

Staging the Invisible: Giorgio Strehler and Luigi Pirandello

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Giorgio Strehler, whose name came to be synonymous with the *Piccolo Teatro* of Milan, died in the waning days of 1997. With a large legacy of celebrated stage productions (based on Goldoni, Shakespeare, Brecht, Chekhov, Bertolazzi, and many others) behind him, Strehler had moved onto consolidating his reputation also with English speaking spectators when his third reworking of Luigi Pirandello's unfinished play, *The Mountain Giants*,¹ was presented in 1995 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music to substantial acclaim. But, not counting the appearance in 1987 of Odette Aslan's massive *Strehler*,² a volume in which representative productions by the Italian artist were examined by select scholars with penetrating archival rigor, probing analyses of Strehler as stage director remained and still remains (with a few exceptions) rare outside of Italy.³ Odette Aslan, et. al., while aware of Strehler's engagement with Pirandello, did not give the 1947 and 1967 versions of *Giants* anything like the microscopic attention reserved for some of Strehler's Shakespearean and Brechtian productions. Fortunately, Strehler's final version of the Pirandello play, with his direction kept intact (and identical to the BAM presentation) was recorded on tape in a joint Italo-French production for *La Sept/Arte* (France) and *RAI* (Italian Radio and Television) in 1995.⁴ This essay purports to examine some of Strehler's notable strategies of *mise en scène* in connection with this third generation production of *Giants*, particularly in relation to the staging of its famous "missing" ending. The study reveals that engagement with Pirandello, beyond the obvious ties of common nationality and artistic fellowship, allowed the director the opportunity to fully investigate the problematic of "vision" and the limits of "visibility" in the very process of mounting a dramatic spectacle.

Following a standard set by one of his avowed mentors, Jacques Copeau,⁵ Strehler treated dramatic texts with studious deference, searching for his interpretive metaphors within the range imposed by the playwright. Nevertheless, in the typical Strehlerian production, rigor at the level of textual integrity was wedded to a deft use of stage images and the entirety of the creative effort was supported by a strong aesthetic sense for such things as the movement of bodies in space, the play of

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shadow and light, and the manipulation of textures and colors. Also, Strehler knowingly exploited the theatre's own plasticity as artisanal craft and practice. Aslan notes that Strehler "constructs the spatio-temporal structure of spectacles by exploiting the material of theatre" itself and that his attention to "detail" is reminiscent of the "race of artisans, the guild workers, the Confraternities of the Middle Ages."⁶

The brief and far from definitive profile of Strehler sketched above is mere excuse to consider an important aspect of his staging aesthetics in terms of the organization, manipulation, and deployment of stage images that constitute both a method and ethos. This essay asserts that Strehler's response to Pirandello's text directly implicates the problematic of "vision" in the very process of staging images, that the unfolding of the stage action in the production of *Giants* is concomitant with the display of the uncertainties of vision itself. With *Giants*, Strehler does not just dramatize the verbal communication between addressors and addressees on the stage, he fully investigates the function of seeing and being seen as it reflects the place, the movement, and the psychology of the actor/characters on the stage. By paying inordinate attention to the direction of the gaze of his stage characters and to the geographical layout that constitutes the field of vision, Strehler renders space multiple and unstable from the perspective of the different players and his potential spectators.

If the dialectic of the gaze in Strehler does not immediately evoke the "interplay of representations" where "representation [itself] is represented" (as exemplified by Michel Foucault's celebrated analysis of Velázquez's painting, *Las Meninas*),⁷ its aesthetic aspiration to dislodge the unitary vision does conform to the multiple fractured perspectives (projected from oblique angles) contributing to the dazzle of the Baroque ("Classical" in Foucauldian terminology). Louis Althusser, in context of a production based on the work of another Italian playwright (Carlo Bertolazzi's *El Nost Milan*), argued that Strehler innately favors pieces that exhibit "a latent asymmetrical-critical structure," theatrical pieces "marked by an internal dissociation, an unresolved alterity."⁹ Of course, Althusser had employed these terminologies in support of a fundamentally Marxist reading. Still, it is possible to regard an engagement with *Giants* (a text fundamentally closer in spirit to issues of "existential" enquiry rather than "class struggle" polemics) as constituting for Strehler yet another opportunity for broaching a text with an "asymmetrical, decentered structure."¹⁰ Furthermore, Strehler was not amiss in recognizing that in *Giants* (as in his other celebrated texts, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Each in his Own Way*, *Enrico IV*, etc.) Pirandello very presciently threw light on the theme of the dislocated "subject." Even when the actual thrust of his dramatic investigation did not align itself fully alongside a "de-subjectifying undertaking," with what Foucault would articulate as "the task of 'tearing' the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such . . . completely 'other' than

itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation,”¹¹ Pirandello’s theatre quite clearly questioned the unitary subject. Strehler, of course, posits his stage direction of *Giants*, not in the unequivocal realm of the obliterated subject where “annihilation” would presage the dissolution of theatre itself, but in the still precarious domain of the “decentered” gaze where fractured but lingering “subjectivities” resist dissolution.

