

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is the phenomenological description of theatrical performance throughout the revision of some of the key-concepts of Hans Thies-Lehmann's and Erika Fischer-Lichte's reception theories from the perspective of Marc Richir's thought concerning the architectonical transposition of experiencing. This revision includes the Freudian concept of "evenly hovering attention" (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*) that Lehmann describes as the spectator's optimal disposition of reception, and the concept of "perceptual multistability" which in Fischer-Lichte's theory is meant to outline the spectator's instability in the perception of the actor and the represented character. I will rethink the phenomenalization of the above mentioned phenomena primarily by introducing Marc Richir's thoughts concerning the primacy of *phantasia* over perception and his description of the experience of the *sublime*. I will argue that the phenomenon of theatrical performance (in several cases) can be the ground of a collectively performed act of symbolic and aesthetic *Stiftung*.

### Introduction

The present writing aims to carry out the phenomenological description of the theatrical performance. To do this, I will firstly revisit the research of contemporary theatre studies, especially Hans-Thies Lehmann's and Erika Fischer-Lichte's reception theories of the theatrical performance from a phenomenological point of view. In this revision I will introduce the concept of *eidetic reduction* (*epoché*) in the description of the spectator's receptive disposition. In addition to this, in the description of the eventful unfolding of the performance, I will suggest the replacement of Lehmann's poststructuralist approach to a phenomenologi-

<https://doi.org/10.14712/24646504.2022.10>

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cal approach. This replacement will result in the introduction of the concept of the *boundless Leib* of *theatrical performance*. Following this, I will rethink the problem of *perceptual multistability* through means of Marc Richir's work concerning the primacy of *phantasia* over perception. From this foundation, using Richir's description of the experience of the *sublime*, I will show that the theatrical performance, when it reaches the ecstatic moment of *catharsis*, reveals itself as a collectively performed playful and symbolic act of aesthetic *Stiftung*, an act of transformation of the symbolic and imaginary institutions of the phenomenological community (audience).

### **Performative turn as phenomenological turn?**

In his book, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann argues that the theatre of the late 20th and the early 21st century underwent a remarkable ontological transformation. The leading experimental theatre-makers of this period, like Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, The Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Jan Fabre, etc.<sup>1</sup> are becoming more interested in the inherent possibilities of the live theatrical performance, than in the mere representation of a dramatic text which (as it is a form of literature) is situated in an insurmountable distance from the present moment of the performance. As such, the dramatic text seemed to be the manifestation of the supremacy of a transcendent writer, who is never present. Starting from the postmodern thought of the irrelevance of this invisible and never present transcendence, Lehmann claims that the new form of theatre cannot be viewed with the old aesthetical terms, namely those related to the representation (*μίμησις*) of the *drama*. Lehmann argues that the concept of drama itself underwent a crisis as it supposes a continuity and wholeness of the experienced world:

What is experienced and/or stylized as 'drama' is nothing but the hopelessly deceptive perspectivation' of occurrences as action. Occurrences are interpreted as a 'doing': that was Nietzsche's formula for mythification. This shift also characterizes the individual's (by nature) illusory perception of reality, the 'eternal' ideology of a spontaneously anthropomorphizing perception.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed list of creators see cf. Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre*, K. Jürs-Munby (transl.), Routledge, New York 2006, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

For this reason Lehmann proclaims the need of a new aesthetic of theatre, which originates itself from the experience (*μῆθεξις*) of theatrical performance. He argues that

Theatre is the site [...] of a real gathering, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place. In contrast to other arts, which produce an object and/or are communicated through media, here the aesthetic act itself (the performing) as well as the act of reception (the theatre going) take place as a real doing in the here and now. Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating take place. The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously. The theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a 'text' even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience. Therefore, the adequate description of theatre is bound to the reading of this total text. Just as much as the gazes of all participants can virtually meet, the theatre situation forms a whole made up of evident and hidden communicative processes.<sup>3</sup>

As we see, Lehmann points out that theatre is an art without any artifact/product (*ἔργον*). Contrarily, theatre it is something, that we do together, "here and now," a form of communication (*ἐνέργεια*). The most important difference between the performance and everyday life is that the former is "aesthetically organized," or in other words: intentionally positioned. But at the same time, in this theory – rooted deeply in poststructuralist ontology – the *act* of communication is imagined as a *text* written together, a text inscribed in the immateriality of the time of the performance and the void of its spatiality, and as such, in the bodies of the participants. In this view, theatrical performance is a joint text, that is written to be *interpreted*. Thanks to this latter condition, for Lehmann the viewer tends to be a *reader* of signs of a text(ure) which is woven in real-time. He confirms although that these signs do not always have precise meanings, but rather the performance is an event where these signs are not put in the hierarchical order of quotidian life: they are put in a *parataxic*<sup>4</sup> relation, for the sake of subverting the fixed forms of interpretations and showing the true nature of signs, as some self-referential textures. Thus, in this view the performance offsets the viewer from their traditio-

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> "The de-hierarchization of theatrical means is a universal principle of postdramatic theatre. This non-hierarchical structure blatantly contradicts tradition, which has preferred a hypotactical way of connection that governs the superand subordination of elements, in order to avoid confusion and to produce harmony and comprehensibility. In the parataxis of postdramatic theatre the elements are not linked in unambiguous ways." *Ibid.*, p. 86.

