

## Waking the Text: Disorderly Order in the Wooster Group's *Route 1 & 9 (the Last Act)*

Michael Vanden Heuvel

Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit.  
Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*

### Postmodernism and Chaos Theory

Drama reveals its most crucial links to paradigms of postmodernism when it investigates and liberates the potential for textual disorder and the "drifting" of presence contained in performance.<sup>1</sup> Such a project seeks to destabilize the rhetoric of conventional theatre and to disempower the aesthetic and ideological assumptions upon which it is based. When there is no conventional "text" at all—by which I mean the demands for psychological consistency or identity, meaning, and unity that a reader can extract from a conventional textual environment—then disorder and improvisation are implicitly foregrounded. Such art, in the shape of various avatars of John Cage's aleatory work, is thus primarily directed at liberating and "deterritorializing" (in Deleuze's sense) one's entrenched processes of linear perception, as well as working to unchain signifieds in the project of opening up more unstable and open forms of representation.

Paradoxically, however, this strategy has in much performance art had the result of simply reinscribing the power and presence of traditional textual drama and of reconstructing the rhetoric of conventional theatre. The performance (or the performer) simply displaces the text as the origin of presence while remaining linked to the audience in a relation of dominance. Further, some of this work makes one wonder whether the act of cultivating an exclusively open, discontinuous and disorderly performative aesthetic might be as infertile as constructing one that is strictly orderly and closed. Neither in its extreme allows room for flexibility, adaptation or true invention, the latter because its system of signification is closed and static and the former because the most it can create are local instabilities that have no link to global innovation.

There have emerged, however, forms of performance theatre which avoid the reinscription of power relations marked in both traditional theatre and in performance art. Such work, which I will refer to as "intertextualist," seeks to create on ongoing dialogics between order and disorder and to complicate or elide

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the relationship between them.<sup>2</sup> Intertextualist performance theatricalizes the interplay between order (presence, being, something) and disorder (absence, becoming, nothing) as they collaborate to form human meanings. Each is enfolded into the other without denying its distinct identity, so that the rhetoric which places order and determinism in an oppressor's role to disorder and indeterminacy is denied, even while contingency continues to play a significant role in the experience of the work.

Intertextual theatre thus is ceaselessly deconstructive but also productive, wresting order, *gestell* and presence from the performance even as new fissures are opened up to subvert the authority that the performance creates. Here, a spectator's response never stabilizes exclusively into either an overwhelming drive toward closure and pure presence or the ebullient but ultimately self-referential absence of an endless *abîme*. Instead, the pleasures and constraints of both intermingle to embody a dynamic situation in which events have no absolute order or meaning, but which create a context out of which unpredictable forms of order can—but not must—emerge. Different stages or levels of intertextualist performance are as likely to move toward chaos as toward orderly closure, thus allowing the work to be dissipating while simultaneously counteracting that dissolution.

The evocation of terms like order, chaos and dissipation is not coincidental. Examples of such "disorderly order" have been theorized in information theory and nonlinear systems dynamics, known popularly as "chaos theory." More recently, writers such as N. Katherine Hayles, Alexander Argyros, William Paulson and especially Michel Serres have proposed that these models are applicable to components of the social and cultural realm as well.<sup>3</sup> Although none of these authors specifically address the order/disorder dynamic in theatre, their work suggests that chaotics can provide a useful set of tools and a language for describing intertextualist theatre and speculating about its effects.<sup>4</sup> While Newtonian mechanics has served as an analogue to Aristotelian theatre and quantum mechanics has been offered as a paradigm for aleatory performance art, the sciences of information and nonlinear dynamics seem best suited for conceptualizing the work of artists who work within the rich folds of order and chaos.<sup>5</sup> These are, says Paulson, "the post-Newtonian sciences that literary culture . . . has never really integrated."<sup>6</sup>

The universe represented through chaotics is not simply random or disorderly, but it is a world in which disorder is the fundamental feature and order is always a temporary intruder:

[Serres'] universe is not a world without order; but in it order is the product of more or less accidental "eddies" occurring in the disorderly flow of cosmic energy and wearing away again, over a period of time, into the stream, by virtue of the never-ceasing interaction of entropy and negentropy. A text by Serres is just such an "eddy" of words, a small informational island informed by order but undermined by a

prevailing disorder that tugs at its structure. . . . The always unfinished constructions of ideas, suggestions and words seem as ready to disintegrate into nothingness as they are to take shape and form; and the gestures toward other texts and further arguments, like shreds and tatters at the edge, are as likely to coalesce into larger masses as to dissolve into thin air.<sup>7</sup>

I want to suggest that this model of nonlinear textuality informs intertextualist theatre, where a similar blending of stability and contingency can be found. Especially useful in this regard is the concept of "dissipative structure," a notion taken from a particular form of chaos theory which allows one to model both intertextual theatre's structure and also its reception.

### **Intertextualist Theatre**

Intertextualist theatre is accomplished most effectively through collaborative creation, so I have chosen to focus on the work of a performance collective, the Wooster Group.<sup>8</sup> Collaboration creates a mediating space of writing in which openness and closure, chaos and order, engage one another in recursive loops. While the work is in progress, the overarching concern is with openness, with different people bringing in a variety of texts, contexts, and discourses and throwing them together without a strong sense of intention or purpose. "In this process," says Elizabeth LeCompte (artistic director of the Wooster Group), "I think of myself as the leader of a children's gang. I revert to six, seven, eight. I try to come up with situations [that have] a certain structure wherein we can play; that the structure is not so rigid that we can't reinvent it all the time, but not so loose that I don't have control."<sup>9</sup> In this "noisy" environment, chance fluctuations allow unforeseen "eddies" of order and synchronicity to emerge, thus creating a system in which a fundamental disorder motivates processes that produce more complex forms of order.