For Strehler, the coordination of the multiplicities of visual exchanges conducted by the various performers requires the same attention traditionally accorded to the orchestration of words between players. Indeed, staging the trajectories of sight (and oversight) becomes for Strehler tantamount to picturing the landscape of human consciousness itself. On his stage, the power of sight itself often misleads; the ordinary glance is replete with misunderstandings, perception is frequently limited, consciousness is false. In the staging of the missing fourth act of *Giants* in particular, Strehler—guided by an outline that Pirandello had bequeathed to his son Stefano—presents a laboratory example of how stage space can be molded to create ambiguous images that incorporate the problematic of vision in the very act of image-making itself. Here, Strehler problematizes the complex relationship of visibility to invisibility, interpreting it to be not only a function of shifting perspectives and uncertain perception on the part of the characters on stage, but also the active engagement of the spectators in the play of oversight and sight, blindness and insight.

With Pirandello, a certain tragic view of life—bound not only to the authors metatheatrical aesthetics and to the narcissistic self-absorption of his various personages—is concomitant with the determination to unveil “truth,” which will remain, nevertheless, an elusive enterprise. In fact, the search for truth or purported reality, in Pirandello, happens to be only one of the author’s antipodal objectives. The love of disguise and camouflage, elaborate stage tricks and labyrinthine games of deception, constitute the other extremity of the author’s chief preoccupation. In sum, Pirandello does not side with strident “anti-theatricality” to better serve “reality”; his theatre does frequently subvert the illusionary world in which many of personages so often bury themselves—the falsehoods, the self-deceptions, the self-aggrandizements—but it does so with a view that the real and the theatrical are permanently intertwined. This pulling away at the critical moment from what Jean Baudrillard has called the “obscenity” of the real, this act of distancing the spectator from the “exorbitant representation of the truth,”¹² is one of the hallmarks of Pirandello’s art. In this sense, Pirandello’s relationship with truth is an enterprise shot through with fundamental ambiguity; Pirandello never totally repudiates what Baudrillard recognizes, independently of Pirandellian studies, as the strength of the “Baroque Theatre,” which “was still a kind of extravagance of representation,” on the same level as “feasts, fountains, fireworks, machine-like artifices” where

“[j]ust like trompe-l’oeil, its contemporary simulacrum,” it appeared “more real than the real, but without trying to confuse itself with the real. . . .”¹³

Baudrillard’s trenchant sketch of the Baroque and the concomitant urge to side with the reality of simulacrum (spectacle), rather than the reality of the “anti-theatrical,” finds familiar reverberations in the finished portions of *Giants*. Pirandello’s story opens with the arrival of a company of actors to a semi-deserted villa, ostensibly somewhere in the Italian provinces, a setting remote enough to appear strange and even oneiric. Here the actors (led by Ilse, Cromo, the Count) find a society of outcasts, poor misfits (called the “*scalognati*”) who revel in simple pleasures, their shadowy existence protected by the genial magician known as Cotrone. The evolution of the play shows the actors divided amongst themselves. Their unity is strained by the memory of a suicidal playwright-poet who had harbored unrequited love for the beautiful and now guilt-ridden Ilse, the compelling star of the company whose permanent obsession is to perform the dead author’s *Tale of the Changed Son* (in reality an orchestral verse play written by Pirandello himself).¹⁴ Group dissension is fueled by the “unpopularity” of the poetic text deemed by the actors as box-office poison and the decisive factor contributing to the impoverishment of the company. The traveling company is received warmly by the *scalognati*, and also by the wily Cotrone, who surprises his guests with a magical midnight show of his own, a spectacle in which puppets come to life, playing scenes that uncannily echo conflicts in the real life of these traveling thespians. Some members of the company begin to feel that Cotrone’s magic can penetrate their dreams, forcing them to join his show as somnambulist performers. In the light of day, however, these actors declare their chief objective, which is none other than to play the *Tale* in the open, at the foothills of the place where the “Mountain Giants” dwell.

Strehler’s staging of the “textual” material is already sensitive to metatheatrical exigencies of Pirandello who offers characters who package their simplest needs, desires and actions, into sub-units of stage performance. The platformed stage itself (designed by Ezio Frigerio) is stage-tricked to accommodate various miniplays, from the most ephemeral, amateurish, and innocent theatre games (the music hall routines of the *scalognati*) to the grand displays of passion and conflict issuing from the itinerant actors, to the music and song driven puppet-theatre replete with extravagant masks and robotic movements created (ostensibly) by Cotrone. Safe for the one instant quite late in the proceedings when Ilse and the hapless Count are ruefully agonizing over the details of their sham marriage together, there is never a time when an audience and, more often, groups of witnesses are not absent from the proceedings. From beginning to end, whether it be the *scalognati* rehearsing in agitated anticipation of performing for the visiting actors, or the actors themselves in their various subunits of actions (e.g., carrying the seemingly dead body of Ilse in a cart, chiming in with her in theatrical grief when she awakens herself to a

performance of *Tale*'s prologue, or when they implicate her in the great debate over the merits of the dead poet's work), all the personages will appear at one time or another as confused witnesses to events unravelling before their eyes, or as duped participants in a game not of their own making. And even as the machinery of the stage helps and abets the creation of strange legends, half-truths, and unsubstantiated stories, it facilitates the back and forth shift in perspectives that makes a performer suddenly an observer and vice versa.

