

“The Thought of Performance”: Theatricality, Reference, and Memory in Herbert Blau

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What moves me in theater is precisely that, the power of theater
as thought, which thought without theater cannot approach.

— Blau, *Blooded Thought*

Herbert Blau shares with many in theater studies the concern that the migration of performance to other disciplines and the “theatricalizing of daily life” deprive their discourses and practices of specificity, making them increasingly unavailable for theater studies.¹ How, he asks, given the new hegemony of performance, can theater resist the reproduction and commodification of the image that is occurring on a global scale? Will the economy of reproduction, with “image consuming image,”² succeed in relentlessly and totally recuperating the very concepts and inventions designed to describe and critique it? In the context of theater, strategies for reappropriating performance for the stage have ranged from the replication of images in parody to forms of reflexive theatricality that question the place of performance in the reproduction of culture and society. Strategies such as these offer critical analyses of performance, which may be grasped through Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of “théâtrique,” a socio-symbolic apparatus that, like a theater, divides inside from outside at all levels.³ Relocated within the space of theater, performance explores the inlay and layering of the socio-symbolic and the conditions of its reproduction. In avant-garde and contemporary theaters, performance undergoes a “retheatricalizing” or refiguration as theater, rendering theater viable once more as a means of cultural understanding and intervention. Such “retheatricalizing” is found in Antonin Artaud’s radical project of undoing the space of representation, though without his belief in the metaphysics of ritual: “In this theater, unmake space,—a new notion of space that we multiply by tearing, undoing it thread by thread. We wear it down to the weave, beneath it appear unheard of riches.”⁴ Suggestive of possibilities for unmaking and remaking the variety of performance spaces in modernity, the multiplying of theater and its

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spaces needs to be reevaluated within the present turn toward context, place, and historical specificity.

In other words, the question of performance and its generalization can usefully be rethought in turning to issues that might be qualified as “referential.” It is, for instance, the referent that is at stake when social, cultural, and historical maps are redrawn so as to engage the complexity and diversity that constituted them in the first place. At a time of heightened demand for the legitimization of enabling identities as well as the resurgence of ethnic violence, a “society of the spectacle” (Guy Debord) modeled on performance tends to intensify the competing claims being made on language, communication, and reference. Much important critical work today focuses on the political and socio-symbolic character of representations and the ways they obscure or allow for a diversified and more complex referentiality. Indeed, many of the debates concerning identity and performance in postmodernity take place in this field of questions that is at once historical, cultural, economic, and theoretical.

Involving both performance and issues of reference, theater, with its complex history and far-reaching inventions, fully engages in this questioning. The main problem with the ubiquity and globalization of performance is perhaps not really that the study of theater is thereby alienated from itself; such study most likely never existed in the form of an autonomous and unified set of practices and genres.⁵ Rather, the challenge for theater studies is to elaborate ways of reading and seeing that remain open to the actual diversity in experimental theater practices. In theater and performance, experimentation gives new shape and definition to the shifting and permeable borders between inside and outside, aesthetics and culture, and representation and history. Clearly, theater cannot be completely modeled on forms of cultural analysis derived from media studies, for these forms may lack the concepts to grasp theater’s most original displacements, re-presentations, inventions, and effects on an audience.

Herbert Blau’s work is profoundly engaged in this recent and ongoing history of theater’s modernity. Undoing the separation between thinking and doing, theory and practice, body and mind, his “theaterworks” have been influential in provoking a rethinking of the ways in which traditional Western oppositions structure and are de-structured in theater. Moreover, Blau’s writing work is valuable for its questioning of the ways these oppositions are once more becoming cemented around theater vs. performance, with theater studies assigned an inside position in opposition to the outside (referentiality) of cultural studies. The supposedly formal practices of theater are opposed to the “social” practices of culture, high art to low, aesthetics to politics, the particular to the general, theory to practice.⁶ When they are unthinkingly propagated, these dualisms, which “critical” theater has historically resisted, come to filter the perception of theater practices, placing an arbitrary limit on even their most original and timely interventions into the politics of culture.

One of the singular merits of Blau's work is that it shows how theater can negotiate the difficult course between critique and performance without allowing itself to become limited to the terms of either one or the other. In the following discussion, I propose first to examine his wager on behalf of theater and the resistant dialogue he pursues with the hegemony of performance in the society of the spectacle. Second, after revisiting Blau's project of restoring performance to the essential foundations of theater, I will consider his particular conception of the "audience." Finally, I will show how audience and performance are together conceptualized with the unconscious, time, memory, and history in his work.