While in some versions of performance art such extremely unstructured environments may actually be presented as the performance, in intertextualist theatre this is not the case.<sup>10</sup> The utter openness and undecidability of the environment deprives the work's creators of what LeCompte terms "control" or order. This is not, however, simply a director's desire for authority but a legitimate concern for creating art which embodies the dynamics of the culture it seeks to represent. A rigorously random aesthetic may be appropriate for developing work that desires to show the audience, as Richard Foreman puts it, how to "see small," by which he means adjusting human perception so that it is comfortable with the fundamental contradiction and uncertainty that conditions the subatomic realm of quantum relations. But for artists more interested in representing the dynamics of life "at large," that is, the experience of the subject in the macro-world and intertexts of culture, then the creation of completely indeterminate environments must be rejected simply because in the cultural realm the subject is surely not purely undetermined and phenomenologically "open."

That is, cultural subjects are conditioned and disciplined, controlled or interpellated to some degree by existing texts and their ordering discourses.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, intertextual artists are always cognizant that writing works within, and eventually stabilizes into, forms of textuality and signification which necessarily perform cultural work. The question at this point becomes how to avoid constructing a rhetoric of dominance or presence and to maintain a dialogic between order and disorder once the improvisational space of collaboration has been closed.

The simple but often provocative strategy used by intertextualist artists is to workshop around and then bring into the "finished" performance various closed or "global" textual forms that are positioned to interact dynamically with a repertoire of open and "local" performance strategies: improvisation, parataxis, game-playing, displacement, transformation. Orderly text and disorderly improvisation are brought together to investigate how the linear qualities of the global text interact with the potential randomness and turbulence of the local performance. Rather than privileging presence, textuality and closure (as in traditional drama), and rather than celebrating indeterminacy for its own sake (as aleatory performance does), this work investigates the effects of random fluctuations within seemingly orderly systems to discover what sort of exchanges take place between order and disorder. The rhetoric of this theatre therefore is not fixed in terms of a hierarchy of power relations between text, performance, and spectator, but is built on open processes of exchange and displacement of power among the terms. No single element assumes primacy as the object to be understood and mastered, but all rather are decentered and rendered intertextual, that is, part of larger signifying practice or use of signs, a "cultural and discursive reservoir" and a "body of writing upon which we draw."<sup>12</sup> The subject of the performance thus becomes the means by which it acquires signification within a network of signs.

Thus decentered, intertextual performances lack structurality and are therefore open to interventions of noise and disorder. As such, they parallel the objects of study in chaos science. Nonlinear systems dynamics analyzes the effects of a fundamental disorder or asymmetry in various orderly systems: biological, chemical, informational, cognitive, even cultural. Such analysis seeks to recast disorder as something besides order's negative other or as an adjunct to some dialectical unity or synthesis. As a result, chaos science has produced, first, a greater awareness of the preponderance of chaos in nature and, second, an appreciation for the positive and productive consequences of disorder. Similar in some respects to post-structuralist theory, chaos theory indicates that even systems emblematic of determinism must be viewed also as fundamentally disorderly—that pendulums, laminar flows, and the weather, like signs and literary texts, reveal a fundamental productive relation between order and disorder, signifieds and signifiers.

The Wooster Group's work and *modus operandi* are appropriate vehicles through which to investigate one means to reconfigure order and disorder,

because neither the work nor the method of production are bound by the traditional rhetoric of theatre. The Group usually seizes upon one or more established cultural texts (usually literary, though they have used recorded and visual texts as well). They then investigate these texts' claims to plenitude and orderly presence by infiltrating their field of signification with various disorderly performative insurgencies in the form of dance, vaudeville routines, live and recorded music, simultaneous live and video performances, and so on. Source-texts are juxtaposed in performance workshops to fragments of pop culture and social history and brought together with structured improvisations which emerge randomly from personal and collective experiences of the group members. The method assumes that no text—whether an original source or the intertext created by the performance—is ever a closed or unified system of signification which excludes disorder or turbulence. Rather, texts are always disorderly and open systems which interact with their intertextual boundary environment, exchanging signs, traces and information with it. Texts are therefore potential reservoirs of chaos, producing and maintaining order only by acknowledging and responding to the surrounding noise and disorder which is the very condition of their existence.

Because it exists in a chaotic state, the text must according to chaos theory be conceived as a system which is sensitively dependent upon the initial conditions of its material realization. This means that the smallest fluctuation or asymmetry within the multi-leveled environment of the text (that is, within its own internal signifying system as well as in its boundary conditions, which for drama includes the performance and the spectator's response) can be looped recursively back into the structure in the form of feedback. If this feedback is amplified enough, it will send the entire system careening off into chaos (similar to what happens when a speaker squawks). For spectators yet enamored of traditional aesthetics built on the presence of the text, this noise and consequent turbulence would represent a devolution into disorder and an epilogue to meaning. However, for intertextualist artists the sensitivity to initial conditions offers an opportunity to intervene in the orderly global discourse of the text at a local level and to inhabit its gaps or spaces in order to introduce greater fluctuations into the system. The assumption behind the strategy is that this disorder can be productive and that the engine for driving disorder toward a state where it can act as a *prologue* to meaning is improvisation, difference, and performance.

