorization makes not only an overt connection between the process of identification and the construction of identity, but also infers that the process of identification is a necessary and unavoidable part of constructing meanings: "to make sense".<sup>21</sup>

In film analysis, the apparatus of identification has been investigated as a structural organization of 'a menu of looks' in the film text. In her paper, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey argues the ideological force of this process and its implication for the development of radical cinema. Within the particular conditions of reading in the dark auditorium of a cinema, the film text, she says, sets up for the viewer *two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structure of looking*.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the process of identification is involved -as the necessary desire of the reader/subject to constitute itself in the text/subject; on the other, a process based on Freud's theory on scopophilia: *taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze*,<sup>23</sup> which relies on the separation between the viewer and its object i.e. a process of objectification. She argues that various narrative and technical (eye of the camera, editing etc...) structures of film organize 'a menu of looks' for the male gaze where the presence of the female subject, i.e. the female actor, functions as *erotic object for the character within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium*.<sup>24</sup> Although much of Mulvey's argument is specific to film – as she herself acknowledges - it nevertheless contains some useful points that comment equally on live performance and, not surprisingly, on the feminist challenge to conventional theatre forms. In her book, *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case explains this psycho-semiotic theory in terms of theatre:

the cultural conditioning of the male gaze is essential for most of the performing arts ... (e.g.) When the ingenue makes her entrance ... The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his [of the male protagonist and therefore of the audience] desire ... This example illustrates one major cultural assumption - that the male gaze is the subject of the dramatic action.<sup>25</sup>

Mulvey uses psycho-analytic discourses on the relations of identification and desire to analyze the position of the reader as active and/or passive participant in the text. The process of identification and many of the conditions conducive to scopophilia in live performance are identical to those in film. In the performance text, and particularly in

dramatic or theatrical performance, the structure of looks are controlled, to a great extent, by the narrative and directorial (writer's and/or director's) decisions which include, as Case points out, decisions about actions, lighting, use of space/time, the visual setting etc.. In cases where there is no written score or director, as in some performance art work, the performer is obviously much more in control of the performance text as a whole. Since there is a correlation in live performance between the process of identification, the performance act, and the attention of the actor/ performer, it follows that the 'structure of looks' in the live performance text - perhaps unlike film - are also controlled by the actor/ performer via the performance act. Thus, a female actor, for example, could participate towards the particular codes which construct 'woman' as sign *for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness*.<sup>26</sup> In Much feminist theatre practice there has been a conscious resistance and challenge to the processes that object-ify women. These strategies have tackled most aspects of the performance language and of the conditions of production of the performance text, including the obvious controlling forces on the performance act: namely the structures of visual pleasure underscored in the writing and directing of work by and for the male gaze. Certain developments in so called radical and/or feminist performance art, (more than in feminist theatre/drama) for example, the work of Rose English, Carolee Schneemann, Rose Garrard - have implemented for live performance, the kind of formal and structural experiments, which Mulvey proposes for film:

The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions ... is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the "invisible guest" and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms.<sup>27</sup>

The active participation of the performer/actor in the dominant structures of signification that is, in the performance act of the performance text, distinguish it from the film text. The structural equivalent to the menu of looks - by inference the operations of ideology in the text - can be traced by analyzing the ideological structures of pleasure and of desire, as they relate to the position of the subject/reader and the *attention of* the performer/actor.

Mulvey's reference to pleasure and desire is articulated as one which, through an active/passive dialectic set up in the unconscious, positions the reader as passive, and interpellates him (therefore the female reader) into the text. It is therefore a site of