Since *The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto* (1964), Blau has charted performance's rapid drift away from its conditions of possibility in theater, a movement he believes needs to be reversed. Appropriated first by the other arts and critical theory, then "moving exponentially to the epistemological center," the theater has become a privileged hermeneutic model in the social sciences as well as other disciplines.⁷ In circular fashion, theater has provided them "with a conceptual apparatus for interpreting the reality from which, paradoxically, it draws its substance as a form."⁸ He detects, correctly, a certain "animus against the drama."⁹ Taking up Roland Barthes's discussion of the Image-repertoire and spectacle as "the universal category in whose aspect the world is seen," Blau is attentive to performance's capacity to expand not only from theater and other disciplines but "across the binaries of art and life." He concludes, therefore, that the only true objective of theater "is to make *less* theater, which is to say, to reappropriate it from widespread adulteration in the social body."¹⁰ The idea of less theater paradoxically opens onto the essential or foundational theater pursued in his work as a director and theater theorist.

Insisting tirelessly on the many dimensions of the "tautological double bind of theater and ideology,"¹¹ Herbert Blau locates the work of theater in the powerful hermeneutic circle that links the ideology of performance inseparably to the performance of ideology. His real object, however, is to recapture, from within the space of that doubling between theater and ideology, what he calls "the essential theatricality, the truth of illusion, which haunts *all* performance."¹² Theater's truth is and historically has been the truth of illusion, which must be reapplied to present-day performance models precisely because "ideology emerges within performance, not outside it."¹³

Blau formulates the idea of a "resistant theater," which, through an "ontology of disappearance," resists the double bind operating between performance and ideology.¹⁴ Such an ontology of disappearance, the making of less theater, is conceived as a problem of repeating "the thing that always escapes you, the still

inarticulable substance of theater: its resistance as disappearance, pursued as theatrical fact.”¹⁵ Throughout his work, Blau explores theater practices to discover within them “the threshold moment in perception or classification when one thing turns into another. Or seems to.” What allows theater to be resistant, therefore, is its potential for “breaking through,” a process that Blau tracks in what “precipitates” or “incites” theater at its most subliminal.¹⁶ “What I have always been concerned with is the instance of emergence or transformative moment at which any practice, in the theater or elsewhere, becomes like ideology itself, something other than what it appeared to be, like theater before it identified itself.”¹⁷ Blau’s notion of a resistant theater is inseparable from his desire to privilege an “insistent (or resistant) subjectivity” (82), which is valorized to the extent that it actualizes or precipitates a form of rupture. “In theater we look for a rupture of the plane of being, to the plane of knowing, through performance . . . an *eruption* from one plane to the other.”¹⁸ In these terms, the appearing of the Ghost in *Hamlet* ought to create a shift in which the ground “goes under.”

Theater for Blau is a way of knowing, which can explain why he privileges the reflexive theaters of Beckett and Genet, for instance, rather than the performance of abject indifference or the spectacle of bodily trauma. Blau’s pioneering theater work on Kafka’s *The Burrow* and on the body as aftermath in Beckett constitutes theatrical practices designed to grasp the extent to which “ideology has become in the proliferous exposures or venereal imagery of the society of the spectacle increasingly enamored with and immured in a politics of the body.”¹⁹ As may be gauged by his language, his diagnosis of the reified and commodified body in mass-media performance is not overall a sanguine one. What disturbs him in the image of the body dispersed globally is the possibility that “no human language or historical event can resist this diffusion.” Nevertheless, he argues forcefully that the body in performance, which is a “haunted referent,” is the very means for a return to the referent, both despite and because of the fact that the body is an “overdetermined object or figure with a history.” Thus it is within the dominant discourses of “historically constructed, encoded, or textualized bodies” that he detects “a reassertion of a universalism of the body.” For him, the body in performance is, despite appearances, the essential body which, however, in the aftermath of the Holocaust is founded on an ontological fault (118). I will return to these questions having to do with the irreducible space of theater in my discussion later of Blau’s notion of the universals of performance.

Watchman: I speak to those who understand. But if they fail, I have forgotten everything.