The Group's performance strategies thus are not brought forth merely to render the text unstable and to "liberate" or celebrate its fundamental disorder. Rather, they are used to show how disorder makes more complex forms of order possible. As Alexander Argyros writes:

Instead of requiring a choice between the imperative to deconstruct linear systems of order to unearth their arche-chaos, and the imperative to define chaos as supererogatory and thereby repress it, chaos theory suggests that determinism and randomness are not the only options

available when describing the behavior of systems. Chaos offers a third possibility . . . and this possibility appears to be the one nature tends to choose in all its integrative levels when survival depends on flexibility and innovation.<sup>13</sup>

The performances of the Wooster Group, similarly, do not try to dissolve all forms of structure, coherence, and intelligibility into an *abîme* of always absent signifiers. Instead, they lead the spectator to look for forms that may legitimately be used to describe or model the relation of order to disorder, and solicit the spectator to respond with "flexibility and innovation."

In chaotic systems there always exists a "strange attractor," a mathematical model of dynamic disorder mapped in phase space which chaos scientists use as evidence of the patterned unpredictability within seemingly turbulent systems.<sup>14</sup> Strange attractors reveal a fearful symmetry within supposedly turbulent systems in which the seemingly random loops and spirals mapped in phase space are infinitely deep but never intersect (because to do so would indicate periodicity and order). In strange attractors, infinite paths exist within finite space, thus creating a bounded infinity in which randomness and disorder are paradoxically constrained and channeled into meaningful patterns. Similarly, intertextualist theatre embodies a world in which disorder exists not in opposition to an anterior order, but as an integral part of order's structure (just as order is essential in some disorderly systems). Such theatre allows the spectator to explore how the interaction between noise and information, entropy and negentropy, can produce unexpected symmetries and convergences that contribute to the evolution toward more complex systems and meanings.

This is an important distinction, for if alternative forms of theatre are to have any real impact in the cultural realm, they must move beyond mere deconstructive critiques of representation and quests for "nonsemiotic" space. After all, even the most explicitly deconstructive practices tend to produce, despite expressions to the contrary, global theories and orderly narratives that are picked up and solicited to perform various kinds of cultural work. Aware that their own work is necessarily complicitous in the production of order and meaning, the Wooster Group's performances seem less antagonistic than is deconstruction toward empowering interpretation and representing forms of order, so long as these are presented as non-foundational and contingent, as "predispositions" rather than "predeterminations." As Ross Chambers writes, elucidating Serres: "There is the game of mastery, which hypostatizes the rules, but there is also another game which consists of siding with disorder, not against the rules, but so as to situate and relativize them."<sup>15</sup> This relativizing strategy may suggest a more productive means than deconstruction's by which to close off the tradition of Western metaphysics.

Intertextualist theatre work envisions order and disorder in the kind of relationship Ilya Prigogine describes in nonlinear chemical reactions.<sup>16</sup> Prigogine points out that at equilibrium, molecules, although very complex, act as

independent entities (he calls them "hypnons" or "sleepwalkers") which "ignore" one another until they are "awakened" by disequilibrium. This disorder, far from rendering the system sterile, instead introduces into it unique and more complex forms of coherence.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Wooster Group will begin investigating existing cultural icons like prominent literary texts which, although they reveal complex networks of past associations and relations with their culture, have somehow become dormant and have reached a state of interpretive equilibrium: for example, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the poetry and political manifestos of the Beat writers, the monologues of Lenny Bruce, Ingmar Bergman's films, Thornton Wilder's drama of Americana *Our Town*. A text like Wilder's, says LeCompte,

has been defined clearly for many years, until there is a kind of coating around it, of one meaning. We know now what Emily represents. There's no ambivalence about it any more . . . I tend to be attracted to the kind of thing that is stable and then to destabilize it.<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of the Group's deconstructive infiltrations of these texts, then, is not strictly agonistic or for the purpose of some paralogical demystification, but to wake the dormant text from a state of effete equilibrium by introducing into it a clinamen of difference or equivocation in order to evolve more complex forms of signification.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, far from being opposed to Wilder's play, the Wooster Group recognizes that their own work is infiltrated and energized by the dissipative potential of *Our Town*.<sup>20</sup>

### Chaos Theory and the Wooster Group's "Route 1 & 9 (the Last Act)"

In truth, it is not enough to say "long live the multiple" . . .

The multiple must be *made*.

Gilles Deleuze

An illustrative example of this process occurs in the Group's 1981 work, *Route 1 & 9 (the Last Act)*.<sup>21</sup> Here, the ur-text to be infiltrated is in fact *Our Town*, surely one of the most powerful and self-contained statements of humanist ideology and Western metaphysics in the American dramatic canon. Wilder's play personifies the role order has played in Western culture both to solidify a common symbolic social economy and to exclude and marginalize what that economy renders disorderly.<sup>22</sup> The play's enforcement of a rich, but orderly symbolic economy produces a set of assumptions about reality so thoroughly naturalized that Brooks Atkinson praised its power to evoke the "days and deaths of the brotherhood of man." Weaving together the material and metaphysical aspects of human existence by linking "Jane Crofut, the Crofut farm, Grover's

Corners" up through and including "the Universe [and] the Mind of God," Wilder renders reality as an orderly, closed and global system governed by unchanging and universal laws.<sup>23</sup> As we will see, this system is modeled on totalizing paradigms similar to those of classical physics, with its assumption that physical processes are reversible and therefore timeless.