ideological control, a strategy of coercion. Barthes uses the term *jouissance* and the *erotic* as a site of subversion of, and liberation from, ideological control: *Jouissance* operates at the level of the obtuse meaning, of *signifiante* and marks an active engagement of the reader, where the text elicits an active participation in constructing meanings. Thus, in some way, there is an opposition between Mulvey's articulation on pleasure and desire, and Barthes's on *jouissance* and erotics. Such an opposition has, of course, been constructed by Barthes himself -its elaborated in *The Pleasure of the Text* -. to distinguish between the reader/text relation in different texts. As I have argued, the presence of the actor or performer can be ascribed to the level of *signifiante*. This trajectory of connections and oppositions foregrounds the question: is there all alternative or oppositional reference in the performance act, to that of presence of the actor or performer? Is it simply an absence of the floating signifier? Is it the pheno-act (phoney-act!), but no geno-act? Mulvey's use of the structure of pleasure as activated by unconscious desire, is important because it designates to these terms, a positive action of coercion. The absence of *signifiante* in the performance act - thus in the performance text as a whole - is implicated in setting up structures of pleasure that interpellate the reader/subject. (Barthes and Kristeva put forward similar arguments about the plaisir/jouissance opposition of reading, phenotext/genotext order of language and writing, respectively.) For the purposes of my argument, I will give a name to this pleasure, as it operates in the performance text; a word that is directly or indirectly (by inference) used to describe a quality of engagement with the performance act, a quality of seduction: seductive. (My use of this term contradicts Barthes's use of it as an element of the erotic relation). To summarize therefore: that which is identified as presence signifies at the level of *signifiante* that which is disruptive to the language, to the signification of the text, therefore opens the performance text; it *elicits jouissance*, creating a relation of erotics, where the reader is actively participating in the production of the text. The absence of the signifier of presence -corresponding to the absence of the grain in the voice - is an absence of the genotext; it closes the text of the performance; it solicits desire, creating a relation of seduction; a relation that *is pornographic* where the reader is passive and interpellated into the text. The term seductive is ascribed to the person of the actor or performer, just as in the case of presence. Both qualities are mistakenly ascribed to the individual rather than to the actual experience of reading, that is, to the signifiatory process of the performance act. There is, however a subtle distinction between the two, even in their common use. The quality of seduction usually foregrounds, the individual person (that is where seductiveness is perceived as an attribute of the person), and not the actor; whereas the quality of presence indicates the skill of the actor, and foregrounds the actor at work. The subtle difference of

attention each quality invites from the audience marks the very significant differential between the two, located in the actual practice of the performer/actor: a difference in terms of the direction, intensity and object of attention. Given the ideological implications of this distinction in the signifying process of the live performance text, the increasingly common confusion between the two qualities of the performance act - all too often by cultural commentators or theatre or performance critics - is not an innocent oversight, but one which carries an ideological value.

In contemporary critical theory, the correlation between ideology and textual action have been articulated, mostly, in terms of the structures and forms of narrative and of language. Although in contemporary theory much of this analysis has used a vocabulary of performance, and particularly of the performance act, there has been little attention paid to the ideological force of the language of the performance act: the actor or performer's live work on stage is itself a language with its own structures of signification. The absence of a critical vocabulary for this language betrays the limitations of existing critical discourse - limitations which implicate it *still*, in the critical frameworks of its heritage. In an age, of a cultural text, of so-called individual enterprise the term 'performance' has become common currency(!), a common part of the vocabulary for all kinds of practice. Simultaneously, in the age, or the ideology, of so-called communication, the live interaction is not only rendered redundant, but also conflated with non-live communication. Much of contemporary critical discourse is inadvertently collaborating in this process, both by ignoring the process of live signification as an object of study, and by appropriating it as a metaphor for the very process of signification itself. Consequently, the 'live' aspect of communication, as foregrounded in performance, does not undergo the rigorous critical and analytical attention afforded to other areas. If all writing/reading is performance, it does not follow that all of live performance can be conflated to reading/writing. Such conflation may liberate the theoretic paradigms for non-live representational forms, but it still manages to reproduce the reductionist habits that underly the critical reading of live performance, historically. This is not to argue against the contemporary theory that, obviously, has proved indispensable to the subject of enquiry in this paper, but to argue for the development of such critical discourse so that it addresses the specific signifying processes of live performance. So that those who are well-versed in such theories also have learn not only, as Sontag says, to *see more, to hear more, to feel more*, but also to articulate it in critical terms and so that it is not easy to confuse *plaisir* with *jouissance*, *presence* with the *seductive, erotics* and the *pornographic* in the live performance text. The perceptual and

critical distinction between the two actions of signification are particularly pertinent within the context of what is referred to as postmodern culture. Jean Baudrillard uses the terms *seduction* and *pornography* to describe what he calls 'the ecstasy of communication, in postmodern culture:

We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene... But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography; today there is its whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks, a pornography of all functions in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, ... in their forced signification, in their performativity ...<sup>28</sup>

He is describing an all-pervasive force of advertising, a coercive *force* of communication, which he locates in the mass production of an ideology which sells information and yet more communication: *pornographic* because it *sells* itself through coercive *seduction*. Baudrillard's essay infers a distinction between pornography and erotics. The same distinction between *jouissance* and seduction that can be isolated in the language of the performance act; a distinction, as I have argued, which marks the political, the ideological force of a performance text. Thus, confusion between the two is dangerous. If critical commentators do not, as Barthes says, 'listen with their bodies', then they cannot hear *signification* at work (or not) in the live text; they cannot address themselves critically to the most privileged level of signification, and are therefore unable to make fully political, ideological analyses of the live performance text. As dominant voices in the culture, they have to bear the responsibility for perpetuating, or even perhaps for generating the confusion.

## **TOWARDS A RADICAL PRACTICE**

Brecht's theories on theatre have become paradigmatic to the discourse on radical theatre/*performance* practice. It is unfortunate, therefore, that there is a common (and reductionist) view, that results in an over-simplification of his theory of distancing (or alienation) to one of anti-identification. Brecht's distancing technique – a concept borrowed from the Formalist ideas about literary language – was a strategy that foregrounded the artifice of the performance, the theatricality of theatre. Such strategies have been developed since Brecht, particularly in performance art works. Although the

styles of performing are as varied as the number of works, there are, however, some features that distinguish it from acting in drama/theatre. The performer in the performance art text does not usually represent a character in the narrative. If there is characterization, then it is often as pastiche or parody. Performing, in some senses, is the refusal to act, which simultaneously is rejection of mimesis, of the dramatic narrative, of the illusion of reality perpetuated by the transparency of its theatre language, endorsed by the naturalistic and re-presentational forms of dramatic theatre. Yvonne Rainer's basic principles of performing embrace a broad spectrum of rejections, some of which she expresses in the following diatribe:

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to the glamour and transcendence of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved <sup>29</sup>

The development of performance act methods/styles in performance art has been influenced as much by such theoretic motives, as by the fact that the *language* of live performance has not been the prioritized aesthetic language for most performing artists, since most have crossed over from another language which they often privilege in the live work they create. Consequently, as artists who have not been conditioned by the structures of the language of acting, they are able to explore and disrupt the conventional languages of acting. Simultaneously, certain amateur traits of performance which are due to the lack of a competent degree of fluency have either been overlooked, or they have become incorporated into certain less engaging aspects of the performance act in performance art. Due to the lack of conscious critical attention afforded to the performer's work [act], there are not structural, theoretical or evaluative tools of analysis. In performance art, the performer 'on stage' is very often the artist - that is, also equivalent to writer/director/designer et.. Even if this is not the case, the performance art text, by foregrounding its process of signification, foregrounds the performance act. The lack of attention to the skills and craft of the performer's language by critics and practitioners indicates that the performance act is not considered as a discrete language which is also the dominant one in the live performance text.