nal hermeneutical position and puts them in a somewhat paradoxical relationship with the performance, being both the co-author and reader of its text(ure). As such, the viewer is also being situated both inside and outside of this texture. They are a *spectator*, a guest, who is invited to be the theoretician (in the original sense of *θεωποί*) of this strange festive event. The spectator is an alien, who is similar to an anthropologist, who takes part in this incomprehensible series of actions (performed in the unstable and utopic polis of the performance), for the sake of its post-factual interpretation. Thanks to this hermeneutical dispositioning, the spectator finds themselves in an altered state of mind:

The consequence is a changed attitude on the part of the spectator. In psychoanalytical hermeneutics the term 'evenly hovering attention' (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*) is used. Freud chose this term to characterize the way in which the analyst listens to the analysand. Here everything depends on not understanding immediately. Rather one's perception has to remain open for connections, correspondences and clues at completely unexpected moments, perhaps casting what was said earlier in a completely new light. Thus, meaning remains in principle postponed. Minor and insignificant details are registered exactly because in their immediate non-significance they may turn out to be significant for the discourse of the analysand. In a similar way the spectator of postdramatic theatre is not prompted to process the perceived instantaneously but to postpone the production of meaning (*semiosis*) and to store the sensory impressions with 'evenly hovering attention'.<sup>5</sup>

As we see in Lehmann's model, the spectator of the post-dramatic theatre finds themselves in an altered state of mind, in a disposition (*Stimmung*), where the intentionality of their attention is different from the quotidian: they cannot perform the instant semiosis of the emerging multiplicity of signs. To describe the disposition from which the performance can be accessible, Lehmann uses the Freudian concept of the *evenly hovering attention*.

From my point of view, this proves to be a slightly misleading concept as it involuntarily puts the spectator in the position of the analyst, being – in Lacanian terminology – *the subject supposed to know*, and throws the theatrical performance in the position of the analysand, who tries to hide the truth in the subtext of its texture. The disposition that Lehmann tries to describe here can be better depicted with the phenomenological concept of the *eidetic reduction* (*epoché*). The practice of *eidetic reduction* focuses on discovering the appearing phenomena from a fresh perspective by getting in interaction with them in a specific situation, rather than

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

investigating the hidden meaning behind their appearance. Thus, theatrical performance proves to be the *staged version of epoché* as Maaïke Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman and Eirini Nedelkopoulou claim in the introduction of their volume, *Performance and Phenomenology*:

Commenting on Husserl, Jacques Derrida noted that ‘phenomenological reduction is a scene, a theatre stage’. The operative assumption is that, if the Husserlian phenomenological approach invites us to take a distance from direct involvement with the world, this same distance will replicate the purported distance between what happens on stage and audience members. Accordingly, theater presents a staged version of the epoché because they both involve perception apart from the quotidian.<sup>6</sup>

Assuming this to be true, theatre performance can be perceived as a unique occasion for a special phenomenological *practice* (*πράττειν*), rather than a self-referential hermeneutic game with self-referential signs. It performatively suspends the quotidian intentionality of *being-in-the-world* of the spectator. By putting the spectator’s imagination, perception, and recollection into play, theatrical performance grants the possibility for the spectator to re-discover and to reflect on their embedding in their intersubjective reality.

Thus, we can say that post-dramatic theatre performance creates a provocative situation where the spectator finds themselves in a world of uncertainty, where the otherwise well-known and objectified beings (human, animals, objects, etc.) *present* themselves as some incommensurable phenomena. The performance provokes the spectator, to get in interaction with the appearing phenomena and not only through their intellect, but through their *Leib*, which experiences the anonym “signals” or the “sensory impressions” of these beings in their pure phenomenality.

In Erika Fischer-Lichte’s approach, described in *The Transformative Power of Performance*, when the spectators enter the situation of this provocative uncertainty, they find themselves in the middle of a dynamic phenomenization. She describes this as a liminal state, where they fail to control the hermeneutical process of generating semiosis of what they are experiencing:

A theatrical element is perceived in its phenomenal being and physically affects the audience. Consequently, the process of constituting a fictive world is brusquely interrupted. In its place we find the “fusion” of perceiving subject and perceived object. The spectator submits to a stream of associations which may lead to further

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<sup>6</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman and Eirini Nedelkopoulou, *Performance and Phenomenology*, Routledge, New York 2015, p. 2.

auto-biographical reflection. When the perception shifts once more to the order of representation, the causal chain of understanding and constituting the character cohesively is broken. The spectators will have to resume wherever their memory allows them to. The attempt to generate meaning hermeneutically proves a Sisyphean task. The shifts leave the perceiving subjects in a state of instability. The aesthetic experience here is largely characterized by the experience of destabilization, which suspends the perceiving subjects betwixt and between two perceptual orders. A permanent stabilization lies beyond their control.<sup>7</sup>