Recognizing that Wilder's potentially dissipative text has been rendered dormant by successive readings and productions, and seeking to wake it, the Wooster Group's performance of *Route 1 & 9* interrogates *Our Town* by performing within its gaps. As a first step, those spaces are exposed in order to deconstruct Wilder's essentialist vision of American culture. *Route 1 & 9* thus begins with a mock *Encyclopedia Britannica* video (shown, significantly, in a separate space from the main playing area) in which a performer presents himself as a Lecturer whose task it is to prepare the spectators for a viewing of *Our Town* by providing a lesson on what it means, how it works, and how it represents the timeless fundamental assumptions of the humanities in general. Such lectures traditionally act to sustain and naturalize the rhetoric and ideologies of Western art, and to construct those formations as universal and ahistorical. The lecture in *Route 1 & 9* indeed retains the reactionary language and desire for power that is often mystified by such discourse ("the play helps us to understand and so accept our existence on earth" [5]) but it also exposes the discourse's own hermetic self-reflexiveness by sealing off the lecture from the noise and disorder of the temporal, quotidian world: first, by containing it within the small frame and mediated image of the video monitor and, second, by separating "The Lesson" from the main playing area. The video also demystifies the Lecturer's discourse by rendering it historical and contingent. Several "jump cuts" occur in the tape, fracturing the Lecturer's presentation and revealing it to be open to the vagaries of chance (perhaps an editor slipped?), time (perhaps the tape has degraded?), or the Lecturer's own lack of presence (perhaps we are just skipping over what must be left absent in his discourse?). Like *Our Town* itself, the Lecturer's "text" is not impermeable to time and noise, but an open system forced to move irreversibly forward into the future, where it threatens to degrade entropically. That future, of course, lies waiting downstairs in the main playing area and in the chaotic performance of *Route 1 & 9*.

Having suggested that even the most positivist discourse contains jumps and gaps, the Wooster Group sets out to investigate what happens when chance and noise are allowed to inhabit freely and positively the seemingly orderly system of Wilder's text. When they began doing workshop readings of *Our Town* the Group initially excluded the part of the Stage Manager so that the piece would be lacking its center. Having destabilized the work, they reconstructed it by interpolating disorderly subsystems (the various structured improvisations, dances, and interactions with people outside the stage environment) into a seemingly orderly system (Wilder's text). As in chaos theory, these local variations are not simply incorporated and dissolved into the unity of the global system, but insist on being respected in their own right. This "version" of *Our Town* is thus denied



the kind of totality and autonomy traditionally granted to art, and is instead breached and compromised by exchanges with differences and disorder existing in the boundary environment. What makes the exchange productive, however, is that new and more complex totalities emerge from them.

Local intervening noise is produced in a number of ways, each exposing differences Wilder's play seeks to suppress. Beyond the performance itself, the offstage environment is allowed to impinge on the stage world, as when a performer calls a variety of real fast food joints in the neighborhood to order supplies for the party that takes place in Part 2 of the performance. The penetration of the unpredictable boundary environment into a local component of the system (and on at least one occasion fast food was in fact delivered to the Performance Garage during a performance) causes the entire system to react or respond. When one respondent on the phone begins to flirt and exchange unwanted double entendres with "Willie," an unforeseen sense of sexual threat is manifested within the performance which, coincidentally, resonates strongly against the asexuality of Wilder's characters.

Another intervention of disorder occurs throughout Part 2 and 3, where blackface performers enact a vaudeville routine on the stage while on monitors above members of the Group perform an uninspired and "dormant" reading of *Our Town*. The multiple texts interpenetrate one another, as when George and Emily read from Wilder's courting scene at the malt shop on the video monitor while below Willie calls various taverns looking for her party dates, Kenny and Pigmeat (9-10). In Part 3 and the opening to Part 4, energetic and finally obscene dances from the live performers are juxtaposed to scenes of somber reflection within the video frames, and Wilder's flat, measured and extremely moving Northeastern dialect is shaken up, drowned out, and violently confronted by the more explosive rhythms of the blackface performers partying below (13-14).

These randomized local levels of the performance thus intrude themselves as a necessary descriptive feature of the (re)reading of *Our Town* and therefore problematize the orderly totality of the source text. By recreating Wilder's text in the performance as only *part* of a signifying system made up of a complex internal structure constituted by distinct local levels moving with different motions (some orderly and others noisy or random), the performance forces the spectators to take into account a new scale by which to measure the work, one which asks us to account for and find significance in certain irregularities and fluctuations that Wilder's text flattens out. While *Our Town* presents an image of the universe striving to remain at equilibrium, *Route 1 & 9* introduces a dynamic disorder of difference. Thus while we can still speak of the experience of the performance as a totality, we can do so only by reconceptualizing the global as constituted by localities, some of which are disorderly.

