Theater Technology and the Shifting Aesthetic

In 1992 the rock group They Might Be Giants issued a compact disc entitled *Apollo 18*. It consisted of seventeen tracks ranging from about one minute to three and a half minutes in length, plus an additional twenty-one tracks of one to ten seconds each. In at least one regard I think this particular work was as revolutionary as the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was in 1967. (I realize that for someone of my generation that is a blasphemous, heretical statement.)

Sgt. Pepper was significant not only for its music but because it announced the arrival of the "concept album" in which all the songs were woven together in what appeared to be a seamless whole. It laid the groundwork for rock operas while sounding the death knell for old-style rock 'n' roll. Now, from a musical standpoint, *Apollo 18* broke little ground. Its tunes have not entered broad public consciousness, and the performers never became pop icons. But on the liner notes for this album was the notation, "The indexing of this disc is designed to complement the Shuffle Mode of modern CD players." In other words, this CD was to be played in an electronically determined random order; pure chance was to replace conceptual organization. This is the antithesis of *Sgt. Pepper*. Not only are we—the artists—it seems to say, *not* determining the order in which you hear this music, but every hearing of it will be different (up to the statistical limits, whatever that might be). If modernism is typified by a sense of a beautiful whole or aesthetic unity, then *Apollo 18* was a stunning declaration of postmodernism with its elements of rupture, dissociation, and pastiche. More significantly, however, for the first time in history that I am aware of, an artist working in the popular culture, willingly, even eagerly, relinquished control of the reading and apprehension of the work of art. It may

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be argued that the order in which one listens to the tracks on a pop music album is irrelevant, but the fact is that the artists lay down the tracks in a certain order. In the days of that ancient medium of vinyl records or tape, skipping tracks or rearranging the playing order was difficult and could even damage the recording. So, like any good vaudeville show, popular songs were programmed strategically to make sure that you would listen to the whole album. But with the advent of CDs and shuffle mode, the listening audience has been subverting intentional order. From an aesthetic standpoint, this probably has little effect; shuffle mode is mostly employed for dance music or background listening, not for a serious session with *Parsifal,* but it is, nonetheless, a conscious alteration of the artist's intent. In this, John Cage's desire to free the audience from authorial manipulation seems to have been achieved on some level.

Now, let me fantasize about what I might do in this electronic playland. With my multidisc CD player I can arbitrarily mix (or purposefully program) tracks from, say, Miles Davis, the Rolling Stones, Beethoven's Ninth, klezmer music, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. While this is playing in the background I get on the World Wide Web and download an image of Leonardo's *Last Supper* that I then proceed to alter by replacing the heads of the disciples with those of the 1996 New York Yankees, whom, let us imagine, I have also downloaded from the Yankees' home page. I then change the whole color palette and send the new image to a friend in China. Next I retire to my "home entertainment center" to watch movies—perhaps some Buster Keaton, *Casablanca,* and Antonioni's *The Passenger*. At various moments I freeze the image, reverse, forward frame by frame, zoom in, adjust the color, change the quality and volume of the sound. I could go on. My version of cyberhell, of course, belies my old-fogeyness both in terms of the content I have chosen and my lack of imagination in terms of what to do with it. The term *polymorphous perversity* pales as an attempt to describe the possibilities of this universe.

But I think it serves to make the point that our relationship to art is in the process of a rapid and radical shift. We used to be trapped in a spatiotemporal framework controlled by the artist and, to a degree, by the producer. To see a work of visual art, for example, I had to go to a museum or at least look in a book, which meant access to a library or bookstore. To see a movie I had to wait for it to appear at a movie theater or on television—in either case, I had to be available at the designated time. A movie seen once might never be seen again. If it became a "classic," it might show up at a revival house, but if not, it was relegated to the vaults of memory. Today, however, I can see virtually any image, read any text, and hear any sound at

any time and in almost any place. More importantly, I can rip these works of art out of their frames and restructure them, retexture them, refashion them to suit my taste or my perverse sensibilities. Art is no longer an artist's creation to be seen, observed, savored, pondered, analyzed, critiqued, or even reviled by an audience. It is raw material for the private amusement and constructions of consumers functioning in isolation from each other.

