

• *Benjamin Cope*

## LET'S DV8... – THEATRICAL STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL IN AN AGE OF FILM

As a lecturer in Visual and Cultural Studies I consider art, film, urban space, television, adverts, the Internet, but hardly ever theatre. Why not? Is theatre somehow incompatible with the technological advances of the visual media dominated world in which we now live? Yet I have the feeling that in my own teaching the element of performance is growing ever more important. No longer does it seem reasonable to expect students to sit and engorge a steady flow of information; rather I find myself seeking a whole range of scenarios and forms of address to try to engage students in an encounter with the ideas or questions of a given lesson. This general tendency of the development of contemporary teaching seems to be forgotten only at academic conferences which are surely the only type of play in which the actors can't be bothered either to learn or even, as in the case of politics or television, to pretend they have learned their script. Both of these phenomena, a disappearance of theatre and a spread of performativity seem to be linked to the media soaked environment in which we now live. What I intend to do in this article, therefore, is to approach the question of how theatre, and indeed the very process of thought, have been changed by the growth of visual media. What role is there for theatre in the age of cinema?

On first inspection, the answer might simply be "There isn't one." As early as 1928 Buster Keaton,

for example, seemed exuberantly intent on proving this point in the climactic hurricane scene from his film *Steamboat Bill Jnr*. In this episode, a great storm causes everything to be put in motion: the hapless Bill Jnr. is first liberated from a mental asylum when its roof and walls are blown clean away in front of the eyes of the cinema spectator. His bed is itself then blown off down the road where he slips and slides his way through collapsing buildings, flying cargo, wind-driven cars, electricity pylons, etc., before finally flying off clinging to an uprooted tree and being plunged into a nearby river. In the midst of all this environmental carnage, Keaton unwittingly runs through a stage door and into a theatre. Here, the outside wind makes a static stage dummy come to life, causing Keaton to step on a car horn and then leap in panic and fall through an unseen trapdoor and disappear. Keaton, by this point thoroughly fed up, decides to escape and therefore runs and leaps into the set design landscape painted on the back wall of the stage. He of course simply bounces off the field and lake painted on the two-dimensional surface of the theatre back wall. But a second later, the wind (of change?) blows the theatre down and Keaton runs out into a landscape that in cinema is not only real, as opposed to the painted illusion of theatre, but full of the potential threat of wind-uprooted flying buildings, one of which promptly lands over him.

Here is cinema making the great claim of its superiority. For while theatre would use tricks or the illusion of representation relying on the convention that we as childish spectators agree to pretend that what occurs on stage is a picture of what has happened out in the real world, the cinema does something quite different. It shows us man or woman in the world, since it is the relations to the outside environment, to the world off-screen, that are key in making films what they are. Is it then only cinema that can make Shakespeare's great boast for theatre that "All the world's a stage" finally come true?<sup>1</sup>

But at this point Martin Heidegger might enter stage left (or perhaps stage far right) and shout: "Cut! Cut! Don't you see that this is all a hoax? You're only seeing one side of the question concerning technology?"<sup>2</sup> For, Heidegger argues, when we look at an aeroplane on a runway, we just see an aeroplane; what we don't see is the global aviation network required to have this object waiting on the runway ready for us. Likewise, when we see nature in all its awesome power on the screen, what is carefully (or quaintly not so carefully when we now look back at Buster Keaton) hidden from us is the perverted mechanics required to produce violent wind when you need it and the even sicker machinations of the global film industry. Through technology man puts nature on standby, on reserve, and therefore loses the deeper relationship to the process of the revelation of truth of which he is only a part and not, as visual culture might lure us into believing, the master.

Should I have failed to convince you that visual culture is the tragedy predicted by that grumpy oracle of the hubris of technology, and then Jonathon Beller makes the point explicit.<sup>3</sup> Beller argues that when we watch a film we are not looking at the object we think we are. What cinema in fact represents is not the world as object, but commodity fetishism in its most extreme form. For in its becoming the object that it is, a visual illusion, film performs an absolute peeling away of the labour relations required to produce it. Unlike other contemporary commodities, like mobile phones or computers, in whose completed form the labour processes of production are also hard to spot, a film has no use-value. A definition of film might therefore read as follows: the pure object of visual consumption which requires that the huge levels of capital and labour-time involved in its production have to disappear.

It therefore seems almost logical to pursue, as Beller unnervingly does, a reading of global visual culture through Marx's theory of labour. Now, he argues, the labour-time that will generate the surplus value necessary for the capitalist is that of the apparently idle spectator, the act of looking.