High above the zigzagging path that leads to the topmost tier in the first act, Frigerio also constructs a square-shaped screen panel capable of appearing opaque or transparent in response to frontal, side, and backlighting. The panel also features a soft, draped center. The center of the panel is thus easily manipulated for speedy entrance and exits—magically transforming a concrete figure into a silhouette. Cotrone is particularly fond of showing how concrete figures become shadows with the simple trick of well-timed backlighting. When the actors perform the first scene of *Tale*, frontal illumination and spotlight transforms the screen into simple stage backcloth. Against this wall-of-light setting, Cotrone and his villa-dwellers observe in amazement how the presentation of *Tale* disintegrates into company squabbling, the same stage and the same moving spotlights following no longer the grief of a fictional mother but the internecine quarrels of a disorganized acting troupe. One of Cotrone's startled protégés, mimicking no doubt the potential confusion of the spectators of Strehler's own production, will inquire whether the actors are still acting. Indeed, if the activity is no longer staged, but something presumably real, then, the audience-actor relation, too, must undergo reevaluation. This constant need for reevaluation of the observer/observed relationship is fundamental to Strehler's directorial strategy throughout his response to Pirandello's written text. In fact, he stages long stretches of dramatic narration or units of histrionic display, actions initiated by the mostly mobile central figures (Cotrone, Ilse), observed nevertheless, by choric personages from multiple perspectives. Often a major protagonist will maintain a stationary position very briefly before moving contrapuntally to the surrounding observer-performers dispersed on raised tiers. The performers are, of course, to double business bound: they pull Strehler's spectators into the central vortex of the narrative, but are placed in privileged relationship to be seen and heard as witnesses; they must double also as vantage points from where spectators will judge the impact of the speech act or the performance event.

Observing Strehler's direction in relation to shifting perspectives, a fundamental query relevant to the "limits" of the visible in the space of vision itself comes to mind. One may well wonder, witnessing Strehler's manipulation of space, if there is not on the stage, as in life, some important element in the field of the visible that escapes our sight, *something* overlooked that questions the adequacy of what we see? Might there not be an invisible place within the visible itself, and if so by

what other designation, or through the auspices of what other articulation might this secret, invisible place communicate itself? Maurice Merleau-Ponty's celebrated observation recorded in his "Working Notes," published together with his unfinished essay "The Visible and the Invisible," gives theoretical focus to what is the source of contention in Strehler's complex images:

. . . but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework . . . and the invisible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it . . . one cannot see it there and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line* of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it (in filigree)—¹⁵

Following Merleau-Ponty, it is this very persistence of the invisible in the field of the visible that always remains a challenge to any stage director. Accordingly, Strehler's direction of the non-existent fourth act of the *Giants*, puts into relief a fundamental preoccupation with the dilemma posed by the limits of visibility.

Strehler had written that "[t]he missing final scene was the most crucial point about *The Mountain Giants* . . . because the characters from *The Giants* . . . cannot fulfill their story by a single word more . . . Pirandello never managed to write it. What a silence!"¹⁶ Where there was no dialogue, however, Strehler compensated. Before the 1966 mounting of the play, he jotted down his own impressions:

Ilse's death, when she is killed by the Giants who cannot understand her, happens in total silence. In front of the lights of a bare ramp, lit with acetylene lamps that flicker blue and yellow, the funeral procession [of Ilse, the play's chief protagonist] must become both heart-rending and tender at the same time, with the actors who have taken up the body of their dead sister showing in their faces where the make-up has run, long dark streaks descending from their eyes, running down their cheeks. In the darkness of the empty stage only one lamp remains lit when all the others are put out, and it pulsates like a planet in the shadows without ever going out.¹⁷

The audiences of the 1994-1995 performances of *Giants* were witness to a powerfully conceived "act without words" (without new words actually, for Ilse in the end repeats short phrases from *Tale* that she has announced in the first three acts), exclamations intermittently accompanied with music and sound effects, the entirety of the sequence bathed in crepuscular lighting. The spirit of Strehler's "Notes" was reflected in the final staging, but the difference between the mental

image and the final product is substantial enough to house our inquiry within Strehler's own *visual* practice. So much is certain; in the silent performances of the actors he so meticulously directed, Strehler revealed the kernel of his own multi-leveled and highly ambiguous, visual manipulation of space.

Already in the "Notes" powerful images are present. Ilse, the play's chief protagonist, seems to fall like Icarus in the famous Breughel painting, and the surrounding world takes no notice. An entire metaphysics is implicated by this turning away of the world vis-à-vis what could be construed as a momentous event. Other images: the light of acetylene lamps, a phosphorous glow, muted nevertheless, by the sulfurous overlay of blue and yellow tints, flickering, casting shadows; a funeral procession, including the removal of the corpse from the raised stage; a sudden close-up of individual griever, white grease, light pancake, dark eye-liners leaving imprint of open tears on sorrowful faces; and then, mostly penumbra, except for the one lamp that pulsates, but as customary with dying planets, temporarily continuing to emit light after being extinguished, bravely resisting. Pirandello's testament had suggested Ilse's death. Had he also implied the demise of humanity? Such is Strehler's initial impression, his ur-image from which his stage direction will derive. Clearly, the first impression marshals light, line, space, color, sound, movement, etc., in the service of a final disappearance of human life. *Götterdämmerung* meets Beckett's *Endgame*, which in turn shapes Strehler's impression of Pirandello's farewell. But Strehler's actual stage practice, his eventual mounting of the play's ending, as opposed to the actions indicated by his "Notes," will be somewhat different. He will hold on to the incipient danger of total obliteration, but he will counter this with attention to long stretches of creature resistance, an unwillingness on the part of humans themselves to go passively into the night.