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*²⁰

In the following discussion, I want to examine more closely how Herbert Blau's "theaterwork" engages the indeterminate borders between audience and community and the negotiations between theater and culture. The points of reference in his writing range far and wide, attesting to overarching, indeed encyclopedic knowledge as he creates connections between theories, performances, genres, and times. Interrogating contemporary theater and performance art, critical theory, political events, Greek tragedy, avant-garde experimentation, and Elizabethan theater, he elaborates a modern allegory of theatricality that bridges their separate histories and audiences. Blau, one might say, "retheatricalizes" drama and performance *for* theater, detecting in their most telling moments of self-reflection their enduring power to perform the past for present and future audiences.

Blau's resistance to being located, assigned, or even assigning to himself a particular "subject position" is of considerable significance for his project of an embodied idea and its "blooded thought." Because of that resistance, he writes as one who puts himself on the line, and often challenges his own presuppositions and conclusions. Blau's relation to interdisciplinarity, therefore, is hardly a 'disciplined' one. In a forum on interdisciplinarity, he laments the fact that "current debates still presume that passports need to be stamped and subject positions declared. The rites of passage across boundaries are not really settling for an in-between, where space and time cross with variable knowledges and ideological differences—what is being settled upon is a new set of categorical imperatives."²¹ Instead of adopting the discourses of the many disciplines to which he refers, such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, and theater, classical and cultural studies, he seems intent on bending their form and context to the singular rhythms of his own reading and, especially, voicing.

What he claims for his work is a capacity to move "laterally and associatively across the canon"²² and well outside it. Compared with the smaller workshops of cultural criticism today, his work stands out by the drama of its writing, the ample theatricality of its voicing. This writing possesses a specifically "Blauian" phrasing, whose rhythms, intonations, pauses, echoes, and movement carry a distinct and resonant voice. This phrasing possesses a particular dialectical movement that, at its point of greatest generality, is undercut by a restriction, precision, and limitation that finally displace and restage the idea. While fundamentally dialectical in its overt argument, this paradigmatic movement in Blau almost invariably limits its own certitudes, undoing their general signified meaning in a return to the specific context of a material theater and its practices.

In Blau's modeling of theater, he is ever taking up the most salient of new paradigms, discourses, and performance spaces that appear on the cultural scene, such as technology, the body, political events, and social movements. His work mirrors their languages and images, but instead of reproducing them he produces

them again, differently, re-using and even wearing them out. Even where these discourses and their “Image-repertoire” appear to have shifted furthest from the space of theater, Blau insistently pursues their underlying logic. He identifies the strands of which they are made, to the point of rupture at which they yield up their continuity with, and dependence on, the spaces and histories of theater of which they are a part. His writing disseminates these performance spaces, returning them to the ontological, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic dimensions of theater as being, psyche, space, time, and memory. In other words his writing enacts a series of restagings of a thought, or variations on it, making theatricality both its means and ends. Theater as “the thought of performance” is not only his subject, his writing as well becomes the site where an intricate *mise en abîme*, or mirroring to scale, of that performance is played out. Turning ideas one way and then another, always towards themselves, he seeks to make them confront at once their own limitations and further possibilities.

These features of his writing over the past few decades give it a continuity that is not only stylistic and thematic but structural and genealogical as well. In particular, the recurrence of the pronominal shifter “we” contributes powerfully to such a sense of continuity of purpose over time and is indicative of some of the most general, paradigmatic structures of his work.²³ It might well be argued that the “we” in Herbert Blau embodies and reaffirms a specifically Western, male-gendered, humanist subject whose assertion of universality erases differences even as it moves to construct itself on the traces of their disappearance. This argument is not absolutely misplaced, but in Blau’s case it is incomplete. He takes up the relation between the “we” and the “I” indirectly in reference to Harold Pinter’s *No Man’s Land*, which presupposes the individual’s problematic relation to collectivity. Blau quotes Theodor Adorno who, in *Philosophy of Modern Music*, writes of a collectivity that is “necessarily degraded almost to a fiction—to the arrogance of the aesthetic subject, which says ‘we,’ while in reality it is only ‘I’—and this ‘I’ can say nothing at all without positing the ‘we.’”²⁴ Adorno’s precisely articulated dialectic between “we” and “I” translates into a “we” in Blau that is at once pervasive and symptomatic. In fact, the “we” in his work on the audience enters into a productive tension with the disappearance of belief in a cohesive and homogenous *communitas*. In other words, the deixis “we” is the index of what he takes to be a necessary community of interests in theater and which he nevertheless recognizes as being barely available to “the audience” in postmodernity. I would suggest that “we” in Blau may be figured as a tightrope suspended over a chasm—somewhat like the acrobatics of Philippe Petit walking between the towers of the World Trade Center, which in 1990 emblemized for Blau the performer’s alienation, solitude, and the “audience as Brechtian *suspension*.”²⁵ Combining danger, technical rigor, and “heroic asceticism,” Petit’s performance figures what is close to Blau’s own aesthetic even as he recalls Brecht’s notion of the “splendid remoteness of the performer