Musical sampling is perhaps the most obvious and blatant example of this phenomenon. Fragmentary quotations of a musical composition are captured—can we say stolen? enslaved? is borrowed, appropriated, or acquired more correct?—and become compositional units within a new piece. This is not the same thing as quoting a motif as homage or inspiration; it is an announcement that the tone, timbre, texture, style, structure, in fact, the very originality of one artist is mere fodder for another. All work is equal; all work is equally available.

Theater, at least by any standard definition, still requires an audience to assemble at a particular place, and time and the ability of the spectators to exert any control over the performance is almost nonexistent; so how does this particular discussion of new technology relate to theater? I would argue that the relationship of technology to the theater is neither direct nor obvious. The mere addition of video monitors or remote tilt-and-pan spotlights—the typical sort of nods toward modern technology in the theater—does not, in and of itself, create new forms of theater. Technology, rather, alters our perceptual mechanisms; it changes the way we see and, more importantly, the way we think. An example may be drawn from one of the landmark American theatrical designs of the last half century, Robin Wagner's setting for *A Chorus Line* in 1975. It consisted entirely of a white line on the floor (and a black surround), capped by a stunning exclamation point of Mylar mirrors in the final scene. To arrive at that apparently simple design took an enormous amount of work and thought, a process of stripping away all that was not essential. In terms of theatrical design I believe it ranks along with John Cage's *4'33"* and Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting* as revolutionary way stations on the highway of twentieth-century art; it forced a whole reconsideration of the role and function of design and even the visual and spatial properties of the stage. Yet to the casual observer, the design's utter simplicity, other than that last scene, was decidedly "low tech." It was, nonetheless a result of technology. It was a reflection of a new sensibility in which notions of beauty were informed by the aesthetics of technology. This was an era in which sleek exteriors hid miniaturized—and therefore seemingly simplified—technology whose external form no longer gave a hint as to its function. Stereos were housed in matte black boxes or

sleek chrome, automobiles were stripped of extravagance and anything that protruded or that appeared merely decorative, buildings were covered in a skin of glass—often dark or reflective. Power came from the invisible. We entered the era of ostentatious nonostentation. High tech and minimalism were one and the same. *A Chorus Line* came almost exactly midway between the first man on the moon and the first personal computer. The white line was not only a barrier to be crossed by would-be chorus members but a threshold of a new technological era.

Too often today producers or directors believe that it takes modern artifacts to make a modern production. This goes back at least to the projections used by Erwin Piscator in the 1920s as well as to the contrivances of nineteenth-century melodrama, not to mention the seventeenth-century machine plays of the French stage. More recently it has shown up in the use of video in theater. In the 1987 London production of *Chess,* for example, also designed by Robin Wagner, two walls of video monitors presented the audience with a panoply of shifting images. They served as an occasionally pleasant distraction from an otherwise unspectacular musical, but they seemed to be little more than a gimmick. For the typical audience, this was simply a reminder of the far more sophisticated world of technology that existed right outside the theater doors. (It should be noted that in the original conception of director Michael Bennett the monitors were a crucial part of the overall concept and the stage was starkly bare. When Bennett became ill, Trevor Nunn took over and introduced furniture and a more literal sensibility into the production. He retained the video monitors but never used them conceptually.)

Piccadilly Circus or Times Square, the Strip in Las Vegas, the Ginza in Tokyo, sections of Hong Kong and Seoul are blazing infernos of brilliant, moving light and images that shift as fast as an eye can blink. In an era in which images from the David Letterman show could be projected over Times Square on the Diamond Vision screen, and then an image of that image rebroadcast to millions of homes on television, thereby creating reverberations of images and audiences, how can a pathetic bank of monitors on a theatrical stage do anything except remind an audience of what it—the stage—is not. At best it is an example of "gee whiz naturalism," as when an actor turns the faucet on the onstage kitchen sink and water comes out and we are somehow awestruck. We are amazed at the banality. Technology on the stage is actually an enactment of absence—it reminds us of the unseen world that now comprises our everyday experience.