Strehler does, at first, articulate an objective at the level of intent and message: he wants to show "the ideological core" of the play, that "The Giants win" and that the "The Giants are always defeated," because through "icy indifference, the absence of feeling that kills poetry along with Ilse," we can recognize that "[w]e are the Giants, lying in wait in life of every day, each time we reject poetry, and through poetry, reject mankind."¹⁸ This scene is suddenly a mighty accusation leveled against us as potential spectators. The entirety of Strehler's artistic know-how seems to want to serve this message. It will be demonstrated, however, that at this moment Strehler's "sublimation" of poetry, raising it as he does to the level of final significance, can only appear as his "conscious" intention, that it cannot also double as his deeper motivation; in practice, his actual stage direction will reveal an intention that surpasses the relative simplicity of his verbal articulation.

Merleau-Ponty's position, that the invisible is lodged already within the world of things, is intimately connected to things, but to the degree that our seeing eyes do not register it, the invisible is perceived to be elsewhere, located, outside of the

field of our vision, in the exterior. It is in our desire to see things fully in their plenitude that the adversarial conjunction of the visible and the invisible comes into play. Merleau-Ponty indicates that the impetus in us to capture the “thing itself” puts us in the ambivalent position of seeing and not seeing. Hence “[t]he transcendence of the thing compels us to say that it is plenitude only by being inexhaustible, that is, by not being all actual under the look—but it promises this total actuality, since it *is there*. . . .”¹⁹ The invisible will declare its ambiguous presence whether a stage director takes stock of its potential significance or not. Strehler meets the double status of the invisible (concomitant absence and presence) head on, by (a) imagining an ending for Pirandello’s unfinished text, and (b) using the very absence of that text to put into relief—to stage—the dilemma posed by the limits of visibility.

The unfinished fourth act carries with itself a well-documented account of Pirandello’s deathbed dictation to his son, Stefano, that would be the outline for the play’s ending. The actors will not succeed in capturing the attention of the so called “Mountain Giants,” a failure that has tragic consequences: the Giants, haughty members of an elite society, will decide not to attend the presentation prepared for them; in their place, they will send disgruntled and impatient servants who will drive the players from the stage with jeering cries raised from the first moment of the presentation. Ilse’s several attempts to carry on regardless is thwarted. She collapses onstage. Her dead body will be carried offstage by the actors.²⁰

In Strehler’s production, the fourth act offers, from the beginning, a fluid definition of space, one that undermines, decenters, and displaces whatever figures appear in it. Moreover, we will witness a process whereby space, altogether vacant, will progressively allow itself to be filled, only to empty itself through a progressive process of visual decantation. Through the slit of the curtain, revealed at first are seemingly free-floating planes suspended in mid-air, surrounded by darkness. This effect is the consequence of direct overhead lighting that illuminates the steps of the staircase that leads from the stage floor to the platformed area which runs parallel to the lines of the apron. The minimal, architectural units are not new and were present in acts two and three, but the blue-yellow lighting has shaped the space into isolated planes suspended in volumetric space. By simple, light manipulation, Strehler will repeatedly undermine the stability and specificity of locale.

The full opening of the curtain ushers in the actors, led by the veteran Lumachi, who is pulling the front end of the thespian cart. A huge follow spot captures this collective entrance depicting an uphill journey: bodies are bent, backs straining, knees giving way, regards anguished, furtive, isolated. Seconds later, Ilse appears, in her own spotlight, apart. She is as she has been throughout the performance, imbalanced, restless. A step toward us, a glance in our direction. Does she ever see us? We are never sure. Often she appears haunted. Once, in the third act, when she

declares her resolve to perform only for the Giants, she leans over, raises herself on the balls of her feet, extends her right hand, draws a graceful, balletic arc in the air, and finishes the gesture by pointing to us. If ever the invisible wall between player and spectator was penetrated, it was then. Now, she regrets coming forward and swings her entire body around; she discovers the staircase and the half-illuminated ramp hovering above. She freezes. We do not know that she has been momentarily petrified by the Medusa gaze of what we will discover to be the look emanating from the space of the Giants. The sight of her destination she finds terrifying.

The actors, as if symbiotically attuned to the slightest fluctuation of Ilse's feelings, form an exaggerated tableau of grief: hands stretched above their heads at various angles, protecting themselves from who knows what heavenly disaster. Nothing in this exaggerated pantomime is unmotivated. Most of the gestures and movements in display not only are symptoms of the perennial suffering peculiar to this group of unfortunate players, but also reflect the internecine conflicts plaguing the members of the company. There is, however, beyond the usual quotient of anxiety, surplus agitation and frenzy—the searching glances of performers who, in the absence of the supportive gaze of spectators, seem to have lost their very identities. But, in fact, these players make a last ditch effort not to fade and disappear. They seem to motivate themselves by an impossible but palpable desire to “be,” to be for each other, for Ilse, for the Giants, for us.