corresponding to the splendid isolation of the spectator that he wanted 'left intact.'"²⁶ Thus, when Blau speaks in the first person plural, the "we" serves as an act of will and signifies a repeated call for the need to sustain the making of theater through its "truth of illusion," even if it is in "the light of a future anterior" (372).

As the idea of a common performativity in culture becomes an increasingly problematic means of grounding the relationship between self and other, performer and audience, the past and the present, the plural "we" persists as a wager in Blau's work. I take this wager to imply that, unless it remains possible to defend human interests and concerns at the most general level, the rights claimed for particular individuals and communities are ultimately threatened as well. Certain links and continuities, Blau intimates, need to be available within the discontinuities and diversities of gender, class, race, and culture. Because these (dis)continuities may be understood in terms that are at once ecological, historical, theological, cultural, and aesthetic, the "audience" for Blau is a heuristic device to reflect "upon recent cultural history in relation to performance as an activity of cognition."²⁷ He identifies in the "audience" a significant shift to what is an increasingly diverse response, which characterizes a relation of response to signifying practices. "Not only *who speaks? who listens?* But who *constructs* meanings? And in what positions of language? since variant social interests are contending to disarticulate the process of signification, the signifier itself, from what in its omnipotence keeps out of sight: the dominant and oppressive systems of meaning."²⁸ The audience is "a body of thought and desire," which does not exist prior to the play, but is "initiated or precipitated by it." It is in the audience that Blau locates "issues of representation, repression, otherness, the politics of the unconscious, ideology, and power . . . memory, mirroring, perspective, and the spatializing of thought itself."²⁹ As his writing insistently unfolds the audience's agency, scopic drive, and full participation in producing a play's theatricality, we can conclude that the "we" stages at once the presence and absence of community, its "intelligible contradictions" rather than "a community of discourse."³⁰ Nevertheless, it may be argued that "we" in Blau is potentially prescriptive, and never more so than in the realm he privileges as the making of theater and its dramatic processes. Thus, it is worth relating the "we" to specific modes and practices that place the making of an audience into further perspectives.

The audience, which Blau calls a "community of the question" and traces back to Greek tragedy, may be presented, as some playwrights, directors, and performers have done, through modes of direct or frontal address to the audience.³¹ Explicitly formulated, for instance, in Brecht's alienation techniques as well as in Beckett's stage directions, the theatrical significance of destination and address comes into play in the work of the Wooster Group and "Mabou Mines' DollHouse," for instance. It is most pertinently phrased by Eugenio Barba in his proposition that the angle of the actor's gaze is based on a radical change of balance.³² Blau, too,

has expressed his interest in an aesthetics of displacement that becomes directly manifest in “the question as to whether the actors are addressing the audience.”³³ He quotes Lee Breuer’s insightful comments that

[the actors] are actually talking to a point between themselves and the audience. The audience observes a conversation between the actor and a point in front of them. It is not direct address in the Brechtian sense. It is rhetorical since it is spoken to the ideal abstract listener. The audience can *observe this rhetoric* for what it is . . . The play is making up the audience precisely at the time the audience is making up the play.³⁴

Blau pursues such an aesthetics of displacement through another figure, the turntable, which in Barthes’s wording functions as a *mise en scène* of listening: “as if on a turntable in the staging—we are brought into the intersubjective space of the endless play of transference, where what is being listened to appears to be the listener” (132). Such a notion of theatrical staging, metaphorized as a transferential turntable, recalls Lyotard’s important analysis of the permutation of narrative posts in postmodernity. In this model of permutation, the positions of sender, receiver, and referent may be substituted for one another.³⁵ Relating this model to theater practices, I would argue, allows one to see how these substitutions stage the taking up of speech by the receiver or hearer rather than issuing from the conventional site of sender or speaker. Furthermore, by conceiving of the referent as having its source in either sender or receiver, theater restages alternative histories in which it is the post of the referent itself that is transmuted into the post of sender. Aimé Césaire’s *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* on Haiti is but one example among many.

