

# The Politics of Performance and the Temporality of representation

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Perhaps no truth is more evident than that works of art inhabit a midworld, caught somewhere between the reality of lived experience and the forms of representation, between signified and signifier, nature and artifice. This characteristic of art has been described in manifold ways, from the Greeks to the present, largely producing more consternation than illumination. The ancient quarrel of which Socrates speaks between poetry and philosophy, juxtaposes a triumphant philosophical reason against activities of storytelling in relation to which the supremacy of sense and clarity over agon and duplicity is unintelligible. One must choose sides without reservation in this ancient quarrel in order to claim rational superiority for philosophy over art. Those who would today renew this quarrel, repudiating the supremacy of propositional reason, may be said to seek to inhabit a midworld, resisting all efforts to repress it. It is the region in which order and intelligibility are in question, the region between representation and truth, style and substance.

That all who love art are fascinated by the middle region it occupies has not led to uniformity in its characterization. The most famous expression of the doubling of art is to be found in Kant's third *Critique*, where on the side of taste art is caught between pleasure and delight, purpose and purposiveness, end and finality; on the side of genius is caught between the establishment of rules and their abrogation; on the side of imagination is caught between freedom and repetition; on the side of the sublime is caught between representation and excess; on the side of judgment is caught between the artifice of nature and the naturalness of art. In our century, the doubling of language has become the metonymic model for all these other doublings: the midworld of the sign.

These doubled moments of artistic representation embody most contemporary understandings of the midworlds of art, and have served as paradigms for other images of the middle region that inhabit the central writings of "postmodernism"-- in Derrida and Foucault, for example, but also in Hegel, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's earlier work, art is caught between Apollo and Dionysus. In his later work, truth inhabits the midworld of power and will. In Hegel, tragedy occupies the midworld of circularity that Spirit eventually makes its home. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," this middle region is inscribed between earth and world.<sup>1</sup>

What is important in these different views of the midworlds of art is not so much what it is caught between, nor even how the middle regions are to be understood or experienced, but the idea of "betweenness" itself. Whether, as much of the tradition has suggested, human experience is caught between the finite and the infinite, or whether finiteness itself is caught between representation and embodiment, the "between" is the region occupied by art; if not art alone. In this role, art serves to remind us of the neighbourhoods in which we are both most at home yet feel most homeless.

Art is not alone within this middle region, nor does it present it to us uniquely. Virtually all the writings that are called "postmodern"-- where modernity pertains to the Enlightenment and empirical science more than to our century's music and art--extend their reach to this middle region. A striking example is found in Foucault:

. . . between the already "encoded" eye and reflexive knowledge there is a middle region which liberates order itself: . . . This middle region, then, in so far as it makes manifest the modes of being of order, can be posited as the most fundamental of all: anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures, . . . in every culture, between the use of what one might call the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being.<sup>2</sup>

Setting aside the emphasis on purity and fundamentality, possible expressions of a foundational movement even in a thought that would occupy a space between fundament and surface, we find a striking image of a historical thought that seeks to inhabit the region between representations and the order that they represent. Historical reflection is as

caught up in this between as is poetry-caught up along with poetry. Elsewhere Foucault defines a divided image of power; power is everywhere, divided by resistances.<sup>3</sup>

Another sense of the between is described by Heidegger in connection with language, using the imagery of art:

This unity of the being of language for which we are looking we shall call the design . . . . To design is to cut a trace. Most of us know the word "sign" only in its debased meaning--lines on a surface. But we make a design also when we cut a furrow into the soil to open it to seed and growth. The design is the whole of the traits of that drawing which structures and prevails throughout the open, unlocked freedom of language. The design is the drawing of the being of language, the structure of a show in which are joined the speakers and their speaking: what is spoken and what of it is unspoken in all that is given in the speaking.<sup>4</sup>

The betweenness of language lie within:

The being of language;  
The language of being.<sup>5</sup>

This theme is continued by Gadamer in one form, by Derrida in another. We may follow Foucault to say that it is the midworld occupied by representation and order. That language is so much part of our experience entails that it occupies the region between humanity and whatever defines its limits, whether that be the infinite, the conditions of representability, or the ideal. In this sense, language occupies the same space as nothing and difference, the conditions of representation. Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida all identify this space with time. Lyotard refuses it such an identification, keeping it firmly planted between the representable and unrepresentable.<sup>6</sup>

To those who understand this middle region as defining something fundamental, even essential, to human experience, whether a reflection of its finiteness or subjectivity, its temporality, or simply a denial of any foundations, in relation even to humanity, it is crucial to be able both to experience and think within this middle region, within

middleness "itself," whether of time as such, rather than of what occupies time, or of difference itself, rather than of its poles. The appeal to art on the one hand and to a "postmodern" sense of history on the other, are attempts to escape from a tradition thought blind to its own contingencies, especially to the circular contingencies in the representation of representation.

The image of a middle region in which the conditions of representation may be thought suggests the further image of the naming of the conditions of naming--more precisely, naming what is at stake in language. By analogy, it is as if we were to be able to define what is at stake in art despite--or even because of--its capacity to transcend any definition, to redefine what is a stake, as if we were to define the essence of a humanity that denatured every essence while still forced to accept the contingencies of its historicity. The analogies here among art, humanity, and language are compelling: at once a historicity whose meaning is conditioned by the contingent facts of cultural experience and a surplus in every meaning that pertains to every condition. I identify it with the finiteness of every finite, the limits of every limit. The middle region that art, humanity, and language occupy is at the limit of limitation. Only by understanding the capacity of humanity to occupy this space of aporia can we understand the nature of life and art.

The aporias in this region are many; I will discuss but a few of them. Yet there is so to speak a "greater" aporia: that of this region itself. In Kant, the sublime is the presentation of the unrepresentable, an unconditioned upon which the entire architectonic of the system rests. It lies within the very fabric of his view of reason that there must be the thought of an unconditioned that cannot be thought, a knowledge that cannot be known. If we depart from his sense of the unconditioned, we cannot continue to speak of *an* unconditioned, of *a* limit to representation. Rather, the surplus and middle region both invade every representation and are dispersed throughout them. It is for this reason that Foucault can say that power is *everywhere*, divided by resistances. In Derrida and Heidegger, there is a more Kantian sense of the specific--almost named--site of the interior: the ontological difference or the arche-trace: *differance* itself.

The philosophic question is of the "itself." The middle region occupied by art, humanity, and language is not a place, but must be inhabited, is nothing, but must be experienced and thought as deeply as possible. To these images of the between *itself*, I would reply that since it is everywhere,

it is thought in every thought, represented in every representation (if only by its absence). It has never been and cannot be forgotten, but it cannot be thought completely either. There is an inexhaustibility to thought and being that is manifested as a surplus in the most ordinary of beings. This is the terrain of art. The midworld that it occupies is that of the sameness and difference that define representation. Sameness and difference are the complementary poles that together define inexhaustibility.

There is another image of the terrain of art--and of humanity and language as well, indeed, of every form of being as well as spirit--that avoids any suggestion of an unsituated site: not of a middle region but of the doubling of every site, multiple locality. Every being occupies many locations, at once--its inexhaustibility--but every being is local: located and locating. Art and language are not unique in this multiplicity, but in their capacity to represent their own multiplicity in multiple ways: to represent inexhaustibility inexhaustibly. Not only does this doubling (also tripling, quadrupling, etc.) not commit us to the between itself, but it allows the reflexivity of representation to function not only within, but without, not only in the aporias of the between but in the constellations of reflexivity that comprise the ethereal regions of spirit--representation and representation of representation. This is the terrain of art, to present the inexhaustibility in presentation as inexhaustible locality: the "worlding of multiple worlds."