Jacques Lacan said that the Merleau-Pontian invisible is the “gaze,” which must be differentiated from that which is visible to the eye: “What we have to circumscribe by means of the path he [Merleau-Ponty] indicates to us, is the pre-existence of a gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.”²¹ The Lacanian gaze, to the degree that it locates vision in the place of the Other, reasserts itself on Strehler's stage: the actors spread out centrifugally from Ilse's position; they carry with them their make-up kits, their stage-costumes, their tattered traveling-bags, even as the roving gazes of moving spotlights suddenly crisscross the empty space and lively circus music wafts across the stage. Where does this transformation originate if not from a precipitous assertion of the collective will of these spooked performers who, on the verge of disappearance, bend the coordinates of neutral space to sudden purpose, shaping the environment to form, if not a concrete “stage,” creating at least a makeshift backstage area? In the absence of spectators, the performers invoke imaginary mirrors everywhere, catching their own glances reciprocated by invisible mirrors, thus reasserting, even if ever so briefly, a “presence” they can barely claim. Rouge, eye-liners, pancake, and wigs appear; smoke-balls of powder explode upward, filling the light everywhere with granular dust particles. In the middle of all these visual elements, Ilse is standing tall and erect: she has finally found her grip in this tricky space; she is, for the first time, seemingly an island of calm amidst the excitement of her colleagues. In this

terrible but wide-eyed stillness, she conveys, to paraphrase Lacan's words on Sophocles's "Antigone," a pure "dazzle"; this Ilse is gripped by desire for a fatal performance the way Antigone embraced death in the name of primordial laws of kinship.²² Accordingly, in her terrible beauty, Ilse is not so much the visible object of desire animating the choral retinue scurrying around her: she is the very embodiment of fatal desire as such.

The subsequent appearances of costumes and masks are crucial to the *trompe-l'oeil* effect that is part and parcel of this imagined ending. The actors' stage-costumes are humble and cheap affairs, material that must be worn over their everyday clothes: ersatz frocks and bow-ties, exaggerated lapels and tails, straw-hats, bowlers, wigs, outsized dresses for men in drag, etc. The interaction that constitutes actors helping each other with their disguises is lively and effective in tricking us. The generic mask is large, pasty-white, stiff and round, often depicting huge, darkened caverns for eyes and split in the center by an inverted T depicting the nose. When worn like a hat, the mask will allow the actor to display facial expressions, but with the slightest tilt of the head downward, a second face imposes itself. An added uncanny effect proceeds from wearing the masks on the back of the head, so that the upstage turn of the body will render the illusion that the actor is still gazing at us, the full illusion being complete when both sides of the stage-costumes, display, by way of artful painting and stitching, a uniform front and back design.

Time comes for Ilse to move with ceremonious dignity to a position downstage where she will be helped by Spizzi and Diamante with her costume and make-up. Spizzi, steps forward to help Ilse with a wimple. Momentarily, Ilse disappears out of sight, concealed behind Spizzi's mask worn on the back of his head, thereby conveying the illusion that our gaze is being reciprocated. Soon enough, Spizzi steps to the side and Ilse with her own mask in hand is looking in our direction. With great dramatic calculation, she will lift with both hands her mask (a replica of her own face, features enlarged, exaggerated) and place it over her face. At this very moment, above the ramp, a curtain slowly rises from the ground level and imposes itself in our sightline. The particular magic of this curtain is that, like some old Roman, theatrical device (specifically, an *auleum*), it is raised into our view, and, as it reaches its full height to the sound of distant muted snare drums, it catches a smoldering orange-yellow light projected onto it from behind. Ilse's stage readiness has occasioned a cinematic dissolve: from an imaginary tiring-house, we have been transported to an illuminated space of spectacle, one that we may still mistakenly assume as being intended for us, but which in fact is being prepared for "others."

Strehler's "Notes" indicated that the "performance" will be "before, behind and around a curtain."²³ The decision to employ a curtain at this point will serve as a fundamental index to Strehler's aesthetic: here, the curtain is not a mere backdrop

for action unfolding before our gaze, but the central device that marks the dividing line of a stage carved into constituent *recto* and *verso* sides, putting us actually in the backstage observation point *behind* the curtain which supposedly opens onto the stage of the “Giants.”

Taking stock of the stage action described so far, it becomes abundantly clear that the actors undergo “displacement,” to use Norman Bryson’s expression, each time they reach for “authentic presence.”²⁴ Generally, actors enter the stage to fill what is a void in the theatrical space. Strehler’s actors, however, carry the burden of their past failures as the mark of their own evanescence with them. They seem to fade before our very eyes. If sometimes they muster up hope and exuberance, convincing themselves of their ability to achieve fullness of being, as in their preparatory activity for performance before the Giants, their very child-like enthusiasm, their excited ritual of disguising themselves by way of costumes and stage-makeup, serve here only to accentuate the reverse, a fading, a gradual disappearance. Their donning of masks, they don’t realize, is yet another sign that space is undergoing decantation, emptying itself of their human presence.