This latter passage shows that “getting touched” by the performance means not only an imaginary touch of a transcendent meaning (for example the poetic beauty of the recited text, or the imagined character played by the actor) but it is the result of an *actual touch*, a spontaneous manifestation of another *Leib* (who performs a gesture, says a word, stares at us, etc.) that provokes the immediate response of the spectator’s *Leib*. The destabilization is generated as an affection that attracts or repulses the *Leib* of the spectator like an invisible wave that shivers the body of the spectator in reaction to the other *Lieb(er)*’s presence. And thanks to this affectivity, the calm and contemplative schematization – which would divide the world into subjects and objects – gets suspended and the spectator finds themselves in a destabilized perception of reality, in the flow of the wild, anonym experiencing, but also amid their most private memories and imagination. As the induced affective wave provokes the spectator’s body to an immediate – voluntary or involuntary – response, they in turn affect the *Leib(er)* of the actor(s) and the other spectators, setting up a unique, fluctuating (com)motion, an affective interplay of the *Leiber* of the participants being present in the performance’s space and time:

The actors act, that is, they move through space, gesture, change their expression, manipulate objects, speak, or sing. The spectators perceive their actions and respond to them. Although some of these reactions might be limited to internal processes, their perceptible responses are equally significant: the spectators laugh, cheer, sigh, groan, sob, cry, scuff their feet, or hold their breath; they yawn, fall asleep, and begin to snore; they cough and sneeze, eat and drink, crumple wrapping paper, whisper, or shout comments, call “bravo” and “encore,” applaud, jeer and boo, get up, leave the theatre, and bang the door on their way out. [...]. In short, whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, S. I. Jain (transl.), Routledge, New York 2008, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

We can see also that the *autopoietic feedback loop* (as it is called later in Fischer-Lichte's book) is not something exclusive to post-dramatic performances but is the basic situation of every performance. At this point, we can state that theatrical performance (regardless of its dramatic or post-dramatic nature) reveals itself as a field of a specific social *interaction*, not limited to the reception of the representation of an imaginary act, but as a *live act of transactions* of the affectivities between their *Leiber* (which includes the bodies of the appearing animals, objects, and even space itself). We can notice also that thanks to its aesthetical arrangement, theatrical performance has special intentionality, inducing a certain kind of movement in the representational activity of the participants' imagination and recollection, resulting in an altered perception of the ongoing phenomenization.

The concept of the *autopoietic feedback loop* draws our attention to the presence of an interconnected *audience* of the theatrical performance, rather than the multiplicity of monastic *spectators*. This audience is also shaping the course of the ongoing performance with its presence, therefore it is not separated from the performers. To describe this phenomenization, I suggest the introduction of the concept of *boundless Leib of the theatrical performance*. As a *Leib*, theatrical performance is a living, breathing, and pulsing phenomenon, rather than a *joint text*, a readable, dead corpus (*Körper*), as Lehmann would suggest. However, I also emphasize that the concept of *the boundless Leib of the theatrical performance* does not presuppose that the audience would be a homogenous unity, a formless and unconscious mass. The same way as the individual *Lieb*-experience also implies the perception of its autonomous parts and regions of the body, besides its whole, atmospherical *Stimmung*.

The purpose of my brief summary of Lehmann's and Fischer-Lichte's approach of the theatrical performance was to show how their work opens up a new perspective in the aesthetics of theatrical performances. Following their approach, the main task of such an aesthetics seems to be rather the reflection on the specific eventful phenomenization of the performance, than the hermeneutical interpretation of the phenomena appearing during the course of it. As we have seen, the phenomenological revision of some of Lehmann's concepts that were borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis or poststructuralist theory of signs can help us getting closer to this description. But we still have to answer the question about the purpose of this aesthetics.

Phenomenology's traditional task is to go back *to the things themselves* by suspending the already-known dogmatic meanings for the sake of naively rediscovering them in their facticity. Thus, our further task is to approach theatrical performance not as something that we understand, or just passively watch, but

something that we *do together*. But what are we doing together when we decide to expose ourselves to the provocative uncertainty of the theatrical performance's situation? What are we *thinking about* together, what is the intention, if we mean by thinking not something intellectual, but as Merleau-Ponty suggests, the reflexivity of our Flesh? What are we reflecting on, when we become the part of *the boundless Leib of theatrical performance*?

For Merleau-Ponty painting seems to be the quasi practice of eidetic reduction of the visible world, as the painter suspends the objectifying and "physical-optical" perception of the visible world for the sake of transforming it to a living vision.<sup>9</sup> Driven from this inspiration, if we follow the thread of the previous thoughts, it is reasonable to assume that theatrical performance tends to be the field of eidetic reduction of the inter- and transsubjective *action*. By suspending (some of) the normative practices of quotidian interactions and transactions, the theatrical performance creates a situation for recognizing the Other as somebody else than usual.

In light of this, it seems reasonable to assume that the phenomenon of theatrical performance is a collectively performed reflectional act of the inter- and transsubjective reality, it is a reflection of *Mitsein*, and as we will see, it holds the possibility of an aesthetic *Stiftung*. To develop this assumption, firstly we have to take a closer look at the phenomenalization of the earlier mentioned experience of perceptual instability, remarked by Erika Fischer-Lichte.

## **1. The moment of collective sublime: From perceptual instability to the overflow of affectivity**

The concept of embodiment, in its Merleau-Pontyian sense, plays a key role in Fischer-Lichte's aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> As she explains, the major change of the performa-

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<sup>9</sup> "The painter's vision is not a view upon the outside, a merely 'physical-optical' relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible." Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, "Eye and Mind" in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, Carleton Gallery (transl.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964, p. 181.