At a time when a sense of “lost theatrical community”³⁶ is especially pervasive, Blau who is skeptical of mythical and ritualized forms has mounted a strong resistance to what he calls the “foolishness about ritual in performance.”³⁷ Taking up Victor Turner’s conclusion that “the *communitas* we desire in ritual is achieved only where there are sufficient occasions outside ritual in which *communitas* is experienced” (261), he criticizes the naïve desire for community and its willingness to surrender individuality to “a new totalizing process of reliminalization” (262). Instead of community outside ritual, Blau perceives “nothing but fractures, fractions, fragments, and splintering vested interests, all of which contribute to general powerlessness” (262). Yet Turner’s understanding of liminal spaces and the rites of passage demarcating the community’s ritual and institutional borderlines is not necessarily antithetical to Blau’s ideas on theater. Instead, these ideas tend to overestimate the generalized failure of ritual in modernity at the local and global levels. Moreover, ritual and collective memory are not in fact alien to Blau’s ongoing

pursuit of “what incites theater at its most subliminal levels”³⁸ and hence engages theater at the limits of the unconscious, cultural memory, and history.

Drawing on Brecht’s notion of alienation but without his belief in theater as direct political action, Blau refuses to entertain nostalgia for the myths of lost cultural unity. Significantly, therefore, “we” in Blau is at once split and reconstituted around thought/theater as division, disappearance, solitude, and alienation. His objections to the older “participation mystique” of the 1960s and 1970s with its “sacrificial realism” must be seen as linked to his ongoing resistance to the “commodification of the image” and its “lure of community” in the “fantasy text of the postmodern participatory spectacle.”³⁹ To these he opposes a reading of Brechtian alienation in postmodern terms: “while the technique of Alienation is a material condition of the postmodern, it was meant to resist absorption into a compulsive reflexivity or, in the commodification of the image, being swallowed up by the Symbolic” (239). Once again, the issues involved here have not only to do with an abstract understanding of alienation or its techniques, but with Blau’s own ethic of resistance to being absorbed and having theater assimilated into the totalization of the image.⁴⁰

Blau questions the mystifications of participation, ritual, transparent community, and the commodification of image reproduction because all, in their particular ways, claim to banish from theater what he takes to be its very foundation: separation, division, and originary splitting. Similarly, his critique of notions of pure play and ubiquitous performance is based on their erasure of distance and difference, which for him are the very conditions of theater. Unlike theorists who find in the fracturing of a homogeneous audience the possibility of new theatrical events based on provisional identities and many-voicedness (which, after Mikhail Bakhtin, has been called *heteroglossia*), Blau defines theater as a space of dislocation, alienation, and solitude, claiming that “in the space of dislocation the idea of the audience as a unity cannot be sustained.”⁴¹

Unexpectedly perhaps, his idea of the audience as a space of alienation is shared by Jill Dolan who, in “Geographies of Learning,” questions the oppressive nature of the demand that there be unmediated reciprocity between subjects.⁴² Along with Judith Butler and Elin Diamond, she argues for provisional communities of different performed identities. In her recent work on utopia in performance, Dolan elaborates what she calls “affective rehearsals for revolution,” writing that “audiences form temporary communities, sites of public discourse that, along with the intense experiences of utopian performatives, can model new investments in and transactions with variously constituted public spheres.”⁴³ She invokes Turner’s view of audiences and participants who experience feeling themselves become part of a communal whole; she focuses specifically on his theorizing of *communitas* as anti-structure, “most evident in ‘liminality,’ [which refers] to any condition outside or on the peripheries of daily life” (14), which encompasses performance. Dolan

upholds the idea that the effect of the performance on the audience as a temporary community extends into various dimensions of public life. To understand the debates on performances of identities, their histories and geographies, and the loose communities that are made and unmade about them, Blau reminds readers that critical and theoretical definitions of difference must not be lost sight of. Not limited to a narrow definition of the postmodern, such an attention to dimensions of difference brings performance-in-general within theater-as-difference. The question arises, however, whether difference does or can ever remain difference-in-general or whether it needs, like theater itself, to be effectively actualized through the interventions of specific cultural and materialized differences and identities. For Blau, all such transitional, performed identities would nevertheless have to take into account, in theatrical terms, what he maintains is the *sine qua non* of theater: its articulation as ghosting.