As the improvisatorial input becomes more and more disorderly and open to chance fluctuation, the local perturbations created by the performance iterate like positive feedback into the system of the source text and cause widespread

turbulence. For example, in Part 1B an audio recording of an improvisation made for a previous Wooster Group performance is played while two men wearing the blackface and "blind man's" glasses enact a slapstick routine in which they try to build a house. As they stumble about haphazardly, the videotape of "The Lesson" is replayed on monitors above the stage, juxtaposing images of the Lecturer trying to construct his own impermeable structure. The audio tape meanwhile makes references to the building of skeletal houses with no walls, and, when one voice asks, "What advantage are those skeletal houses?" the response is that they are appropriate for "Cold people . . . indifferent people" (7). If one is attentive to the various visual and auditory signs, it is possible to link the cold indifference with the aloof and objective Lecturer still miming his lesson above. In one performance I witnessed, the taped speech coincided with a cut in the video from the Lecturer to a montage of Greek statues meant to represent the "timelessness" of great humanistic art, resulting in another ironic juxtaposition of the material and the ethereal, the noisy and the orderly.

The slapstick building of the house continues and then breaks off as the performers re-enact a Pigmeat Markham vaudeville routine that includes a central joke dealing with defecation. Simultaneous with much of this action, "The Lesson" is replaced on the monitors by the straight reading of *Our Town*. Contained in the relatively small frame of video monitors, the restrained dialogue, rigidified social praxis, and repressed facial expressions of the performers are "shrunk" and de-amplified, making them also appear as avatars of the "cold, indifferent people" mentioned on the audiotape.

The performed improvisation and videotaped material are thus affecting the structure of meaning we normally derive from *Our Town*, alerting the spectator to what Wilder's play represses. Framed outside Wilder's text and town, these disorderly phenomena (sexual threat, racial difference, violent physicality, death rather than eternal verities) find representation in *Route 1 & 9* as local perturbations which will—as they cannot in the closed system of *Our Town*—cause widespread transformations of the overall system.

At this point in the performance the global system of *Our Town* can be said to be producing a good deal of entropy, as its conventional structure of signification begins to "lose energy" and break down under the influence of the insurgencies initiated by the far-from equilibrium performative strategies. However, this is not merely a deconstructive reading of Wilder's play intended to expose textual aporias. With *Our Town* now explicitly opened up and its already present differences and disjunctions exposed, its system of signification now has what chaos scientists call more degrees of freedom: to use Prigogine's description, it is a system that has forgotten its initial conditions. In this state Wilder's disenfranchising of difference and disorder is lost to memory, and, with disorder restored, the system can allow for greater positive feedback between itself and its boundary environment, that is, with discourses framed outside it.

The result of the autocatalytic process is the creation of what Prigogine calls a dissipative structure. Dissipative structures are those which lose energy (in the

form of useful heat) and thus produce greater entropy (the measure of heat loss). Paradoxically, however, dissipative systems are able to differentiate and grow more complex as the result of increased entropy production. As opposed to closed systems which move irreversibly toward thermodynamic equilibrium (entropy's final state of homogeneity or "heat death"), dissipative structures are open, and can maintain a state far from equilibrium. Such systems, because they are producing entropy at an accelerated rate, require more energy and information from the environment to sustain their growth. They thrive on disorder because fluctuations feed back into the system and force it either to disintegrate utterly or to reintegrate on more complex levels of organization. Dissipative systems can thus transform from apparently chaotic states to increasingly ordered ones as they pass through a what is called a bifurcation point. The existence of dissipative structures therefore depends on the continual expenditure or dissipation of energy that keeps it from equilibrium. This flagrant disregard for the Second Law of Thermodynamics becomes a model for what Prigogine claims is "the constructive role of irreversibility" in which open systems distance themselves from equilibrium and "nourish phenomena of spontaneous self-organization, ruptures of symmetry, evolutions towards growing complexity and diversity."<sup>24</sup>

*Route 1 & 9* presents a sort of theatrical bifurcation point, where the orderly system of *Our Town* is dissipated and then forced by the perturbations of the Group's performance strategies to internally reorganize on a more complex level; that is, as *Route 1 & 9*, a work which like any dissipative system constantly threatens to dissolve before the spectator's eyes unless greater energy is exchanged with it. Wilder's text, founded on ahistorical and universal values and committed to the exclusion of noise, randomness, and the quotidian, is now irreversibly altered by the motive force of exactly what it had sought to exclude. Yet *Our Town* is still there, providing the orderly system which, dissipating, draws more energy and information from the environment in order to wake itself into re-organizing on a more sophisticated scale. Like a unicellular seed that spreads into complex root and branch systems which reach out into the environment for more matter and energy from the soil and the atmosphere, *Our Town* is interacting with the environment of the spectator and of contemporary American culture in order to evolve.