If works of art occupy a middle region, and if this middle region is the essence of art--essentially to have no essence--then the suggestion to be considered is that particular arts and their works are distinguished (and therefore related) by the ways in which they differentiate--by the different middles they inhabit and the relationships of betweenness they define. We may note, then, that if time is the difference that defines the middle region of representation, then performance arts occupy a doubled (perhaps tripled and more) relationship to time, inhabit a more complex temporality than the other arts: they are in and of time as well as inhabiting its difference. They occupy different times at least twice, not only in the presence of the work at different historical sites, but in different performances. Borrowing Plato's extraordinary image of the doubled distance from truth inherent in the mimetic function of pictorial art, but emphasizing the midworld of mimesis rather than its reproductiveness, we may say that performances in dance, drama, and

music, even the reading of poetry, occupy a more complex, perhaps even "greater" representational distance than where the original work of art can be presented again rather than re-presented through different performances. The life of the performance work lies in the temporality of its productions. Here the capacity of dramatic works to be read as well as performed--their almost autonomous artistic lives--engenders another doubling that enriches the presence of such works in unmatched ways.

To this we may add that *praxis* inhabits an analogous relationship to times' between, a relationship absent from other forms of representation. Practice takes place at different times and is meaningful in different times that pertain profoundly to the intelligibility of the events in which it took place. One of the reasons why Foucault is mistakenly called a nihilist is that the region he occupies is almost entirely historical. His genealogical and archaeological methods are ways of thinking historically of the underlying conditions of the order of historical representation. The future remains an absolute abyss: the space of *praxis*.

I wish to address in my remaining time the particular midworlds or localities of performance art and their relation to *praxis*. I wish to examine the analogy inherent in the temporal and representational multiplicity that pertains to politics and performance. Let me begin with the question of what may be meant by performance art. Clearly, every work of art occupies the time of its presentation, engages us in an event inhabiting time and space. Clearly as well, there are performing arts--aleatory improvisational, conceptual, singular -- in which no work is performed: the performance is the only work. A similar distinction can be made between a work produced by an artist that is performed by others and a work that is presented in an event of performance. The principle is one of sameness and repetition, and there are two kinds of performed works: one in which *the work* is performed, and may be performed again; the other in which the only work is the performance, and it can never be performed again. There are performances that are re-presentations of a work; there are performances that are presentations of a non-re-presentable work.

A performance is the presentation of a work in an event occupying a doubled time and space--that of the performers and that of the audience--in which the distinction between the work as material object and the work as presented collapses. In the presentation of a work of plastic art, the work retains its integrity within the event of presentation--for example, in the commemoration of a public work consecrating those who died in a battle. The work and the ceremony coexist, but the work

inhabits a larger world in which it may be presented recurrently. The possibility of recurrence for such a work lies in its reality as a material object. In a performance of Hamlet, the tangible presence of the play is to be found only in performances (or readings), while the performed play occupies the doubled event of performance. What distinguishes a textual reading from a performance is the doubling of lived experience pertaining to the latter. A work of cinema is not a performance to the extent that the tangible reality of the film outstrips the event of presentation. The autonomy of the work beyond its presentations is what Benjamin calls its "aura" (though he does not identify it with its materiality).<sup>7</sup> I am concerned here with the relationship of performances both to works that have an aura and where no work exists that could possess an aura. I am particularly concerned with the aura of a work that exists only in its representations--in performance and conceptual works.

Performance works comprise two groups, in one of which an autonomous work is performed, and in relation to which each performance is another presentation of that work--its re-presentation, in the other of which there is no work other than the performance. There are in this sense imitative and original performance works.

The works that are repeatedly performed include the greatest known. To say this, however, is to adopt a masterpiece view of art, and there are artists and critics today who find in "postmodernism" an important movement away from masterpiece theory. Art is where you find it, not in works that possess sublime grandeur. Without taking a stand here on this controversial subject, I wish to explore an important side of the negative view. It is a concern with the politics of performance as a consequence of the temporality of representation.

Two observations are in order, one that performance works, especially drama, are sites at which many radical political movements congregate, forms of opposition to oppression; the other that there is security for a regime of power in the repetitions of traditional works that no longer threaten in the present moment. These two moments, together, suggest a tension unique to performance arts despite analogies in the canon, archive, and museum of tensions involving repetition and transformation.