Inspired by Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, cultural studies now encompasses a broad spectrum of cultural critique in the areas of media, feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies. Yet, it could be argued that cultural theory today betrays a desire for realism. Blau seems not to have forgotten what many appropriations of postmodern thought overlook, namely Ferdinand de Saussure's pronouncement concerning the arbitrary nature of the sign. Although the reverberations of Saussure's semiotics of the arbitrary are visible in a wide range of constructivist theories of gender and culture, these appropriations often enter into a tension with their demands for realism and mimesis. In the context of theater and performance, claims are made to have escaped from realism, but it persists despite and because of its supposed disappearance, so that "mimesis is dead, long live mimesis."⁴⁴ At the core of Blau's theatricality, however, is a ghosted, sublime theater, which is as opposed to new realisms reflecting society as it is to the participatory lures of the postmodern. His paradigmatic terms for this theater are the thought of performance, the truth of illusion, the disappearance of theater, the resistance in theater, and the unconscious as *mise en scène*. Together, these terms map out, as I shall elaborate, theater's engagement with the unrepresentable in the remembrance of history.

For Blau, the significance of psychoanalysis and postmodern thought, especially in the work of Derrida, Lacan, and Barthes, lies in the implicit or explicit theatricality of their theories. As he states, "in deconstructionist thought the theater has been made . . . the object of the critique of domination and power" (182). Placing his work at a certain distance from Foucault's theatricality of knowledge and power, Blau instead invokes deconstruction for staging the essential theatricality of thought in performance. It is this aspect of Blau's work that connects him most decisively with the strain of postmodernism that is not simply a celebration of multiplicity, indeterminacy, and free play of signification but rather a critical view of the forces and tensions underpinning socio-symbolic systems as such. To a remarkable extent,

his writing is informed by the critical edge of French thought that consistently questions its own terms, limits, and possibilities.

What his reading of Derrida accentuates specifically is deconstruction's potential for opening up the scene of representation to theater as an essential separation or division (of "essences" in Artaud). Blau's theater, of which he says "there is no theater without a ghost" (348), shares with deconstruction its view of the long history of metaphysics and its intimations of an ongoing metaphysical closure. His work with the KRAKEN theater group illustrates the goal of tracing the "activity of thought pursuing itself through performance."⁴⁵ For instance, in the play *Elsinore*, there is no Hamlet character—"what there seems to be, in the ghosting process of performance, is a piece of him, shadows and reflections, figures conjectures affects affinities double exposures." Countering the question of location and situation underlying all identity—"where's Hamlet?"—Blau responds that in the character's dissemination, one would be referred instead "by the multiple exposures of ideographic space, laminated, to the whole distributed presence of performance" (48). Calling upon Derrida's notion of arche-writing, Blau circles back repeatedly to what Derrida calls "that very thing that cannot let itself be reduced to the form of *presence*." Elaborating a specific dimension of theatrical ghosting and quoting Derrida, he calls it "the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present" (82). Blau concludes that "there is not a gesture of performance which does not follow this path, since it is in the act of performance that we are always giving visible body to what is not-there, not only the disappearance of origin but what never disappeared because it was never constituted. How could it be, since memory cannot contain it?" (84).

Blau, it seems, is intent on stripping away layer upon layer of contingencies in order to get to the foundational structure of theater and performance as such. In this respect, his work stands in sharp contrast to current tendencies in theater studies, which give credence to the most visible contingencies as the very matter of identity construction and determination. For Blau, psychoanalysis provides the model for the originary emergence of theater in the psyche whose unconscious, as Lyotard reminds us, cannot be staged in the order of representation.⁴⁶ In *The Audience*, Blau states that his previous work, especially *Take Up the Bodies* and *Blooded Thought*, was an "extended meditation on the incipience of theater and its appearance in the psyche."⁴⁷ In the context of Bob Wilson's *Deafman's Glance* and the staging of Christopher Knowles, Blau asserts that the unconscious and theater share the same ontological and phenomenological space. "Wherever the unconscious is, it is in a scene of theater" (302). In a yet more specific formulation, Blau situates the "appearance of theater, through fracture, in the birth of the psyche itself" (54). To pursue this simultaneity of being and rupture, he provides a heightened scenic reading of Freud's discussion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of the child's *fort/da* game, which enacts the mother's disappearance, substitution,