In addition to creating a dissipative system which appears to function remarkably analogous to those described by nonlinear systems dynamics, the Wooster Group presents through *Route 1 & 9* a dazzling critique of presence or pure being. This, too, suggests connections to chaos theory, as Prigogine's own metaphysical quest has always been for proof that time is irreversible, and for a means to reconcile the ontological claims of Being and Becoming. Where classical physics, relativity, and quantum theory model a universe where the time-frame describing physical processes can always operate forward or backward (Being), the biological sciences imagine a reality bounded by birth, evolution, and death (Becoming). Prigogine has insisted that thermodynamics represents an integration of Being and Becoming by revealing that, in nature, the terms are

complicitous. As Hayles summarizes Prigogine's solution: "At equilibrium, thermodynamic equations are classical in the sense that they are reversible, but far-from equilibrium they are irreversible and hence bound to a one-way direction in time. A thermodynamics that integrates reversibility with irreversibility would . . . allow being and becoming finally to be reconciled."<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not Prigogine's largish metaphysical claims can be mounted on experiments in thermodynamics is of course open to dispute, but again the paradigm coming out of chaos theory allows one to articulate the kind of productive subversions the Wooster Group is attempting in *Route 1 & 9*. A pure ontology of presence constitutes reality as transcending history and existing beyond temporality, and acts as the foundation to the reactionary humanist discourse espoused by the Lecturer in *Route 1 & 9* ("Mr. Wilder's play helps us to accept our own lives however hard or limited they may be. And this feeling gives us courage and confidence and even exhilarates us." [6]). The equivalent discourse in science takes the form of reversibility, where physical reality is envisioned as a Newtonian absolute space with no time asymmetries, equally capable of operating backward or forward, and purged of the quotidian transformations that characterize the uni-directional flow of time in the human realm.

In *Our Town* we see a similar desire for atemporality and presence expressed. Since the play deals with "the days and deaths of the brotherhood of man," it is thus situated, paradoxically, both within temporality yet outside real time. Wilder constructs a temporal scheme in which "days" (process, Becoming) are subsumed by "deaths" (stasis, Being), thus creating an illusion that the two states are reversible. Throughout the play, any act which might mark temporal change is hypostatized as ritual (the children's rites of passage, Emily and George's wedding, Emily's funeral) and thus represent a *tempus illud* outside real time. In addition, the Stage Manager's strategic position within both the time of the play's action and also looking at that action from his perspective of eternity (what Charles Nagel calls the "view from nowhere") similarly conflates temporality and atemporality and renders time symmetrical. The Stage Manager's universalized discourse (similar to the mathematical discourse of proof that assumes the consensual and atemporal "we" in its demonstrations) constructs an environment in which all asymmetries are purged: a space, that is, free of noise, difference, and time. Moreover, while Emily is among the dead, she feels for a moment that she is simultaneously among the living ("and my baby was on my lap plain as day" [90]). She learns in fact that she can return to "live all those days over again," thus literally acting out a form of the principle of reversibility. Finally, Wilder designates that *Our Town* is to run from 8:40 to 11 p.m., thereby predetermining the future of the play and suggesting that if negative time were to replace positive, nothing essential in the shape or structure of the play would be altered: it would run from 11 to 8:40 and still be contained by the structure of death, marriage, birth. In such a world, there is no actual possibility of novelty, difference, or transformation, since every possible past and future state

of the town is contained as a Laplacian homunculus in its present state. Mapped in phase space, such a system would be described by an attractor so "un-strange" and rudimentary that it would be possible to predict and retrodict its state at any given time—exactly the message of Wilder's play and precisely the source of poignancy attached to his representation of humanity.

When the Wooster Group infiltrates *Our Town* they confront this representation of what Einstein called "the calm contours which seem to be made for eternity" and expose it as a set of contingent signs constructed by desire and lack. From the Group's perspective, reality's actual "contours" are fractal—that is, characterized by the degree of their *ir*regularity, their fractal dimension—and thus emblematic of American culture's dynamic character.<sup>26</sup> For Wilder, the fact that "our town" segregates difference (its Catholic and Baptist churches are isolated "down by the holla" and the resident "Poles and Canucks" are sequestered "across the tracks") is naturalized within a consensus that arbitrarily excludes sources of turbulence. The Wooster Group, on the other hand, positions difference as prior to consensus. Performance itself becomes the means to embody the real as a site where presence is never actually pure, where irreversible time and unpredictability, paradoxically, determine the nature and order of this very un-systematic system.

Similarly, the Markham vaudeville routine already mentioned creates a similarly local and chaotic effect in *Our Town* which directs attention to time's irreversibility. As David Savran points out, Wilder's play never confronts death, but romanticizes it by rendering it simply as life lived without the intrusion of disorderly passions. Markham's scatological routine is, Savran says, a "terrible affront because it everywhere assaults us with the inevitability of death . . . [it] is a scatological profanation in the rarified world of Wilder's dead because it evokes fear of a death now seen as the conclusive loss of control over one's own body."<sup>27</sup> A similar loss of order or control is represented in the exuberant and sometimes frightening violence of the dance movements in *Route 1 & 9*, which in Part 3 take the form of a "Ghoul Dance" complete with the blackface performers drooling stage blood from their mouths and exposing their genitalia to the audience. In addition to representing an alternative to Wilder's calm image of death as reflective repose (from the video monitors above we simultaneously hear Mrs. Gibbs deliver the line from *Our Town*: "Goodness, that ain't no way to behave!"), the dance emphasizes the contingent structure of reality. The Group manipulates and deforms space by their energetic movement through it. Opposed to Wilder's reified sense of time, the flexible and transactional nature of space is more open to chance and transformation. As Serres says, "Time is the most immediate and simplest aesthetic projection of ordered structure. . . . Spaces are repressed because they are . . . certainly disorderly."<sup>28</sup> In *Route 1 & 9*, it is the spatial subsystem presented live on stage, outside the tight frame of the video monitors, that acts as the clinamen—the source of human history—to disrupt the seemingly laminar flow of time and remind the spectator that disorder and

difference, rather than repetition, creates reality and thus drives time irreversibly and unpredictably in one direction.