If current generations live in a world barraged by overwhelming light, sound, and movement and a dizzying array of mediated imagery, then no

wonder the theater, with its simplicity, cannot attract new audiences. The most elaborate Broadway spectacle cannot compete with the technology right outside the theater door in Times Square. But again, it is not merely a matter of fast-paced images or technical gizmos—it is a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing. In semiotics one talks of the reader's or viewer's "competence." You must be able to recognize a sign in order to read it. The stereotypical individual who goes to a museum of modern art or an avant-garde play and responds to the work by saying, "That's not art" or "That's not theater," is not merely expressing conservative taste. Such a "reader" is literally incapable of decoding the sign structure and therefore is incapable of recognizing it as a form of art. Theater, by definition, requires the interaction between a live actor and a live audience. It is time-bound and space-bound. No matter how fast it moves, it is slower than the cyberkinetic world in which it precariously lives. We have audiences who are no longer competent, a generation of spectators who, when they see theater, do not recognize what they are seeing. The question, then is not simply *what* can be done about this, but whether anything *should* be done about this. In other words, does one reeducate the audience or reeducate the theatrical creators?

Part of this inability to see comes from a radical shift in the structure of our worldview, a structure now informed by technology. Most theater is still constructed on a linear model, something akin to what the late French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called an arboreal model—a structure, like a tree, based on roots and branches—that is, a hierarchical model in which everything is connected in a particular order and relationship. Deleuze advocated in its place a rhizomatic structure—an ever-expanding network capable of sprouting a complete form at any point, a structure in which no one point is superior to any other, a structure capable of almost infinite replication making eradication difficult if not impossible.

> A rhizome doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: "and . . . and . . . and . . ." In this conjunction there is enough force to shake up and uproot the verb "to be." Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you driving at? All useless questions. To make a clean slate of it, to start over and over again at zero, to look for a beginning or a foundation—all imply a false conception of voyage and movement (methodological, pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic . . .) But Kleist, Lenz, or Büchner have another way to travel, as if moving or setting off in the

> middle, through the middle, entering and leaving, not beginning or ending. . . . The middle is not at all an average—far from it—but the area where things take on speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one to the other and reciprocally, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement carrying away the one *and* the other, a stream without beginning or end, gnawing away at its two banks and picking up speed in the middle.[1]

Some recent observers of the cultural scene have seen house music as the epitome of the Deleuzian world. The component elements of the disc jockey, the record, the sound equipment, the dancers, the room, and, of course, the mediated music are inseparable and ultimately indistinguishable. The dancers losing all sense of self and of boundaries become, in Deleuze's famous phrase, a "body without organs"[2]—a creation in which ideas can move freely without the interference of boundaries or hierarchies. Energy flows through this body, unimpeded and undifferentiated.

The World Wide Web, of course, is a paradigmatic rhizome with its horizontal proliferation of sites expanding exponentially. The Web is a "place" (such a spatial referent is meaningless in a virtual world) in which home pages of a local kindergarten, a virtual sex club, the White House, and the Institute for Medieval Studies are separated by the click of a mouse. (The very fact that almost anyone who reads this will understand references to home pages, mouse clicks, and webs suggests that we are in a very different referential world than we were not so long ago when Edward Albee essentially invented the game of Trivial Pursuit when Martha quoted a Bette Davis line to open *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*)

Just as the theocratic worldview of the Middle Ages, neoclassical scientificism in the Renaissance, and the theory of relativity at the start of the twentieth century all affected the theater of their day, so must this new technology affect us today. But how? Because theater exists in time in the experience of a community within a bounded space, it cannot evaporate into the ether to be reinspirated through the pores like the Hellenistic concept of *pneuma*. Nor, of course, do we have remote controls in the theater. We enter the theater building, we take our seats, and just as Richard Wagner desired a century and a half ago, we project ourselves across the mystic chasm into the ideal world depicted on the stage. And despite the occasional attempts at such forms as environmental theater, we are still dealing with a single-focus linear event that bears little resemblance to present-day experience or knowledge.