and return in the spool and string toy.⁴⁸ Similarly, the originary emergence of the audience occurs in a fracture or “breaching” that Derrida’s reading of Freud’s scene of writing identifies as the “first staging of memory,” its visual representation or theatrical performance.⁴⁹ If Blau brings Derrida and Brecht into closer dialogue, it is by accentuating the fundamental alienation within the latter and by drawing Derrida’s deconstruction and Lacan’s scene of psychoanalysis more resolutely to theater and performance. Despite Brecht’s own mistrust of the unconscious, Blau supplements Brechtian alienation with psychoanalysis, situating the audience at the interface between distancing and the play of *fort/da*: “that story is prefigured in the behaviour of the child who, as an *effect* of the enactment, controls the story by *becoming its audience*” (297). In Lacan’s account of the scopic drive, there occurs a doubling, a space of dehiscence in which . . . for Blau “the audience . . . materializes in the space between the look and the gaze” (77). The audience’s materialization, by which it is in fact brought into existence, is also what radically splits it. “*What can look at itself is not one*. The already divided spectator is repeated and further divided” in the memory of an original separation (55).

What draws Blau to the psychoanalytic project in particular is its crucial goal of tracing the divisions of the unconscious well into the realms of the socio-symbolic. These divisions elude determination not only by mimesis but by the commodification of the image as well. Thus, crossing psychoanalysis with theater provides the means to interrogate the society of the spectacle by re-staging their common terms, namely, the spaces of performance, audience, perception, the gaze, the other, and the most concealed object. In the movement of “substitutions and scenic displacements—the compulsive revisionism of the unconscious—what is there to be seen is for all its theatricality, *essentially out of sight*” (52). Blau elaborates on this process of theater’s haunting, describing it as a

dialectical wordplay between the visible and the invisible, where in the very sinews of perception the spectacle appears as a trace or decoy, the ghostly, reverberant *surface* of the seen. Theater is made from this play of meaning in a structure of becoming, the passing form of an invisible force, where we lose meaning by finding it, and there is always something repressed. (57)

In Blau’s skeptical gaze, repetition dogs revolution in that “every opening contracts into the repressions of history, history as repression” (369).

Blau’s desire to witness and to bear witness to that ghosted other scene (of the unconscious) is bound up with his conviction that its staging is founded on an originary and constitutive split. Performance can only gesture to that other scene in its disappearance and fading, as “it passes out of sight.” If this constitutive separation in substances, essences, and origins is found to be essentialist, then

all speculation of a general order must be deemed essentialist—an impossible conclusion, despite the many signs of empiricism's new ascendancy. Blau is drawn to the theatricality of psychoanalysis precisely because it does not close off that which, eluding the empirical, remains unrepresentable in the space of performance despite its materialization as theater. This aspect of his work may be productively related to that of Peggy Phelan on the need to escape the seductions of total visibility. Such visibility, she affirms, is all too readily recuperated by the ideological dimensions of the apparatus of images and their reproduction as simulacra (Jean Baudrillard).⁵⁰ Taking less distance from the technological, Philip Auslander argues for the possibility of a “progressive cultural politics . . . from within the structures of mediatization itself,” suggesting that it take the form of ideology critique and resistance.⁵¹ These positions are at the center of current debates on the role of technology, mediatization, and art in the production and dissemination of not only information, but other ways of experiencing and knowing.

As I suggested earlier, Blau allows one to rethink the relation between the particular and the general through theater's drive to negotiate them. A reading of his work, therefore, should neither understate nor dismiss out of hand his privileging of the theatrical alongside the universals of performance. He tracks these universals of performance in what exists “aside from that outer show,” which for him encompasses “bodies, space, light, sound, gesture, motion, dress or undress, more or less dramatic content, coherent or scattered narrative, song and dance, masking and mimicry, exhibition of skills, shamanic or mimetic.”⁵² He resolutely opposes these elements of appearance or staging to the “latent substance of performance which is divisive, solitary, alien, and apart” (183), which arises in the essential loneliness and separation of the performer who, “in a primordial substitution or displacement, is born on the site of the Other.” Performance as separation and division is “the one thing which, if there is no communicative synthesis at all, nothing but a breach, also crosses cultures” (183). Skeptical that Western subjects can in fact occupy by mimesis or mimicry the site of non-Western subjects, he suggests that what theater needs to rediscover everywhere is the foundational division within representation shared by all. However, it might be argued that any one-way projection of this splitting from within the logocentric subject onto different, specific others remains problematic because it always risks reducing alterity in order to constitute and reproduce the (now divided) Same. As I proposed earlier, difference-in-general needs always to be actualized in specific practices of difference, which are defining characters of theater's inventions. Yet difference-in-performance eludes recuperation because it is founded on a phenomenology of perception, which in Blau is inseparable from what he calls the “maybe imperceptible physiology of the inaccessible other.”⁵³