In chaotic systems, according to scientists, "microscopic perturbations are amplified to affect macroscopic behavior. Two orbits with nearby initial conditions diverge exponentially fast and so stay close together for only a short time."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the reception of *Route 1 & 9*, like the structure of the play, can be mapped as something like a chaotic attractor: nonperiodic, yet at the same time confined to various basins of response. The text's exponential sensitivity to initial conditions and the Group's manipulation of those conditions by performative disorder and the unpredictable interpenetration of the boundary environment assure that in the performance no moment of "pure" presence, when signifiers "lock on" to signifieds, is possible. The Group avers with Mandelbrotian insouciance that the smoothly-shaped and stable Euclidean contours of the text are dull and stifling in comparison with the exciting and infinitely productive fractal irregularities that intertextual performance makes apparent. On the other hand, the spectator's response is never completely free, but predisposed by the terms and invariances set by Wilder's text and by the ideological context of the audience's own history. Like all fractal geometries, then, the Group insists that the strange and fluctuating borders between order and disorder are by far the richest and most complex sites to inhabit.

### The Politics of Chaos

What, then, is productive about intertextualist theatre and its reception? There is potentially a broad political purpose to the project of imaging contemporary American culture in the dissipative and fractal forms expressed in *Route 1 & 9*. The politics of such performances are coded, as William Worthen says of much postmodern theatre, "not only in the themes of the drama but more searchingly in the disclosure of the working of ideology in the making of meaning in the theatre, in the formation of the audience's experience and so . . . in the formation of the audience itself."<sup>30</sup> In order to "stage" a non-Newtonian spectator, the Group first implicates the audience in the passive and objective manner of seeing which creates the strong appeal for works like *Our Town*. Then, by making it impossible to align the dissipative structure of *Route 1 & 9* with the stable global system of Wilder's play, the performance asks the spectator to confront the possibility that any attempt to do so will result in a sterile equilibrium. In essence, the spectator is solicited to forego the usual attempt to predict and retrodict the logic of the performance and to experience instead a state of indeterminacy: to exist, that is, in the irreversible and contingent time of the performance rather than the seeming timelessness of Wilder's town.

To compensate for the loss of interpretive mastery and order, the spectator is allowed to seek instead plural and self-transforming networks of possible significations that emerge in time and which constantly shift, recirculate, split, and reorganize on a multitude of scales. The implication is that the process of constructing meaning in an unpredictable universe, like the blind building of the

skeletal house in Part 2, is a haphazard but stimulating (and even funny) experience. Relinquishing acculturated and hegemonized thinking which demonizes disorder, the spectator is able to welcome the "intrusion" of disorder as a provocative alienating experience. As Chambers explains in regard to the writing of Serres:

ordering is a falsification of the real, which has disorder as its fundamental and prevailing feature, and that, consequently, there is no ordering without violence, exclusion, injustice and sacrifice. The residue—what ordering excludes as inessential, peripheral or parasitic, that is disorder and "noise"—proves to be what Serres is in fact "all about." By excluding it, one misses the essential (188).

*Route 1 & 9*, then, attempts to return the spectator to the essential experience of disorder's strange dance with order.

This is not, however, simply a new form of "open" postmodern performance. By projecting American culture as fractal and by positioning the spectator as incapable of grasping its totality, *Route 1 & 9* delimits the desire and ability to measure and contain that culture within its axiomatic, Euclidean and hegemonic discourses. The performance forces one to recognize that the irregularities and differences that make an absolutely accurate measurement of American culture impossible are not mere difficulties or intrusive paradoxes, but are in fact the significant reality or shape of a multicultural society.

Such fractal contours do not necessarily imply that the culture is threateningly disorderly or out of control, but rather that it is dynamic. In situating the volatile and contingent relations of power that saturate social space, Foucault emphasizes that

Power's condition of possibility . . . must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.

The "substrate of [unequal] force relations" between discourses of order and disorder creates a heterogeneous and permeable ideological space which must of necessity remain processual and open to history. Faced with a discontinuous but inevitable exchange of orderly structure and disorderly turbulence, such a social "system" can only be expected to engender states of power and hegemony; nevertheless, these must always remain local and unstable and thus open to alteration.

The paradigm of dissipative self-organization contains the two related notions that far-from equilibrium systems (a) renew and recycle their components

while retaining the overall integrity of structure and (b) transcend existing boundaries in the process of evolving. Against a tradition of Eurocentric positivism that positions "our" town as the "end" of a unified human history, *Route 1 & 9* reveals that even the smallest islands of local difference may fluctuate and transcend global structures of power that exist in America's noisy (and therefore entropy-rich) culture. And while, as the anthropologist James Clifford notes, "it is easier to register the loss of traditional orders of difference than to perceive the emergence of new ones," such emergent orders may herald a sense of culture, not as static, bounded entities but as textual sites and processes constitutively open to contingent flows of order and disorder.<sup>32</sup> That, in itself, remains an empowering possibility. Like dissipative systems swimming upstream in the entropic river, gathering disorderly pockets of energy and information to stem the flow of disorganization, there exists in the Wooster Group's raucous town the potential for transcending existing forms of oppressive order by dissolving and then recycling them in order to evolve new and more complex forms of social organization.