Whether we look at a film matters to the profits of those who made it, every time we set eyes on a web-search engine, someone is making money. Should cinema therefore be viewed primarily as an active agent in the machinations of global capitalism enabling "the extraction of value from human bodies beyond normal physical and spatial limits and beyond normal working hours — it is an innovation that will combat the generalised falling rate of profit."<sup>4</sup> It seems perfectly plausible to argue that the growth of the film industry, and the other visual media it spawned, has had a profoundly disruptive effect on a certainty of where work is: for if a film requires huge amounts of labour to disappear and watching a film appears to be relaxing but makes someone a profit, then do we know what we are doing and when we are doing it? To put it another way, albeit with a somewhat American sense of cinematic slogan-making, "Production has entered the visual and the virtual has become real."<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary world can thus be described as the continual encounter with a vast array of visual fetishes which lack any grounding in objectivity, a process which can only, as Beller proposes, have had a profound impact on the structure of our unconscious. For Jacques Lacan, in developing his structure of the unconscious, was acting as a great theoretician of theatre: indeed, his notion that the true sense of a phrase is cut off from the words used to express it is one he wonderfully performed in his lectures. The pregnant pauses and the dramatic monologue that Lacan played before a packed auditorium is, like the obvious presence on stage of the Purloined Letter in his famous seminar, what gestures us towards the deep truth that must always just elude us.<sup>6</sup> An actor speaks on stage, both subject and object, craving the subjective desires of the objects in the audience to whom he performs the desire he cannot express. Is Lacan's thought of the mirror stage anything other than the paradox of the actor: recognising oneself as part of a symbolic network in which the individual inevitably feels the impossible necessity of being both subject and object.

The times, however, have changed. The circulation of rootless images has enlarged to such an extent that the primordial question is not that of the relationship of desire separated from an objective symbolic structure, but rather of how the unconscious itself is shaped and stimulated by the constant impact of visual fetishes. The zones of our unconscious leisure, pleasure, are growing and the question of how these diverse instances of desire relate to a coherent individual becomes ever more tenuous. Does the sight of so many partial quasi objects of desire produce so many partial quasi subjects? The constant impact of

these groundless visual fetishes, Beller thus argues, enlarge and radically further destabilise the spheres of the unconscious, to the extent of changing who we are. Thus, a thought of how we now relate to thinking and acting cannot but pass through an analysis of our changed relationship to images, of what sort of a spectator we are. Or to put it another way, our ability to see the 'empty space' that Peter Brook saw as sufficient to constitute theatre is already polluted by the montages of desires provoked by moving images.<sup>7</sup>

This same point is made by Jean-Luc Nancy in his moving article on Iranian film-maker Abbas Kiarostami.<sup>8</sup> Nancy proposes that rather than being the 7<sup>th</sup> Art, the cinema has become the art which disturbs the classification of all the others. This is true not just of theatre and, as in the Buster Keaton example discussed above, how cinema has questioned the theatre's need for a stage, but also of painting, literature and music's sense of identity as artistic genres. However, Nancy's vision of cinema, perhaps not surprising if he watches more Iranian cinema than corporate American nonsense, is not so black as Beller's. For although Nancy agrees that cinema has transformed our mental experience, he does not agree that this has distorted a real experience of reality and labour to leave us confronted only with fetishes. Rather, for Nancy, the key feature of contemporary experience is a certain cinematography that marks all of it and which has fundamentally changed our distinction between the real and the representational. There is not one experience that is real and another that is mediated through a canvas, a stage or a screen. After a century of cinema we are becoming aware that our experience of the world is itself a complex product of our memory of cinema. Art is no longer about representing the real, but is itself a process of production: producing nothing less than our experience of the world. In this sense, stage or no stage, screen or no screen, becomes rather insignificant: the essence of drama lies elsewhere.

What might theatre have to say in this new situation? The first thing that happened at the Warsaw performance of British dance-troupe DV8's play (is it cinema's fault that this was somewhere between a dance and a play?) appropriately called *The Cost of Living* was that the lights went up on the house and a gruff, rough-looking coarse-voiced Scot hurled abuse at some members of the crowd who arrived late: "What the fuck do you think you're doing! We've all been working on this play for 2 years and you bastards can't even be bothered to make it here on time! Don't you know time is money?!"<sup>9</sup> If, as discussed above, in Beller's view the problem of contemporary visual culture is that it makes invisible the labour of production, here we have theatre aggressively doing precisely the

reverse: the human work of production is made as explicit as the language used to state it. For a moment the passive/active audience become actors under the spotlight of a gaze, and the usually sublimated lack of awareness of the value of the labour that goes into producing a cultural product is made the play's point of departure.