On the side of the security within the sameness of representation lies the aura of the authenticity of the performance--a notion quite different from the authenticity of the original work of plastic art. Goodman calls the latter "autographic": the work does not serve as model for repetition.<sup>8</sup>

By way of contrast, an "allographic" work is one that lends itself to repetition in a multiplicity of renditions. Goodman addresses only the question of how notation can define the identity conditions of a performance: the question of what makes a performance "correct. The question of *authenticity* in performance is quite different, neither that of correctness--all the notes but perhaps none of the brio--nor that of the singularity of the work--the one and only original work. No performance can be the original (even where there is such a work). Authenticity in performance is something different.

Some might respond that the idea of authenticity cannot be defended in relation to a performance where the original work cannot be tangibly present, representative of its time and place. Concerns with period and style may be responded to in manifold ways, none of which confers unequivocal authority in relation to how the work is authentically to be performed. Moreover there is the inescapable fact of the public life of any work or text: to be adopted by any family and given any upbringing. Whatever canons are violated by extreme performances, they do not define authenticity though they may define good taste. Yet despite these considerations and controversies, we do speak of authenticity in performance. It is a way of defining the tradition in which a work is to be performed.

Authenticity, like canonicity, conforms to a principle of repetition conjoined with variation. One of the revolutionary consequences of recording technology is that new resources have been made available to the performer for defining authenticity: the performance is retained on tape or film as if it were the original. The corresponding loss is the aura of the work. It passes into the aura of the performance, particularly striking in the case of popular music, whose works in the past either were incorporated into monuments or passed away from the current scene. There are now original works and original performances, all preserved as if their own authenticity were at stake. Repetition is now both essential to performance and made impossible, since every important performance is recorded somewhere, and its repetition is plagiarism. (A similar trend may be noted in politics, where repetition passes into plagiarism to the extent that recording technology confers legitimacy on authenticity.)

At the other end of this spectrum lie performed works that have no models, to which no concept of authenticity can apply. We come to the very heart of performance in a tradition. The idea of authenticity canonically defines the tradition. Authenticity defines the archive even



in arts where there is no work except as performed. Corresponding to the forgery is the plagiarized performance; corresponding to the inept reproduction is the inauthentic performance. The performance thus inhabits the tradition in its own divided way, at once representative of the original and an original itself, possessing its own aura. I am speaking of occurrences such as the preservation of recordings of Toscanini performances as monuments themselves with traits of originality and authenticity. It is not merely collector's idiosyncracies that define the authenticity of recordings. It is not, as Adorno suggests, merely the fetish character of high capitalism, supported by the recording technology of late capitalism.<sup>9</sup> It is as much the multiplicity inherent in the idea a tradition, voraciousness pertaining to the circularity of representation, that impels a technology capable of turning on itself to do so in the form of art. To be able to preserve performances on tape or film is to inhabit another midworld, between the life of the medium and the life of the work. In this midworld we find the nature of both authenticity and tradition, not an essence pertaining to masterpieces and monuments, but the circularity of every representation, magnified in the repetitiveness of performance.

The idea of belonging to a tradition and the idea of authenticity are inseparable. In the repetitiveness of form and structure lies the preservation of a tradition; in the departures from the sameness of repetition lies the enrichment of the tradition. Stability in a tradition rests on a sense of originality whose repetitions define the preservation of a tradition and whose departures define its enduring presence. That the notion of preservation is so strong in our sense of a tradition presents us with a continuing tension inherent in the capacity of a tradition to appear to close upon itself.

If we now consider the role of performance art in controlled societies we may see a role for tradition that runs counter to its capacity to transform itself: a capacity to conserve itself through the aura of authenticity. There is, in virtually all controlled societies, an emphasis upon works of performance, upon the development of remarkable performance skills that at once conserve a tradition and consecrate its monuments. Performance art is, here the great conservator, playing the role archivist in the guise of the vitality of lived experience. In the museum, we confront the work in *its* originality. Its aura belongs to it alone. In the library the book stands completely for its original, lacking the surplus that makes the present relevant to it. What intercedes in both

cases is our capacity for interpretation, It is what brings the archived work into our present.