<sup>10</sup> See: "The parallels between Grotowski's theatre practice and Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy are striking. The latter's philosophy of the lived body (chair, 'flesh') represents the ambitious attempt to mediate between body and soul, sense and non-sense, by using a non-dualistic and non-transcendental approach. Merleau-Ponty conceives of the relationship between these two entities asymmetrically, that is, in favor of the sensual body. The body is always already connected to the world through its 'flesh.'" Fischer-Lichte, *op. cit.*, p. 83.



tive turn lies in the actor's changed approach towards their body. According to Fischer-Lichte, in the so-called representational theatre the actor's body is an institutionalized and instrumentalized body of a transcendental mind. A body that has to be hidden and repressed to sustain the illusion of the literary character (*dramatis persona*). After the revolutionary explorations of the theatre-makers of the '60s, this body becomes a reflexive Flesh, the *quasi* place of revelation,<sup>11</sup> where the well-known dualism of the body and the mind finally dissolves in its facticity, right in the front of the audience. As one of the contemporary critics' remarks about Ryszard Cieślak's presence in Grotowski's *Constant Prince*:

The essence ... does not in reality reside in the fact that the actor makes amazing use of his voice, nor in the way that he uses his almost naked body to sculpt mobile forms that are striking in their expressiveness; nor is it in the way that the technique of the body and voice form a unity during the long and exhausting monologues which vocally and physically border on acrobatics. It is a question of something quite different ... Until now, I accepted with reserve the terms such as 'secular holiness,' 'act of humility,' 'purification' which Grotowski uses. Today I admit that they can be applied perfectly to the character of the Constant Prince. A sort of psychic illumination emanates from the actor. I cannot find any other definition. In the culminating moments of the role, everything that is technique is as though illuminated from within ... At any moment the actor will levitate ... He is in a state of grace. And all around him this 'cruel theatre' with its blasphemies and excesses is transformed into a theatre in a state of grace.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, as Fischer-Lichte argues, in Grotowski's theatre the actor's body – in exceptional moments – was able to become an "embodied mind", an "illuminated" body, which did not represent any pre-established meaning, but it was performatively (*in actu*) generating new, wild meanings. The actor's body, through its unusual, *radical presence* was provoking a certain kind of shock for the audience, having the power to destabilize their perception:

I agree with Lehmann's definition of presence as a process of consciousness – but one that is articulated through the body and sensed by the spectators through their

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<sup>11</sup> See: "Jerzy Grotowski fundamentally redefined the relationship between the performer and his role. In his view, the performer cannot serve the purpose of portraying – thus embodying – a dramatic character. He sees the dramatic role created by the playwright as a tool: '... [the actor] must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself'. The role no longer constitutes the ultimate goal of the actors. Instead, their bodies themselves appear as something spiritual, mental – as embodied minds." *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Kelera, Josef, "Monologues of Ryszard Cieślak as the Constant Prince: steps towards his summit" in Grotowski, Jerzy, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Routledge, New York 2002, p. 109

bodies. In my view, presence represents a phenomenon which cannot be grasped by such a dichotomy as body vs. mind or consciousness. In fact, presence collapses such a dichotomy. When the actor brings forth their body as energetic and thus generates presence, they appear as embodied mind. The actor exemplifies that body and mind cannot be separated from each other. Each is always already implied in the other. [...] Through the performer's presence, the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming – he perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy. I would like to call this the radical concept of presence.<sup>13</sup>

Fischer-Lichte also argues that in the cases of these performances where the audience could experience the *radical presence* of the actor, they were entering in a new, a *liminal state of being*, that could function similarly to an initiation or a rite of passage.<sup>14</sup>

As we continue to think about theatrical performance as the field of the collective practice of the eidetic reduction, we could say that in the course of the above described phenomenalization, the participants went through an onto(theo)logical change of perspective. The *radical presence* of the actor provoked the spectator to suspend the schematization of the actor (and throughout his mediality, also the schematization of themselves) as a transcendent mind (*ego/même*), as a closed, objectified *persona*. They found themselves *being present (ipse) together (Mitsein)* in the affective flow of the provocative situation of the performance.

Besides the concept of the *autopoietic feedback loop*, Fischer-Lichte uses the concept of *perceptual multistability* to describe the discussed phenomenalization. The *perceptual multistability* is a concept derived from *perspectival multistability*, a term used in gestalt psychology to describe the occurring visual paradoxes during the recognition of gestalts:

The exhibition of the specific, individual physicality of the actor induces a perceptual multistability similar to perspectival multistability, visual paradoxes. [...] The causes for this perceptual oscillation are as of yet unclear. A spectator first perceives a certain movement of an actor in its specific energy, intensity, thrust, direction, and tempo, and then suddenly understands it as a symbolic appeal to or threat of the character. Despite

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<sup>13</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *op. cit.*, p. 98–99.

<sup>14</sup> Although she argues that this liminal situation is different in many views from a ritual: “While the liminal experience in ritual may transform the participants’ social status and alter their publicly recognized identity, no comparable effect seems to exist for the aesthetic experience of artistic performances.” Fischer-Lichte, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

the shift from the material to the symbolic sphere, the actor's specific physicality might still affect the spectator in a particularly intense manner.<sup>15</sup>

According to this description, during the ongoing phenomenization, the audience of the above-mentioned performances would be the citizens of two separate (though interfering) worlds: they would oscillate between the perception of the present moment (where they are affected by the actor's radical presence) and the perception of the represented time of the symbolic meanings of the embodied figure, thus being caught up in the paradoxical hermeneutic situation of: "what do I see, a rabbit or a duck?"