I think some theater has begun to respond in small ways. Tony Kushner's

Angels in America, for instance, though old-fashioned in its thematic and character approaches, is nonetheless structured around dozens of scenes that function not unlike windows on a computer screen. Any one scene is present beneath the surface of any other, and any one can be foregrounded through hypertextual reference. French-Canadian director Robert LePage's *Needles and Opium* captured this new sensibility, as do many of the postmodern plays of Mac Wellman or the creations of Anne Bogart with her Saratoga International Theatre Institute. The opera productions of director Peter Sellars with designer George Tsypin are more a product of Foucault and Deleuze than Einstein and Freud. But it is the Wooster Group that has most successfully responded to this brave new world. Especially in *Brace Up!*—their translation (into the 1990s) of *The Three Sisters*—they incorporated video not only to connect a multiplicity of genres and aesthetics (*Godzilla* and Chekhov to name only the most blatant), but also to link on- and offstage space while dissolving the boundaries that separated these worlds, and to bridge the presence and absence of performers. Their use of video brought offstage actors into an onstage mix, retained the presence of actors who could not be physically present (as when Willem Dafoe was off making a movie), allowed actors to interact with themselves (as Michael Kirby did in *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points),* and poignantly and eerily kept the brilliant actor Ron Vawter an essential component of the show after he had died of AIDS.

Should we get rid of old-fashioned theater? Of course not. Cars, airplanes, and space shuttles have not eliminated walking. But it is worth noting that walking and running can now be pleasure and sport as well as utilitarian activity. Likewise, older forms of theater cannot have the same impact or utility in this age as they did in a previous time. Thus, I believe that certain institutions such as Broadway or regional theaters will become our Kabuki or Beijing Opera, preserving popular forms as entertaining spectacle, maybe even becoming pastiche entertainments in the same way. In the next millennium, *Cats* will still be running ("*Cats,* now and forever" warns the ad), but it will include not only Grisabella and friends but the Garfield balloon from the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade, and perhaps Norma Desmond flying in on a helicopter. Another theater will feature "all chandeliers, all the time." While this admittedly facetious vision may not come to pass, Broadway seems already headed toward an institution of revivals and spectacles for tourists rather than a vital cauldron of new creative ideas. The new theater no longer has much to do with the sites we once associated with the form.

We are victims of Aristotle or at least victims of Renaissance critics and

their more recent apologists. For many people theater equals dramatic text. So we look at medieval theater and pronounce the *Second Shepherd's Play* acceptable but other dramatic texts of the Middle Ages naive and boring; or we see Italian Renaissance drama as a stultifying knock-off of Seneca, whom we see, in turn, as a knock-off of the Greeks. We look at Noh texts or commedia dell'arte scenarios with confusion. We are, in other words, incapable of seeing these mere fragments as parts of a larger, far more sophisticated theater. These were theaters in which the performance went well beyond the limits of a "play" to encompass hours and even days or weeks of multiple events in multiple locations in a festival performance context. In trying to comprehend them we are incompetent audiences; we do not recognize the theater. We cannot read those events any better than the new cyberspectator can read contemporary theater.

What if the revolution has already occurred and we missed it? What if new forms of theater have emerged as a result of new ways of thinking and because we are trapped into habitual patterns of perception, we cannot see it? Laurie Anderson and George Coates are creating performances on the Web, the Super Bowl rivals the festival of Dionysus, and modern revolutions are dependent on faxes and e-mail. Are rock concerts, discos, sporting events, and political rallies our theater?

If theater requires a live performer and a spectator, then there will never be a direct analogue of shuffle mode or remote controls. But I think something strangely equivalent is happening. The days of a monolithic theater appealing to a wide swath of the populace have passed, at least for now. We now have many small, intimate theaters aimed to narrow audiences based on ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, location, politics, and so on. They are, in a sense, like tracks on a compact disc or sites on a DVD. We no longer have to listen or watch under the strict control of a cultural hierarchy—we can pick and choose and structure our own culture. This is but one result of the shifting aesthetic wrought by technology.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Rhizome," in *On the Line,* trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 57–58.
2. Deleuze and Guattari, "Rhizome," 2.