We use the same word, "interpretation." to describe performance. There is the analogy of bringing the established work into our present through its performance. Yet there is a striking difference, lying in the autonomous aura of the performance. There is a constant tension in performance concerning authenticity. It is found within the vicissitudes of the critical discussions in music about period instruments, the recapturing of lost techniques, the importance of prior norms. It is found in the repeated discussions about the legitimacy of a particular rendering of *Hamlet*. It is present in the striking capacity of certain performing artists to transform our sensibilities and expectations: Glenn Gould's performances of the Bach *Partitas*, delicate renderings of the *Appassionata*, dreamlike renderings not of *Midsummer's Night* but of *Lear*.

The looming presence in all arts of the question of authenticity, even where the original work cannot be presented to us except in performance, may suggest certain contingent features either of Western industrial societies or of our historical epoch. Have there not been cultures--Australian aboriginal, medieval Church art--for which the idea of authenticity was marginal at best? The answer I believe is that such cultures express their own sense of tradition in what they understand to be authentic and what they understand authenticity to be. If not the paintings of Christ, then his teachings demand concern for authenticity. And if there is little concern with authenticity in aboriginal and Balinese art, then there is equally little concern for a unified tradition. More accurately, no doubt, there is a different concern for history and a different sense of tradition. *Our* understanding of tradition is deeply involved with question of authenticity.

If the meaning of tradition is inseparable from the question of authenticity, and if the question of authenticity pertains to performed works in a unique way, to the performances as well as to the works performed, and if there is a corresponding role in political practice for both tradition and ceremony--akin to performance--then there may be expected a close analogy in the relationship of both art and practice to tradition. It is essential in a closed society that deviation be controlled, custom: whether externally or internally, overtly, or covertly, by force or by each a manifestation of power. The role of art in such a society, where equally under central control, must be the mirror image of the political

structure. This mirror image is the traditional performance, analogous to the repetition in practice of the forms of political representation, doubled by the repetition in performance of the forms of artistic representation. The rituals and ceremonies that define the social fabric, that manifest the order of power in its most palatable form, are analogous to if not identical with the rituals and ceremonies of performance art. Thus, coronations are marked by anthems and marches, great wars produce their dramas; dance frequently celebrates the accepted order of society.

In such societies, where the constellations of power issue in domination, but where the question of legitimacy is fundamental, it will inevitably depend on enduring tradition. Such a society will manifest itself in repetition in its claims to legitimation, in its scholarly forms and in its performances and celebrations. Here novelty in performances of ceremonial works like anthems and requiems is in the service of repetition: the reestablishment and reconstitution of authority. This is not to say that all authoritarian societies legitimate themselves through tradition: some work by brute force and power. But they cannot then be regarded as legitimate. Legitimacy in a contingent, historical world requires appeals to history. Here art and practice mirror each other, repetitions of a golden age.

The monumental in art and practice is not the only form to be taken by ceremony and celebration. There are performances of established works and established public ceremonies to legitimate power. There are also performances of new works--mirror images of new consolidations of power. More important, there are performances without works, just as there are characters in search of authors and political practices without legitimacy. There is, in "postmodernism"'s rejection of canonicity a political agenda, not to establish another canon, still within the sphere of power, but rejection of the very idea of tradition, with its inherent glorification of authority through repetition, and with it the idea of legitimation.

Another repetition is to be found within the technological roots of cultural "postmodernism," the fragmentation of the authorial subject: repetition through dispersal. There is no escape from repetition--the sameness in difference--nor escape from tradition or the subject. There is similarly no escape from the work in a recording culture, but rather the presence of works everywhere. Every performance becomes its own work, asserting claims of authenticity, absurd in a culture in which no works possess the aura of originality. Where originality is everywhere there is

no pedalpoint of repetition upon which difference can manifest itself. In the most repetitious and traditional performances, there are the moments of departure--in character, voice, or stance--that enliven performances beyond the vitality of static works. Even so, this interplay of sameness and difference that constitutes the play of art, the revelation of inexhaustibility, retains its traditional nature, and does not thereby face its own midworld--its inexhaustibility. Where the inexhaustibility of art and life are confronted in a piety of questioning the very stability of the work through its manifold performances is a threat to the radical thrust performances in time.