Although I agree with Fischer-Lichte that the phenomenon in question is crucial in the description of the phenomenization of theatrical performance, we find the applied model misleading. The model of *perspectival multistability* is meant to describe the relationship between a perceiving subject and a perceived object that is independent from the former. The source of uncertainty is in the impossibility of clear identification of the latter. Accordingly, the question of *perceptual multistability* in the case of the example of Ryszard Cieślak's *radical presence* in the *Constant Prince* would be: who do I perceive, the Constant Prince or Ryszard Cieślak? As the *Constant Prince* is an imaginary character, it seems more appropriate to say that the spectator *imagined* him somehow, and at the same time they could *perceive* Cieślak's sweating body, or the color of his hair and, simultaneously his gestures, words, acts, and the whole situation *reminded* them of something or somebody, and also that they were *feeling themselves* somehow in his presence. As we see, the multistability here does not consist in the impossibility of the unambiguous identification, but in the complexity of the lived experience. Thus, the situation is not an exclusive "or," but rather an inclusive "and".

I claim that the cause of the deficiency of Fischer-Lichte's analysis of the phenomena is to be found in the ontological assumption that she uses as the foundation of the analysis: both Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and the Gestalt theory consider perception as the most archaic register of the experience of the world.

I assume that if we reevaluate this phenomenization from the perspective of Richir's description concerning the architectonical transposition of the experience, then we would see this problem in another, more articulated way:

Here, we must consider the complete architectonic reversal of the classical architectonical perspective. This reversal, still too implicit in our previous works, consists in reversing the primacy of the perception over phantasia into the primacy of phantasia over the

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

perception. This is the consequence of the fact that, for us, the most archaic register of the phenomenological field is constituted by the 'pure' phantasia schematized in the schematism out of language and by the 'perceptive' phantasia schematized in language, which pass to the imaginations by a correlative architectonical transposition of the (quasi)doxic position of intentionality.<sup>16</sup>

As we see in Richir's his later works, the architectonical foundation of experiencing the world is an anonym, "pure" *phantasia*. As the affectivity provokes movement in the formless "material" of this *phantasia*, it coagulates in perceptions, imaginations, and recollections, sedimenting as symbolic and imaginary institutions. A metaphor taken from nature can help us better understand this architectonic structure. *Pure phantasia* is like the humidity in the air: it is present everywhere, but in such a loose density that it does not have any shape, it is the *presence* of a yet invisible *element* that surrounds us. Maybe it is so dense, that if we do not pay attention we fail to even notice its presence. But if we focus to our body, we can *perceive* this presence on our skin, despite its inability to be precisely located. By the affectivity of the heat, this humidity becomes denser and gets schematized in the form of a cloud that can be seen. If we blink while watching the cloud passing by, a more or less detailed and stylized copy of what we have just seen remains with us, but starts to dissolve gradually, further losing its details. If we open our eyes again, we notice that something from the dissolving image remained with us, because now we cannot watch the cloud simply as it is, for we also notice that something has changed. Depending on how we stylized the image, we can recollect some of the identical and changed details. If we close our eyes again, we will see another image. But if we decide that this time to keep our attention focused on the image (or we accidentally fall asleep), this image will partly detach from the cloud and starts to have a "private life". For example, if we decide to take a step with our eyes closed, we will notice that this image collapses in many pieces that start to have their "own life" and with every step taken we will enter in a wilder and wilder place of images that we never saw before.

In the case of the theatrical performance, the *element* is an *anonym presence* in the *boundless Leib of the theatrical performance*. An *elemental* presence not exclusive to either the actor or the spectator, but situated *in between their Leiber*: it is an affective tension in the intersubjective *Phantasialeib* that all experience. As such it is a not a transcendental, intelligible *Geist*, but an *elemental Leiblich presence* that can be perceived in their guts. This tense presence *provokes a Leiblich* reaction, that is incarnated (*embodied*)/coagulated in the actor's playing gestures by the means

<sup>16</sup> Richir, Marc, *Variations sur le sublimé et le soi*, Millon, Grenoble 2010, pp. 227–228.

of the *invoked* institutions of the shared imagination (for example the *Constant Prince*). As these gestures also affect the audience's *Leiber*, their imagination and recollection becomes active, as the affective movement of the *boundless Leib of the theatrical performance* is provoked by the *elemental intersubjective presence*. The coagulation of the perceptions cannot be performed perfectly into intelligible objects, due to the circulating affectivity that "melts" the coagulation, and amplifies the experiencing of the *elemental presence*. A similar – but more intense and inter-subjective – rhythm of inspiration is provoked, that Merleau-Ponty speaks about in the *Eye and the Mind* in the case of the painter:

We speak of 'inspiration,' and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted. We say that a human being is born the moment when something that was only virtually visible within the mother's body becomes at once visible for us and for itself. The painter's vision is an ongoing birth.<sup>17</sup>

Taking this into consideration, we could say that at that very moment when the rhythm of this inspiration and expiration becomes an unbearable "hyperventilation" (or hypercondensation), it transcends to the ecstatic and utopic experience of the sublime:

Indeed, I interpret the situation by saying that the failure of the imagination to include what overflows it to pass beyond, does not concern so much the imagination itself that the affectivity, which finds in some way a point of accumulation and hypercondensation. For me, it is the affectivity that is put in play in the moment of the sublime. In fact, there is a moment where the affectivity exceeds itself – it is what Deguy calls the "jutting out" [*ressaut*] – and that corresponds to the moment that Kant designates as attraction. Affectivity exceeds itself in something that is no longer itself, and that is in fact the absolute transcendence in infinite leak [*fuite infinie*], which introduces a gap inside the hyperdense affectivity, so that this gap begins to be schematized in what I call the diastole.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of theatrical performance, this would mean that after an ecstatically intense, chiasmic experience between the *anonym presence* and the subjects that are present in the *boundless Leib of the performance*, there is a pure, collectively lived *anonym* experience of the *ipse* (as schematization of subjectivity is suspended in

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> Richir, *L'écart et le rien*, Millon, Grenoble 2015, p. 205.

this experience). It is a utopic moment of the sublime, when the instituted schematization of perception, imagination, and recollection is suspended and a transcendental co-presence can be experienced in the concept-less schematization of the *Phantasialeib*. But as we also see, according to Richir, in the diastole of this utopic experience of sublime, there is a beginning of a new kind of schematization in the gap inserted by the absolute transcendence. In our case this means that the Other reveals itself to me as somebody other than before, or more precisely, our former intersubjective positioning reveals itself as a *transsubjective situation*: an act of symbolic *Stiftung* is happening. The moment of sublime here is a collective experience, revealing the act of *Stiftung* as the utopia of the social:

In other words, the utopia of the social is what constitutes at the same time its ‘flesh’ and its ‘vivacity’, what in German one can call its *Leiblichkeit* which is not localized anywhere but runs everywhere, gathers and distinguishes the “bodies” (*Leibkörper*) of the different “individuals” in a non-fusional unity and a non-dispersed plurality [...] <sup>19</sup>

## **2. The intentionality of theatrical performance: From the transsubjective sublime to the catharsis**

So then, a new, utopic *Leibkörper* community has been created founded on the basis of the collective experience of the sublime. To this point, the above-described phenomenalization does not appear to be something specific to theatrical performance, but rather could be the result of any collectively experienced sublime, such as a sizeable sporting event, a live concert, political gathering, etc., where the participants also collectively experience the affective overflow in the *Phantasialeib*. The main difference then is to be searched – and hopefully found – in the intentionality of the event and in the imaginary and symbolic institutions that are constituting it.

As we cited earlier, Lehmann points out that the point of divergence between theatrical performance and everyday life is, that the former is *aesthetically organized*. Since it does not have any product, what matters is the production of the *aesthetic act itself (the performing)*. According to this idea, it is reasonable to assume, that the main difference between the public event of Jackson Pollock’s action painting and an interactive devised performance, where the participants smear each other and the settings with paint would be (as they are both aesthetically organized events) that the latter does not have any product left over the event. But

<sup>19</sup> Richir, *La contingence du despote*, Payot, Paris 2014, pp. 75–76.

if one day the creators of the latter would decide to exhibit the smeared surfaces that are left over, would that transform the performance retrospectively into an action painting? We tend to say, no. But what is the main difference then? From my perspective, whereas in the case of an action painting the accent is put on the action of *painting*, in the case of the performance, the painting is also a medium of a certain *act* that is something else than painting: it is a *symbolic and imaginary act* in the pre-established symbolic and imaginary space of the performance. As we suppose this, we still have to define what is meant by the symbolic and imaginary space, and by the symbolic and imaginary act.

As I argued earlier, theatrical performance is the field of the collective practice of eidetic reduction. This implies that the phenomena appearing in the performance are perceived differently than in quotidian life. This difference tends to be the same that D.W. Winnicott describes in his book, *Playing and Reality*, concerning the difference between playing and reality:

- (b) This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world. Into this play area, the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality. (d) In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling. (e) There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, in playing the child uses the phenomena of the external world in the service of a sample of dream potential and *lives* with this sample. Thus, playing seems to be an alternative/experimental form of *living* in the sense that some of the institutions of the external world that “are not in play” are suspended, and the ones that are *in play* are also put in a different referentiality than in everyday life. We can see also that Winnicott supposes a direct connection between *shared playing* and *cultural experience*. We can say thus, that in our approach the symbolic and imaginary space of the theatrical performance is a transitional space of shared playing. Somebody (an actor, a director, a collective) offers the playful situation of: “*What if this empty space would be Dante’s Inferno, or that green paint would be blood?*”. If the spectator accepts this offer, they become the co-creator/player of the performance’s transitional space. They start to schematize the surrounding

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<sup>20</sup> Winnicott, Donald Woods, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, New York 2005, p. 69.

world, appearing phenomena differently than in the everyday life. This way, theatrical performance is not the representation of the world, but a collectively lived (shared play) dream potential of it. But what is played, or better said, *acted out* in the transitional space of a performance? What is the intentionality of this jointly performed act of playing?