The dearth of critical and practical development in specific relation to the performance act is founded on the misinterpretation of Brecht's ideas: that the process of so-called radical or innovative performance is one that rejects the engagement of the reader through identification. Although contemporary theorization around the process of identification acknowledges it as a fundamental engagement of reader and text, and as a necessary relation in the construction of meaning, the inherited confusion in terms of *acting* and *performing* still persists. At a period of aesthetic production which is strongly implicated in critical practice, such theoretic misconceptions quickly translate into misappropriations in practice. The process of identification cannot be reduced to psychological or emotional identification. A methodological or a theoretical analysis of the performance act must acknowledge the process of identification; an acknowledgement which is particularly pertinent to innovative or radical performance art work. The textual strategies of performance art texts can be characterized as postmodernist texts which articulate a plurality of subject positions that in turn position the reader as subject-in-process, resisting the operation of identification with a fixed subject of the narrative or meta-narrative. The radical performance text is *identified with diversity and difference, a politics of contestation*,<sup>30</sup> therefore described in terms of what Dick Hebdige calls *critical postmodernist*. The radical strategy of such texts is to present contradictory positions of identification, to chart the fragmented identity of the subordinated subjects of culture: the cultural hybrids who are absented from the narratives that construct a fixed subject position of culturally dominant voices, that constitute a unified identity in a unified world which simultaneously interpellates and alienates the subject/reader through the inevitable process of identification. The radical performance text does not present a plurality of worlds, an equivalence of positions, because it is *tendentious* and selective. It foregrounds heterogeneity and difference within a tendentious field which makes present the subjects who have been absented, by creating for them the multiple and contradictory positions of *identification* - the positions they inhabit in the multiple worlds of their lives. This is what Stuart Hall calls the diaspora experience, which,

is defined...by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>31</sup>

(Author's emphasis)

The task of the critical postmodern text then, is to de-centre the dominant subject and to displace and fragment the reference points of identification in text. If the process of identification can be correlated, as Stephen Heath argues, to the construction of identity, then the radical performance text has to acknowledge and provide references for identification. These references are located in the performance act of the performer and as such represent a trajectory, a process of shifting reference points, much in the way that Fredric Jameson describes as an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*.<sup>32</sup> Without identification there is no signification, therefore there is no textual action. The live performance, more than any other text, literally relies on its readers to participate in its production -particularly in the case of performance which is an open text twice over. The subversive action of a text that *challenges* the single and fixed point of psychological identification lies in its power too *engage* the reader through the processes of identification in the first place. Only then can it shift the subject/reader across the multiple and contradictory positions of identification constituting for the reader, a *production* of identity. Stuart Hall describes the operation of such strategies in modern Caribbean cinema as:

...allowing us too recognize the different parts and histories of our-selves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call 'cultural indentity'.<sup>33</sup>

Since the reference for the process of identification in the live performance is the performance act, and since it is primarily determined by the *attention* of the actor/performer, then radical performance practice, described in the terms above, has to develop a practical and critical methodology that addresses the attention of the performer.

## **THE PROJECT:**

### **THE STRUCTURE of ATTENTION**

I doubt whether, were he singing today, his art would be recognized or even simply *perceived*...It is perhaps, precisely and less paradoxically than it seems, because his

art was *already* marginal, mandarin, that it was able to bear traces of *signifiante*, to escape the tyranny of meaning.<sup>34</sup>

(Author's emphasis)

The actual site of signification that opens the live performance text, that subverts the resolve towards fixed identity and fixed meaning and most importantly that disrupts the ideological force that implicates all cultural practice, operates at the level *signification* of the performance language. The primary project of a critical language for performance is to see more, hear more, feel more the play of signifiers at the surface of the performance text: at the level of presence. The critical reader must locate the contradictory relation the obvious and the obtuse meanings in the live work, and acknowledge its implication in the politics of a piece work. Such its development constitutes a simultaneous practice of thinking with the body and listening with the intellect – the quality of *attention* practiced by the actor or performer who is identified as *having presence* being in process of the present. The attention of critical practice must be on the *structure of attention* of the actor or performer, as well as on the structure of the other language that make up the live performance text. In the live performance it is the *structure of attention* that determines the *traces of signifiante*; it is equivalent to the quality that Barthes believed would not today be perceived in Panzera's vocal performance. The most urgent project for the critical language for performance is to develop a vocabulary for reading the *structure of attention* since, as Barthes says:

This luxury does not yet belong to today's politics but nevertheless already to tomorrow's.<sup>35</sup>

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## NOTES

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