Time is essential to performances as it is not to works that are produced in time but do not revel in it through the temporality of performances. Here the temporality of performance is the historicity of re-presentation: repetition. The presence of an unknown and uncharted future, pregnant with a promise for which the past is an enigma, is a radical theme in every performance that threatens dissolution. The transitoriness of any historical past is evident in the transitoriness of performed works, under the pressure of historical and cultural differences.

The interplay of authenticity and departure that defines a tradition is mirrored in the interplay of authenticity and variation that defines performance. The temporality of performance is its political nature: the promise of a transformed future. The transition from a canonical tradition in which authenticity is central to a tradition that endures without authenticity is a mirror of the movement from a society in which norms are all to a society without enduring norms. There is the absence of norms without chaos, the presence of ceremony without imitation. There is the loss of the intensity defined by what endures through a tradition by means of its variations. There is the gain inherent in the artistic awareness of the region occupied by human experience.

We can understand here the contrasting presence in the dramatic tradition--if not in music and dance--of works that challenge the fabric of social order. The temporality of representation moves forward as well as back although the repetitiveness of performance has only historical movement. The concern with authenticity in both work and performance is an archival movement while the question of the future defines *praxis*. It follows that authenticity and canonicity present us with a dubious answer to the inescapable question of how we are to relate to our future--an answer given by preservation of the past. The natural response

by artists and critics for whom the future is the central question is then to repudiate the masterpiece tradition, even tradition itself, repudiating with it the focus upon the artist and the originality of the work.

In this context, within performance arts, the aura of authenticity that surrounds both performances and works performed is as much a political as an aesthetic condition: a relation to the future by reconstituting the past. The idea of a discontinuous history, found in Foucault and Lyotard, is a political sense of both work and practice. Its representation apart from history itself, lies in our representation of both authenticity and canonicity, And it is within performance arts that we find mirrored in an especially acute way the representations that define authenticity, doubled in relation to historical time: to past and future. The sense of authenticity in performance doubles the sense of preservation of the past, making even more abyssal our relationship to the future.

Several solutions have evolved to this predicament, whereby we must establish a relationship to a future that may be inauthentically related to the past. One is the repudiation of authenticity in performance. Rather, performances of established works, like translations--which face the same representational difficulties of sameness and difference--belong to the present and future more than to the past. Even this response is limited, however, since it lacks a strong enough sense of historical discontinuity. It has the virtue of facing the past amidst an urgent concern with avoiding its entrapments. A second solution is the repudiation of the canonical tradition, emphasizing even in performance present and future works. This solution must be regarded in the extreme as more political than artistic, but it emphasizes the divided temporality that belongs to representation. A third solution is still more extreme, rejecting the repetitiveness of performance for the presentation of singular works that live only in performance. Performance arts become events never to be repeated. The absurdity of a work that ceases to be a work upon performance mirrors the absurdity of a present that immediately ceases to be present upon the emergence of activity within it. There is a temporality to performance that express a pervasive structure of the politics of representation,

An irony of contemporary recording technology is that it makes such an evanescent art of performance entirely in vain. This is I believe, the fundamental paradox in the emergence of a performance art that

repudiates repetition: the performance either ceases to be relevant in any present or is recorded, thereby taking on the repeatable aura of the singular work. We may regard this development as another way in which technology enslaves us, overshadows our historicity, Alternatively, we may regard it as a way in which the truth of history imposes itself on every attempt to escape its materiality, every attempt to sever representation from power,

The transformation of a work that would have no tangible historical presence into an enduring work for which questions of authenticity and repetition are inevitable--wherever recording technology emerges: witness the questions raised today by colorization--is a mirror of a deeper political truth than the work itself may recognize: that the gap between past and future resists control on all its sides--on the side of preservation, the discontinuities of tradition; on the side of revolution, the irresistibility of repetition. The inexhaustible surplus that pervades human life and thought, and that is manifested intensely in art, threatens to dissolve the very fabric of art, a mirror of the dissolution of the tradition--as well as of every form of dissolution--that characterizes political reality.

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