Strehler’s stage direction is building toward a climactic displacement whereby we are, as viewers, put into the position of palpably witnessing the fading of the actors, not only from our own overcoded perspective, but also from the other side, from the place where the void throws our gaze back at us. In an analogy that incorporates stage and life in the discourse of visibility, we can evoke Lacan’s dictum: “We are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world. That which makes us consciousness institutes us by the same token as *speculum mundi*.”²⁵ We can say with Lacan that as soon as “the gaze appears” already there as it were, personal vision reorients itself and the “subject tries to adapt himself to it [the gaze], he becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure.”²⁶

It is impossible for the stage director to place us in the position of an originary gaze, the perspective of the world itself, one which predates us, into which we are born, but from which we are expelled. The stage director can only approximate this gaze by an anthropomorphic abstraction, by way of what Bryson calls a “trope of displacement,”²⁷ a term by which we attribute to someone, or something, the power of being able to *see* from a place where *we* would like to see, but from where we are forever exiled. Strehler puts us in that approximate position by evoking the vanishing perspective of the Giants.

We notice that we are distracted from Ilse precisely at the moment we find our own regard being reciprocated by the regard of her mask. Conveniently, we could assume that Ilse is finally acknowledging our gaze, hence inviting us to identify with her. But this assumption is merely another visual trap. At this very moment, the curtain appears and our attention moves elsewhere. She, too, is beckoned by this stage that has appeared as “a super-positioning” of another “planar surface”²⁸

over the one to which our regard has been privy. Now, the actors will stand at slight distances from each other, on each wing side of the curtain backdrop, allowing their bodies to stand in the place of the wings of a "Serlian" vista. In the absence of arcades, cornices, and flagstones, the bodies of the actors will serve as architectural elements arranged against the central vanishing point which is now at the dead center of the curtain opening. When Ilse steps across the imaginary vanishing point as she passes through the curtain, her action clearly bisects the entire stage (including the raised platform) into two perfect halves. Bryson's description of the Albertian perspective in painting, "the organization of all lines around a clear and centrally positioned vanishing point. . . . a space which can be said uniquely to welcome and accommodate the viewer"²⁹ is germane to a consequential doubling of the gaze in Strehler's *mise en scène*. According to Bryson, the vanishing point is "what Alberti calls the centric ray," and as such

. . . the viewer's space is embraced by the perspective, and since the space of viewing and that of painting join together, or at least a fiction of continuity is suggested, the viewer is uniquely incarnated by the *veduta* as a physical presence on the actual stage of the painting. . . . Yet the paradox is that the 'centric ray' may also be turned around. At the picture plane. . . . two cones intersect: the cone of lines emanating from the viewer's eye; and, within the painting, the other cone of lines that emanates from the vanishing point.³⁰

Bryson's description of Renaissance painting and Strehler's tableau effect as he arranges the moving picture of Ilse's crossover into the space of the Giants are comparable. When Bryson says that when the second cone, the "opposite of the first, . . . runs in reverse . . . it introduces into the image a place, a mark of 'othering,'"³¹ he might as well be describing the vantage point of the Giants (their servants actually) as they observe and reject Ilse's performance. On the live stage, as opposed to the space of the static Renaissance vista, Ilse has to cross over, perforate the curtain at the center and step to the other side, to impose on us the effect of the vanishing point in the orderly Renaissance painting: in both spheres, "[t]he source of the centric ray, twin term to the viewer's monocular site, turns viewer into image, seer into seen."³²

By a simple, synaptic, mental association, we recognize that the servants of the Giants, as they wait for their curtain to open, are occupying a place similar to ours as we awaited the opening of the first act of our play. The Count knocks his staff on our side of the stage platform, cuing Ilse's entrance. With great elan, Ilse opens the central flap of the curtain and steps onto the stage of the Giants. We see Ilse's shadow as she gesticulates, recognizing in the shadow's magnified contortion

the effort of the actor's entire body to articulate the first few lines of the *Tale*. The actors who are biding their time to join Ilse on the stage, unable to see Ilse as we see her, stretch and strain to second guess the spectator reaction; when they hear the sounds of disapproval raised from the other side, they mime expressions of agony and disappointment. Ilse, defeated in this first round attempt to impress her spectators, reappears before us. The actors, subduing their own desire to perform, converge on Ilse in a great, collective show of support. It is decided that Cromo should go out and seduce the spectators with a Music Hall dance number. Cromo is an immediate success. His is a vulgar clown's performance, shaped by low humor and lewd gestures, as readily attested by his reflection on the curtain. Encouraged by the reaction to Cromo, the actors urge Ilse to reappear before the unruly crowd. Again we will see and hear the interrupted, expository monologue of the *Tale*; we observe again Ilse's moving shadow outlined on canvas, tracing not only the anguished gestures of a mother's grief—lamenting the abduction of her son—but also the suffering of an actor (Ilse) who is rejected and vilified in the presence of rowdy and uncaring spectators.

It may come as a shock to us that Ilse's most dramatic moment has occurred offstage: in her final agony, she has not addressed us eye to eye; we merely catch a glimpse of her fall as she makes her most desperate appeal to the invisible spectators on the other side. Her shadow makes three repeated efforts to assert itself. The moving silhouette, backlit against the curtain, is terribly eloquent: the figure (Ilse), raises itself a third time, this time to its fullest height and maximum tension. Then, it snaps and begins to crumble in sections—head first, followed by arms, upper torso, legs. Finally, it crashes to the floor in a big heap. Everything else staged by Strehler subsequent to this moment is coda to the manner in which he has positioned us with respect to Ilse's death.