We suppose that the act in question is the *act of transformation*, as Ryszard Cieślak remarks in one of his trainings: “There are personal impulses which can be incarnated in these details [of the movements – B.Zs.]. To incarnate means, to change, but not destroy them.”<sup>21</sup>

Or as Romeo Castellucci describes his series of *Tragedia Endogonia*: “The process will not be an accumulation, but rather a living transformation. A + B will not equal AB. A + B will equal C. The general structure is a sequence which includes a transmigration of forms inside itself. It will be a process of evolution.”<sup>22</sup>

To understand better, what do we mean by the *act of transformation*, we have to return once more to the earlier cited report of one of the spectators of the *Constant Prince*: “He is in a state of grace. And all around him this ‘cruel theatre’ with its blasphemies and excesses is transformed into a theatre in a state of grace.”

We can notice that words like “blasphemies” and “excesses” express, on one hand, the spectator’s onto-theological beliefs that are related to the historico-political and social institution of Christianity, and on the other hand, that what he experienced during the course of the performance was in a tensioned/conflictual relation with this institution. But we see also that as he experienced something that he later linguistically institutionalized as “*a sort of psychic illumination emanates from the actor*” and “*He [Ryszard Cieślak] is in a state of grace*,” he changed his relationship towards the earlier mentioned institution of Christianity. What we see here is that the lived experience does not ruin the whole institution, as he still schematizes it by the means of the institution’s vocabulary, but the experience radically *transforms* the schematization of the institution by ruining the iconography of it, by incorporating experienced images and memories that were excluded earlier from to the mentioned institution (as they were “blasphemies” and “excesses”). In our view, what happened here with the spectator is what László Tengelyi calls a *destinal event* in his book *The Wild Region in Life-History*:

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<sup>21</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRyLLTvs00c&list=PLg2-UPKZqnyagysFrONjyKrobAgVPGFDI&ab\\_channel=ContemporaryArtsMedia-Artfilms](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRyLLTvs00c&list=PLg2-UPKZqnyagysFrONjyKrobAgVPGFDI&ab_channel=ContemporaryArtsMedia-Artfilms), 4’24”.

<sup>22</sup> Claudia Castellucci, Romeo Castellucci, Chiara Guidi, Joe Kelleher, Nicholas Ridout, *The Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio*, Routledge, London and New York 2007, p. 32.



This is how we arrived at the concept of a radical turn in life-history, which we took as referring to a critical situation, a decisive incidence, a “fateful” or “destinal” event in life-history. This concept can be more precisely circumscribed as follows: the expression of a radical turn or destinal event in life-history designates a sense formation which starts by itself, takes place without any control, as if it happened “underground,” creating, simultaneously, a new beginning in life-history.<sup>23</sup>

We also have to notice that this destinal event could happen only between the safe circumstances of the performance, and that the *transformational act* was not performed only by a sole actor, but was the result of the full dramaturgy of the performance. It included the embodiment of many previous actions, that were provoking the audience, generating affective tension in *the boundless Leib of the performance*, by schematizing the “blasphemical” *elemental presence*, that had to be institutionalized. By this means, the *Constant Prince* could be considered a collectively performed *aesthetic and symbolic act of transformation* (and also institutionalization) of an excluded, wild and anonym elemental presence, that was intentionally affecting *the boundless Leib of the performance*. Something similar happened, that Richir describes in terms of the symbolic *Stiftung* of the state:

If [the founder of the state] founds, inaugurates, it destroys as much something of the old order, brings it to vacillate on its bases, leads the men who are following him for a new social state to the correlative threat of dissolution. A dissolution which, in the ‘moment’ of the foundation, is the dissolution of all the existing symbolic references, until the depths, the marks of the affectivity, of the feeling of life and death, of the difference between Good and Evil. This ‘moment’ is thus also that of the meeting with the formless, where the ‘moment’ and the ‘pathos’ of the sublime is played, which is, in fact, the sublime’s *Stimmung* (affective tone) – not a passion, which would already be ‘pathological,’ but one of the anonymous roots of the affectivity. Now, this ‘play,’ as Kant has well shown in the third *Critique*, puts in its turn in relation two ‘moments’: the repulsion, where appears the terror of the formless, and the attraction, where all the being, with its *Stimmung*, that is here all its affectivity, makes and elaborates the experience of the crossing of the first moment of repulsion – crossing which is, in a sense, crossing of the death, namely of the disappearance of its symbolic identity, and meeting of the symbolic being as of an enigma, not subjected to die.<sup>24</sup>

What Richir describes here as the “formless,” tends to be the same phenomenon

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<sup>23</sup> Tengelyi, László, *The Wild Region in Life-History*, Kállay Géza (transl.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2003, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Richir, *Melville. Les assises du monde*, Hachette, Paris 1996, pp. 32–33.

that we characterized earlier as the *anonym*, *elemental presence*, or the uninstitutionalized *pure phantasia*, that causes affective tension in *the boundless Leib of the performance*. We argued also that as the “meeting” with this *elemental presence* happened in the aesthetically institutionalized, transitional, and safe space of the theatrical performance, the result was a collective experience of the *sublime* and not a trauma. Thanks to the “settings” of the transitional space of theatrical performance, the excluded/formless phantasia could incarnate in the symbolic institution by destroying and re-founding it. Thus, it is an en-action/inauguration of an *aesthetic foundation (Stiftung)*, and as such, is a *live act (praxis) of transformation* performed collectively, and not a representation of an act, a *mimesis praxeos*.