The brutal attack on spectator illusions is continued throughout the performance. "How old were you when you lost your innocence?" someone screams and it is clear that that innocence, presumably the innocence that would have allowed us to believe in theatre, has been truly lost. But we do believe, because as in Chekhov, this is theatre that makes our real. At another moment, surrounded by the paraphernalia of the pseudo-Dyonisian excesses of a British Friday night, a chorus of dancers just jumps mechanically up and down, their arms by their sides, singing "Happy, happy, happy me," underneath a neon logo threateningly encouraging us to "Jump while you can". The stimuli of today's culture tell us to "Just do it!" and the body responds, but for how long and where is the subject? Desire has been polluted, made object irrelevant, and when a female dancer shoves a male dancers hand down her pants, it is clear that this is neither theatre, nor erotic.

This disturbing of the relationship between real and illusion is taken to an agonising climax when the dancers who are not of the sort of shapes and sizes one traditionally associates with dance are urged by a smiling master of ceremonies to step forward for a perverted (or honest) beauty contest. They have to present themselves to the audience: a first huge man comes forward and says, "Hi! I'm Mark from New York and I have to keep eating because DV8 only employs me 'cos I'm fat". The next, "Hey, I'm Valentino from Sicily and I've got Aids". The next, "I'm Shirley, from London, and I've been a drug addict for 10 years". After each the audience is encouraged by the host to applaud wildly. Thus, in what might be seen as an extension of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, the traditional relationship of theatre has become astonishingly inverted. It may be that we are hearing and seeing a simple truth which we suddenly desperately start wanting to believe is fiction. "Show us your body — only that can't lie" rings out the slogan, but is even that true? As the next stage in their beauty contest, the competitors have to run out and retrieve objects from the audience: first, black socks and most return, after a few minutes frantic activity, with a black sock. Then 'droga biżuteria', and a few less succeed, but some do; then 'karta kredytowa', and only three reappear back on stage grinning and waving someone's visa. Here then the illusion of the contemporary interactivity of visual media is made

wonderfully and, especially for the card donors, slightly anxiously real.

Throughout the performance time runs ahead frantically: is the bankruptcy of time the final cost of living? The message is clear and black: time and money have polluted everything, distorting all beyond our ability to recognise it or ourselves. This after all was also a big production kindly financed by the wonderfully effective tourist propaganda machine the British Council, and as such is an example of the unjust process of cultural globalisation of which I too am, as much as it pains me, an active beneficiary. It was a play that fought against an easy sense of reassurance and even its brightest spot was one licked with darkness. For the play's leading character was a disabled dancer whose body is astonishingly misshapen in a way that provokes a complex set of emotional responses, not least because the character himself was not just victim but also petulantly and sometimes vulgarly aggressive. But in combination with other dancers there were moments when he produced movements of a lyrical beauty that suggested that if there is hope it lies in the invention of new combinations of physical interactions. Perhaps the key is not understanding, but searching for new ways of meeting and moving.

For movements are conditioned it seems more socially than physically. In Poland, there is a strong heritage of this in the deforming of bodies which, as in Tadeusz Kantor's *Dead Class* or Kristian Lupa's staging of Thomas Bernhard's *Erasure*, is associated above all with the weight of tradition and the trauma of the war. The issues that have caused these physical burdens have not disappeared in the period after World War II. While in Belarus, as powerfully embodied by the theatre Inzhest they have perhaps got heavier, in other places the physical distortions have become displaced and fragmented, but remained just as violent.<sup>10</sup> This was intensely demonstrated by the St. Petersburg street theatre troupe Derevo who in their performance of *The Execution of Pierrot* ran dirty and naked amongst the tables of the elegant cafés of Warsaw's pristinely tourist-preserved old town square, confirming all our worst fears about the barbarian, un-European nature of Russians. The plot of the play, in this time of anti-terrorist paranoia and the war in Chechnya, is to shoot a deserter, which they repeatedly attempt and fail with burlesque and gloriously sexualised physical excess. Derevo, like DV8, provoke the crowd: into giving many 'poslednye cigarety', using audience members to stand on to prepare to shoot, stealing walkie-talkies from confused security guards, causing the police to be called and eventually involving the crowd in an all-engulfing tomato fight. This play was particularly en-

joyed by passing drunks and children, whereas I heard an old lady behind me saying, "Well, it's one thing for them to show this on television, but this, this is terrible. There might be children watching". The provocation of their performance indeed succeeded in engineering a drastic change to the bodily politics of the space in which they were performing.