The spectacle of Ilse's death, viewed by us as shadow play, is placed in the field of vision on the very line that marks the mid-point of the double conic rays of the Albertian perspective. The second cone, whose point of view is lodged at our perspectival vanishing point, is the viewpoint of the Giants. In painting, according to Bryson's explanation of the Albertian perspective, the vanishing point which reciprocates our gaze, putting us in the position of being seen, transforms us into object perceived by the "other"; hence, a sense of self-alienation. This is to say, we recognize the limitation of what we see as being conclusive, and we realize that we are not just viewers, but also objects in a field of vision already in place, subordinate to a dialectic that turns us into the objects of pure gaze. In Brysonian terms, then, we have been assimilated within "[t]he centric ray [that] constitutes a return of the gaze upon itself."³³ In Strehler's theatre, Ilse's placement visible to the Giants (shadow for us) is the fulcrum where the retro and verso of the double conic rays fold, thus superimposing the viewpoint of the Giants squarely on ours. But since there are no Giants, no servants of the Giants either, nobody who, as spectator,

Strehler would like to position on the other side of *our* stage, it becomes abundantly clear that “we are the Giants,” as Strehler has noted. In order to fully look at ourselves from the strange place of the other, Strehler undermines the very corporeality of the Renaissance image, by exposing the machinery of its visual construction, the very machinery that serves to show Ilse’s demise as a shadow event.

Ilse’s performance outlined on canvas from our perspective, and supposedly corporeal and three dimensional from the viewpoint of the Giants, is no less concrete for appearing as mere shadow to us. For once it is established that the shadow and the original are interchangeable, what will be carried out in front of the curtain in our view will be no less real, for appearing as shadow, to the Giants on the other side. This is how far Strehler pushes the dynamics of sight in his stage direction: even when the Giants are assumed to be absent, their perspective from the other side, which would see the events of our side of the stage as shadows, is not annulled. To the degree that we are spectators *and* the Giants, we will see the actors as corporeal presences and as shadows at the same time. The final pathos of carrying the dead body of Ilse out of the space of theatre is not independent of this double status of the actors as actors and as shadows.

The actors drag Ilse’s body onto our side of the platform. An entire choric sequence of grief follows. Pointing at Ilse emphatically at first, each actor will proceed to look at us accusingly. When the tableau of group mourning is over, the actors amass the fallen heap that is Ilse’s body into their collective arms. Now their regard is diverted toward their task. Down the staircase and toward the middle aisle they carry the martyred protagonist. Even when they have completely penetrated our space, we cannot help but imagine the action as a shadow play, because our gaze, doubled by the perspective of the Giants as we imagine it, converges. Not only are the actors shadows, but also we, as spectators, begin to fade under the insistent gaze of the other side. The actors, eyes lowered, pass through. That we are trapped in the field of reciprocating gazes is emphasized by the masks of the actors, worn as they are above heads bent low; these masks still glare at us, insistently, provokingly. With the exit of the actors, Strehler’s proscenium curtain, tinted black and metallic, descends like a guillotine and splits the actors’ cart.

As bleak an ending to a staged production the figure of a ravaging iron curtain might be, the sum of images trafficking in Strehler’s *mise en scène* communicate a dialectic of vision that resists a descent into absolute nothingness. In this essay, I have evoked three generations of responses on the part of Strehler to the segment of Pirandello’s play left incomplete. From idea to image to stage direction an evolution takes place that moves from a certainty of interpretation to a profound analysis of what the very act of staging the gaze might portend. The clarity of Strehler’s reading, one that he might even derive from Pirandello at an armchair distance, remains the “articulated” position most removed from that invisible that he will render visible in his stage direction. When Strehler says that “we are the

Giants,” he is ready to conclude that “we” are the murderers of poetry. Thus, the first response is that the Pirandellian text is specifically about the death of poetry and clearly humankind is responsible for it. Strehler’s second response, images embedded in his “Notes,” already draws on visions that suggest a universe whose light is being slowly extinguished, leaving only a solitary lamp braving the dark. The ramp with the dying acetylene lamps that are dimming is just such a picture: end of life as we know it. There is, however, the third response, Strehler’s *mise en scène*, and this *mise en scène* navigates between the two responses: it shows that decrying the death of poetry is also a form of “sublimating” poetry, redeeming its value against all odds, and that looking squarely in the face of certain death is to undergo the shock of recognition that our own world hides everywhere its otherworldliness. But making the invisible visible is a creative effort, a struggle: hence the third response, no longer the death of poetry, but an *agon* between death and poetry, a struggle that will forever defer the lonely hour of the final judgment.

Notes

1. See the English translation by Marta Abba, appearing in *The Mountain Giants and Other Plays* (New York: Crown, 1958).

2. See Vol. 16 of the Odette Aslan compiled and edited tome, *Les voies de la création théâtrale* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1989) which is the most serious collection of studies on the diverse prose and lyric theatre practice of Strehler.

3. The material in English on Strehler, beyond David L. Hirst’s *Giorgio Strehler* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) is negligible. Hirst finds the Goldonian, Shakespearean, and Brechtian productions of Strehler worthy of sustained attention; his curiosity does not, however, extend to any great consideration of Strehler’s experiments with Pirandello.

4. *I giganti della montagna*, by Luigi Pirandello, dir. Giorgio Strehler, videocassette. *La Sept/Arte* (France) and *RAI* (Italian Radio and Television), 1995.