As catharsis in its Aristotelian sense is nothing else than the phenomenon which “through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions”<sup>25</sup>, we tend to think that what happened in the case of the *Constant Prince* was not an isolated phenomenon, but an instance of that which reoccurs every time there is a *cathartic mo(ve)ment* in the *boundless Leib of theatrical performance*.

Thus, we claim that the intentionality of the event of *theatrical performance* is the *act of aesthetic foundation (Stiftung)* of the evoked symbolical and imaginary institutions of the phenomenal community (the *boundless Leib of theatrical performance*). This *Stiftung* is the result of the catharsis, which is the sublimation of the affectivity caused by the elemental/anonym presence.

By this means theatrical performance (when it results in the mo(ve)ment of catharsis) is also the act of incarnation of the *encroachment of the intersubjective invisible* in the *Flesh* of the visible world, rediscovering its unicity, in the sense the Merleau-Ponty describes in one of the worknotes of *The Visible and the Invisible*:

The sensibility of the others is “the other side” of their aesthesio’ logical body. And I can surmise this other side, *Nichturpräsentierbar*, through the articulation of the other’s body on my sensible, an articulation that does not empty me, that is not a hemorrhage of my “consciousness,” but on the contrary redoubles me with an alter ego. The other is born in the body (of the other) by an overhanging of that body, its investment in a *Verhalten*, its interior transformation which I witness. The coupling of the bodies, that is, the adjustment of their intentions to one sole *Erfüllung*, to one sole wall they run into from two sides, is latent in the consideration of one sole sensible world, open to participation by all, which is given to each. The unicity of the visible world, and, by encroachment, the invisible world, such as it presents itself in the rediscovery of the

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<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b

vertical Being, is the solution of the problem of the “relations between the soul and the body.”<sup>26</sup>

Driven from this inspiration, I suppose that theatrical performance is a collectively performed aesthetical and symbolical act of transformation that “sublimates” the *invisible wall* which separates the regions of the visible world, resulting in the re-discovery of the “vertical Being,” or as Romeo Castellucci would say, “an individual epiphany.”<sup>27</sup> Although, when I use the words “vertical Being” or “epiphany,” I must clarify that by doing so, I do not want to suppose a *Geist* or a God, but a purely *Leiblich* experience of *the absolute transcendence*, the same way Richir describes in *L'écart et le rien*:

In my opinion, anything that language can produce in relation to pure absolute transcendence is a mere simulacrum. And that is the reason why I don't really understand what religious experience is – I don't know what it is! It is that absolute transcendence is radically different: it is peculiarly unimaginable, incomprehensible; and even if I manage to imagine it, it is only possible insofar as it has always been and will always be leaked [fui]. This is the reason why absolute transcendence cannot be God; for it has no relation to humanity, and no relation to affectivity: it is a part of affectivity which is lost in all affectivity, and about which affectivity itself can say nothing at all – not to mention that affectivity does not speak, that affectivity is nothing but the blind and innocent instinct of “life” [vivre] to “live” [vivre] (it speaks only when it is modulated into a linguistic schematism driven to seek one meaning or another).<sup>28</sup>

Comparing this with the notion of the *invisible wall* that Merleau-Ponty remarks in the earlier quoted passage, I tend to think that what I called the elemental/*anonym presence*, is the manifestation of an invisible and unschematisable (*Nichturpräsentierbar*) presence *in between* the *Leiber* of the participants of the theatrical performance. A presence that creates attraction and repulsion, though it cannot be incarnated in the bodies of the *subjects* of the social institution. Thus, due to the affectivity of this presence, the imaginary/symbolic border that separates the *elemental presence* from the institution starts to be visible/tangible causing *spasmodic/systolic* reactions (schematized as fear, anger, etc.) in the *Leib* of the subjects. In that moment when this spasm becomes unbearable, the tension cracks the wall of

<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup> “Theatre is an individual epiphany, so I have no control over the audience's reactions.” Laera, Margherita, “Comedy, Tragedy and ‘Universal Structures’, Societas Raffaello Sanzio's Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso”, in *TheatreForum*, No. 36, 2009, 3–15, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Richir, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–210.

the institution and a free, uninstitutionalized movement (a shout, a laugh, a burst into tears) of the *Leib* happens in the *un-subjected co-presence* (*ipseité*). In the *diastole* of the experience, in between the ruins of the institution, begins a new way of schematization. Thus, the *act of transformation* of theatrical performance is the collectively performed forbidden action provoked by the *elemental presence*, the *hybris* that tears down the invisible imaginary/symbolic walls of the actual social institution, that forbids the performing of several acts to its *subjects*.

From this perspective, *theatrical performance* is a place of inter- and trans-subjective aesthetic revolution, or evolution, a virtual/ dream possibility of the *Mitsein*, or as Augusto Baal offers, the *rehearsal of the (r)evolution*:

In so doing the spectators purge themselves of their tragic flaw – that is, of something capable of changing society. A catharsis of the revolutionary impetus is produced! Dramatic action substitutes for real action. Brecht's poetics is that of the enlightened vanguard: the world is revealed as subject to change, and the change starts in the theatre itself, for the spectator does not delegate power to the characters to think in his place, although he continues to delegate power to them to act in his place. The experience is revealing on the level of consciousness, but not globally on the level of the action. Dramatic action throws light upon real action. The spectacle is a preparation for action. The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action! Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Baal, Augusto, *Theatre of the oppressed*, Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer (trans.), Pluto Press, London 2008, p. 135.