What might this exploration of physicality in contemporary theatre suggest? In an essay on Maurice Maeterlinck, Antonin Artaud wrote "Drama is the highest form of the spirit. It is in the nature of the deepest things to clash, to combine, to come apart. Action is the very principle of life."<sup>11</sup> What does this quotation mean? If we read it across the cuts, clashes and rhythms of Sergei Eisenstein's thought of montage as integral not just to the craft of cinema, but also to the passage that causes thinking to become the expression of emotions in action, we get to a point where theatre now can become the embodiment of cinema's revolutionary impact on thinking.<sup>12</sup> For the revelation of Gilles Deleuze's books on the cinema is made in the title of first volume, *The Movement-Image*, when we understand that this movement image is a higher form of thinking: thinking beyond thought. Thought is an encounter, or rather a series of encounters, whose outward movement is its transformative power. So when Deleuze, with Félix Guattari writes, "If the mental objects of philosophy, art and science (that is to say vital ideas) had a place, it would be at the deepest point of the synaptic gaps, in the hiatuses, the intervals and the between-times of a brain that refuses to become object" they are metaphorical only to the extent that they attempt, even partially, to localise the encounter nature of the thinking experience.<sup>13</sup> In Artaud's sense, the clashes, combinations and coming apart with the world around us are nothing less than the expansive process of thought that takes place through the body.

The revolution to thinking that Deleuze and Guattari attempt to bring about is the end of thinking about thought as representative: rather thought is dynamic, transformative and expansive. Thought is not that which comprehends, it is that which goes out to meet, does not understand and through the meeting of not understanding is transformed and thus stimulated. In terms of language, this sounds provocative and indeed accounts for much of the frustration often expressed with regard to Deleuze and Guattari's writing: what do they mean, why are their concepts so unfixed and fluctuating? But as a description of the power of contemporary dance or a contemporary theatre of movement, it seems perfectly acceptable. This theatre seems most successful when its movements express the paradoxical mixture of bodily freedom and self-imposed restriction

which form the paradoxical characteristics of today's society. For regarding thinking as encounters means that it will always be in tight relationship with the society in and against which it emerges. Thus the plays I mentioned seemed successful precisely to the extent that they became no longer plays, but an expression of the material truth of society. Theatre becoming non theatre, as Deleuze and Guattari write that philosophy can only become non-philosophy in order to become itself.<sup>14</sup>

What can theatre do for us? What can we do for the theatre? In their description of how to resist the spread of capitalism, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write the following:

We certainly do need to change our bodies and ourselves, and in perhaps a much more radical way than cyberpunk authors imagine. [...] The will to be against really needs a body that is completely incapable of submitting to command. It needs a body that is incapable of adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so forth. (If you find your body refusing these "normal" modes of life, don't despair-realise your gift!) In addition to being radically unprepared for normalisation, however, the new body must also create a new life. [...] The infinite paths of the barbarians must form a new mode of life.<sup>15</sup>

Frankly, separating Hardt and Negri's insight from their rhetorical excesses is sometimes frustrating, so I use two examples from the plays I described which help to try to figure out what this might imply. A particularly intense moment in the *Derevo* performance is when a strikingly androgynous girl appears to rescue the hero as a Russian ambulance service: smoking four cigarettes at once, waving and licking raw meat and fish, with her strangely adolescent and both provocative and obscene body, she is the incarnation of a health service one would rather not meet. However, she also embodies a sphere beyond the disciplined bodies of the self-enforced realm of bio-power in which capitalist mechanisms of control function. Or the disabled dancer in *DV8* leers towards the audience, "I bet you've been wondering if I can have sex, haven't you? Can't help it, can you?" Can we?

I would therefore argue that it is primarily in its resistance to the image as fetish and to sex as commodity that theatre has especial potential at the current image soaked stage of the development of late capitalism. Theatre can install the corporal productivity of thought into the encounters of existence as process, but is this any longer relevant? Has not cinema stolen and effectively negated the chance of the productive missed encounters of being together on which theatre is based? I think

here of Sergei Eisenstein's principle of basing the cinema on the montage of fairground 'attractions', the attention catching stands of public theatre. It is clear that in making the strong emotional hits of 'attractions' ubiquitous, the cinema has more or less destroyed, the possibility for the being together on which such street theatre was founded.<sup>16</sup> So how can theatre join not theatre and have an impact on society in any way that can compare to that of say, Robbie Williams or Tatu? In Poland, our great manifestation of street theatre recently was the 100,000s persuaded to synchronically get on their knees in public squares: but it seemed as if this deforming of bodies was done in the name of pre-cinema morality and a subjugation of bodies to hierarchy. It is perhaps for this reason that Deleuze's works on theatre, on Samuel Beckett and Camelo Bene, are especially dark, self-destructive and difficult to accept.<sup>17</sup> Exploring bodily resistances to power seems to lead in some dangerous and threatening directions, perhaps revealing the dangers that lurk in the shadows of the radically democratic space of unstructured encounters opened by Deleuze's thought.