5. In his *Per un teatro umano: pensieri scritti, parlati ed attuati* (Milan, 1974), Strehler pays homage to Copeau as follows: “Copeau or the sentiment of theatre’s unity, unity between the written script and representation, actors and scenographers and musicians and authors, all unified, inclusive of the last theatre technician. Theatre as the place where everyone can, does know and must do the work of the others, some better than others. Theatre as moral ‘responsibility,’ as love that is clinging and exclusive” (134; my translation).

6. See Aslan’s “De Giorgio Strehler à Victor Garcia,” *Théâtralité, écriture et mise en scène* (Quebec: Hurtubise, 1985) 93-94; Aslan observing Strehler in rehearsals of Carlo Goldoni’s “village” trilogy with French actors (in preparation for a Parisian opening), says that his direction of *Trilogie de la villégiature* showed a “near exhaustive knowledge of the work he was mounting and its context, making him respond to all objections and capable of showing evidence for his analysis . . .” (96; my translation).

7. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 307. Foucault reconstructs Velázquez's autoreferential painting in which the painter depicts himself in the act of painting (back of canvas visible to us) at a moment when the children of the Spanish royal family are visiting the artist's studio, while the King and Queen, who may be present, depicted, if at all, by a possible reflection in the backwall mirror: "the broad dark surface of the canvas with its back to us, the paintings hanging on the wall, the spectators watching, who are framed, in turn, by those who are watching them; and lastly, in the centre, in the very heart of representation, nearest to what is essential, the mirror. . . . the interior lines . . . point towards the very thing that is represented, but absent" (308).

8. Martin Jay asserts two points of helpful clarification: "Foucault . . . did not differentiate between the baroque and classical eras," and "*Las Meninas* is normally interpreted as an example of baroque rather than classical art, and Velázquez is understood as having subverted any confidence in the objectivity of the phenomenal world in favor of a subjective perspectivalism," in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1994) 405n89.

9. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979) 142.

10. 143.

11. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotexte, 1991) 31.

12. Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies* (New York: Semiotexte, 1990) 57.

13. 61.

14. In the original Italian—*La favola del figlio cambiato*—written by Pirandello, appearing in *Maschere Nude*, vol. 2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1958); this verse play, attributed to the "dead poet" who haunts Ilse, was written more or less contemporaneously with the writing of the *Giants* in 1936. It depicts the plight of a grieving mother who finds that her healthy son has been stolen and replaced in the bed by a dimwitted child. The mother's search for her true infant takes her to the palace of the king. Here, she finds the changeling ready to be crowned monarch of the land. Prior to his coronation, however, the surrogate prince discovers his true identity and is reunited with his long suffering mother. The identification of Ilse with this tragic mother, or rather with the "desire" of this particular mother, is itself a topic for an extended essay.

15. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968) 215.

16. See Strehler, "Production Notes for *The Mountain Giants*," *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre: A Documentary Record*, ed. and trans. Susan Bassnett and Jennifer Lorch (England: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993) 167.

17. 167.

18. 171.

19. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 191.

20. This is a summary of Stefano Pirandello's notes. The entire text, in Marta Abba's English, is attached to her translation of the *Giants*.

21. See *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 72.

22. See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992) 243-56. See also Mohammad Kowsar, "Lacan's *Antigone*: A Case Study in Psychoanalytical Ethics," *Theatre Journal* 42 (1990): 94-106.

23. Strehler, "Production Notes" 167.

24. See *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (London: Cambridge UP, 1984) 137. Here and elsewhere I am borrowing Bryson's analytical vocabulary in relation to his groundbreaking analysis of the composition of the "gaze" in painters such as Cimabue, Giotto, Pollaiuolo, Raphael, David, Ingres, and Delacroix.

25. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 75.

26. 83. The Lacanian gaze, to the degree that it locates vision in the place of the Other, is a valuable referential point for locating viewpoints in space. From another perspective, the Lacanian "gaze" is a manifestation of the "drives"; here its reintegration into the mimetic circuit becomes almost impossible. The gaze as "drive" conforms to Timothy Murray's statements on the Lacanian drives in general: "unrepresentable" and "split between libido (desire) and death"; a drive has "no goal other than to make manifest its potentiality," functioning in "nontemporality (ubiquity of time and space) and contradiction" ("Introduction: The Mise-en-Scène of the Cultural," *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray [Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997] 17).

27. Bryson, *Tradition and Desire* 133.

28. 63.

29. 76-77; Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1477), whose *De Pictura*, Books I and II, introduced fundamental laws of perspective in art and architecture, and whose theories exercised seminal influence throughout the sixteenth century, impacting the scenic vistas of Serlio, and the architectural designs of Palladio.

30. 77. In *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983) Bryson makes a similar argument: "The centric ray constitutes a return of the gaze upon itself: the cone of lines emanating from the Albertian eye is doubled in its opposite, a cone radiating towards it out of that point from which all the architectonic lines radiate . . ." (106).

31. Bryson, *Tradition and Desire* 77.

32. 77.

33. Bryson, *Vision and Painting* 106.

The text on this page is extremely faint and illegible. It appears to be a standard academic article layout with a header, a main body of text, and a footer. The header contains the page number '76' and the journal title 'Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism'. The main body of text is too light to transcribe accurately, but it seems to consist of several paragraphs of prose. The footer area at the bottom of the page is also illegible.