## Notes

1. See for instance Michel Benamou, "Presence as Play" in *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Milwaukee: Center for Twentieth Century Studies, 1977): 1-26; Bernard Dort, "The Liberated Performance," trans. Barbara Kerslake, *Modern Drama*, 25:1 (1982): 60-68; Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality: the Subject Demystified," *Modern Drama* 25:1 (1982): 170-180; Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: the Case of Postmodern Drama" trans. Loren Kruger, *Modern Drama*, 29:1 (1986): 1-22; Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1989). An overview of the subject is provided by Stephen Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: an Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

2. I choose the term intertextuality because it signals a set of key concerns in the work I am analyzing, which Patrick O'Donnell has called "an anxiety and an indeterminacy regarding authorial, readerly, or textual identity, the relation of present culture to the past, or the function of writing within certain historical and political frameworks." Intertextuality motivates one to reconceptualize such entities as text, author, discourse, history, and origin and insists upon seeing them as linked in an economy of exchange rather than dominance. See *Intertextuality in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) xiii.

3. See Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* ed. and trans. Josué Harari and David Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) and *The Parasite* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982); William Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988); N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990) and *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991); and Alexander Argyros, *A Blessed Rage for Order: Deconstruction, Evolution, and Chaos* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991).

4. While a full explanation of the science of chaos is well beyond the scope of this essay, a number of accessible studies have appeared recently which outline the main tenets of the theory. See especially the following and their bibliographies: James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987); John Briggs and F. David Peat, *Turbulent Mirror: An Illustrated Guide*



to *Chaos Theory and the Science of Wholeness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); and Hayles, 1990, 1991.

5. Natalie Crohn Schmitt discuss the relations between quantum science and alternative theatre in *Actors and Onlookers: Theatre and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990). For a discussion of essential differences between paradigms drawn from quantum mechanics and chaos theory, see my article "The Politics of the Paradigm: Theatre, Chaos Theory, and Self-Organization in the Wooster Group's *Nayatt School*," *NTQ* 9.35 (August 1993): 255-266.

6. Paulson 1988, 31.

7. Ross Chambers, "Review: Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*," *Degré* Second July 1983, 186.

8. The model is certainly applicable to the work of other theatre artists, among them Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, and Caryl Churchill's collaborative efforts.

9. Alexis Greene, "Interview With Elizabeth LeCompte, 13 March, 1989," quoted in *Contemporary American Theatre*, ed. Bruce King (London: MacMillan, 1991) 119.

10. The Wooster Group is an offshoot of Richard Schechner's Performance Group. David Savran suggests that it was LeCompte's discomfort with Schechner's foregrounding of the rehearsal process (which could be kept open and processual) over the actual performance that led to the split within the Performance Group and the subsequent formation of the Wooster Group. See Savran, *Breaking the Rules: the Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986) 2-5.

11. For a revealing feminist critique of Foreman's own supposedly free and open phenomenological assumptions, see Jill Dolan's "Ideology in Performance: Looking Through the Male Gaze" in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1988) 41-59. Dolan convincingly demonstrates how Foreman's claims to a nonideological theatre of pure absence mask implicit assumptions and construct a decidedly male gaze for the spectator.

12. Paulson 1988, 35.

13. Argyros 1991, 247.

14. For further description of strange attractors, see Gleick 1987, 133-53.

15. Chambers 1983, 189.

16. Prigogine won a Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1977 for his theory of dissipative structures, and has since written several popular books expanding his findings into the philosophical and cultural realms. His theories are hotly contested by some scientists, who warn that his scientific conclusions are conjectural and his non-scientific applications of the theories purely speculative.

17. Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La Nouvelle Alliance: Métamorphose de la science* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). Revised and translated as *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1984) 180.

18. Greene 1991, 121.

19. The Group's strategy of reanimating moribund texts is again similar to Serres's project of reading. He writes:

Each generation should, at a certain point, devote itself to a great rereading of the tradition that preceded . . . today, we're witnessing the birth of a new kind of culture—a scientifically based culture in which the science-culture link appears as a totally new articulation. When [people] know what a "turbulent state" is in physics, they'll read the poem of Lucretius as I read it. So what am I doing? I'm using the culture that I see emerging to reread the tradition. (Serres, "A quoi sert la philosophie?" *Le Nouvelle Observateur*, édition internationale, February 6, 1982, 15).

20. LeCompte has often commented on her debt to Wilder, whom she calls her "predecessor." See Savran (1986) 18.

21. The only text of *Route 1 & 9* is found in the small magazine *Benzene*, 5/6 (1982): 4-16. All further references to the performance are to this volume. I have made use of this text and of my

own observation of the performance in the 1986 revival, as well as the summary of the play provided by Savran (1986, 10-45).

22. I am drawing here on the illuminating comments on *Our Town* made by Joseph Roach in his "Introduction" to cultural studies in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 9-15.

23. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 45. All further references are to this volume.

24. Prigogine and Stengers 1984, 271.

25. Hayles 1990, 92.

26. Fractals are the invention of Benoit Mandelbrot, who devised them to visualize the notion that complexity is embedded in order and vice-versa. For an explanation of fractal geometry and fractal forms, see Gleick 83-118.

27. Savran 1986, 29.

28. Serres 1982, 119.

29. James Crutchfield, J. Doyne Farmer, Norman Packard, and Robert Shaw, "Chaos," *Scientific American*, 255 (6): 51.

30. William Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theatre* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992) 146.

31. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 93.

32. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 14-15.

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