But perhaps the pope was a great street actor and the cinema opens up the chance of rethinking theatre by connecting individual expression with the multiple physical and psychic movements from which it is created. Russian philosopher Oleg Aronson argues that we should understand cinema in terms of the miraculous.<sup>18</sup> Cinema events happen: we don't know why or how, they appeal firstly to our emotions (our sense of wonder), they are perceived by a crowd, they are profoundly democratic in that they appeal not to scholars but to the wider public and they have the power to change us. But is one of the miracles of cinema to give us back the chance of a theatre where it no longer matters that we can't understand, since the manifold movements of our visual culture stimulated unconscious find their expression in the manifold interactions of our moving bodies. Our attention thus would now be on the environment that enables or perverts such movements, the mechanisms of crossing the interval and the potentials thus created for change. As Eisenstein in his article on montage in acting and Peter Brook both write, this acute sensitivity to the multiple possibilities that create the psychic reality of physical interpersonal space and how to cross it is at the essence of theatre.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps now in something like an experienced return to silent film, we need to become better actors. Like a person learning to swim, comfortable with repeating the swimming instructor's movements against the unpredictable moving currents of the sea, despite not knowing how the sea works or what it means. Wouldn't it be nice to think so?

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- <sup>10</sup> For information on Inzhest see [belorus.by/inzhest](http://belorus.by/inzhest). A powerful example of the physical expression of the distorting psychic violence of living in everyday post-communist reality is offered by the Polish group Suka Off, see [www.sukaoff.com](http://www.sukaoff.com).
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*Benjamin Cope*

## DV8 IR TEATRO IŠLIKIMO STRATEGIJOS KINO AMŽIUJE

### S a n t r a u k a

Remiantis kino teorija, šiame straipsnyje siekiama išsiaiškinti, kaip teatras galėtų tapti veiksmingo pasipriešinimo globaliai *media* kultūrai centru. Ar teatras nėra filosofiškas, ir ar neturėtų jis dėl to dėkoti būtent kinui? Analizėje išskiriamos dvi trupės: anglų DV8 ir rusų *Derevo*, tačiau minimas ir lenkų, baltarusių teatras. Straipsnyje remiamasi šiais mąstytojais: Busteriu Keatonu, Martinu Heideggeriu, Jonathonu Belleriu, Sergejum Eizenšteinu, Antoninu Artaud, Peteriu Brooku, Jacques'u Lacanu, Olegu Aronsonu ir neišvengiamai – Gilles'u Deleuze'u bei Félixu Guattari.

Straipsnyje teigiama, kad kaip tik gebėjimas pasipriešinti atvaizdo fetišizacijai suteikia teatrui išskirtinių galimybių dabartinėje vaizdiniais persunktoje vėlyvojo kapitalizmo stadijoje. Tačiau ar kinas, paversdamas vaizdinius visur esančiais, nesunaikino paties poreikio susirinkti ir būti kartu? Kaip teatras galėtų daryti visuomenei tokią pat įtaką, kokią daro, pavyzdžiui, Robbie Williamsas arba *Tatu*?

Rusų filosofas Olegas Aronsonas teigia, kad kiną reikia suprasti kaip stebuklą. Kinas tiesiog atsitinka, nežinia kaip ir kodėl, jis veikia mūsų emocijas, be to kinas yra masiškas ir išskirtinai demokratiškas, nes suprantamas ne vien mokslininkams, bet ir platesnei publikai, pagaliau jis turi galią mus keisti. Bet galbūt vienas iš kino stebuklų yra tai, kad jis sugrąžina mums teatro galimybę, kuomet suprasti tampa nebe taip svarbu, nes įvairios mūsų judančių kūnų sąveikos tik išreiškia įvairius vizualiosios kultūros paveiktos pašamonės procesus. Teatre mes galime atkreipti dėmesį į aplinką, kuri įgalina arba iškreipia judesius, į tuos mechanizmus, kurie reguliuoja mūsų judesius tam tikru metu, ir suprasti kokios yra galimybės visa tai pakeisti.

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