As Blau formulates them, the universals of performance are neither universalizing nor ahistorical, and to read them as such is to miss some of

their essential features. They emerge in the context of a specific movement of disappearance, solitude, doubling, and originary splitting, which combines with the phenomenology of consciousness as a consciousness of performance, of being looked at. Time, for instance, is a universal of performance, as is “someone dying before your eyes.”⁵⁴ In another context, Blau again uses similar terms to speak of Beckett’s *Breath*: “the body in performance is dying before your eyes.”⁵⁵ Consciousness, defined by phenomenologist Edmund Husserl as consciousness of something, here links up with a dialectical relation of change between performer and performance to enact a reciprocal transformation.

Read in this framework, the universals of performance, which are founded on difference, fading, ghosting, and the importance of memory, ultimately seem to have little in common with claims for universal values or their exercise as power. They engage, rather, the possibility of theater as the embodiment and materialization of memory and history. It is essential, therefore, to recall what is at stake in what Blau calls “the *ghostliness* that moves the performance”⁵⁶ and which he also identifies as a universal of performance. For Blau, “no sound is purely made, no gesture *in absentia* from time, no image without memory.”⁵⁷ The stage space itself is “a palimpsest of memory, value, and desire,” of which the fading borders or bounds are cloaked by the “burden of history” (274). His grasp of the intimate connections between memory and language is developed further when he writes, “the language comes at us in familiar and unfamiliar cadences, a lamination of voices remembering, mnemonic and referential, with a history in the words forgetting that words forget,” even if words are used, instrumentally, as “vocables without memory” (229). For Blau, then, theater is nothing less than an irreducible and enabling space in which subconscious memory “has to be recovered through the interpreted murmur of history.”

As the privileged process of ghosting in theater, memory haunts Blau’s theater and theory. Although he does not (or cannot) tell us what the specific context or content of that memory may be, historical memory is the essential and common term in his triangulation of performance, remembrance, and reference. The history of theater and theater itself are nothing less than a certain relation to history: “the almost undeniable remembrance of history that *there is something in the nature of theater which from the very beginning of theater has always resisted being theater.*”⁵⁸ Essential to understanding this history, since Plato, is the emergence of theater “in the weakening of myth, a memory place.”⁵⁹ It is in both Artaud’s and Lacan’s notion of audience that Blau locates “a memory space, the redoubled extension of remembrance on the stage, which is, however, the repetition of a memory that is always failing.”⁶⁰ Similarly, returning to the question of memory in postmodernism, Blau quotes Beckett’s *The Lost Ones*: “none looks within himself where none can be,” adding “such is the stage, it appears, of the deepest

form of memory, history without a subject, everything remembered and no borders to memory itself: the site where none can be.”⁶¹

Blau places theater at the very core of the unconscious and of cultural memory, and in reciprocal fashion he places the unconscious and cultural memory at the core of theater. In the forgetting of theater, he states, lies the willful forgetting of everything.⁶² In no matter what anti-theatrical form, even where the clear desire to forget theater is overtly expressed, “theater is . . . a function of remembrance. Where memory is theater is” (382). Herein lies, I believe, the necessity for universals of performance that are not reduced to the mystifications of myth, ritual, and performance as presence. “If we are to continue, however, in the *making* of history—that is, exercising through the theater some measure of control of our presence in it—our work must include a critique of the illusion of an uninterrupted present, keeping it in mind.”⁶³ Universals of performance thus are grounded in a difficult yet necessary condition, that of affirming a common performativity as the very possibility of cultural memory. It is a performativity founded on difference, separation, and resistance to the reduction to the Same, yet vigilantly open to the “encounter with the unforeseeable.”⁶⁴

What disturbs Blau about the society of the spectacle with its commodification of the image in performance is that it accelerates the lack of memory and contributes to “eroding the sense of the audience as history” (208). His notions of community, the endangered public sphere, and their relation to theatrical performance lead him to a question that is essential for the present, and which he finds posed in Hannah Arendt’s introduction to Benjamin’s *Illuminations*: “how does the past *adhere*, whether as nightmare, illusion, or tradition? That determines the way we think about community, or even whether we think of it at all, since community is a question of what is commonly remembered and adhered *to*, or thought of as better forgotten, or forgotten however it is thought?” (21) Arendt, though, speaks of language itself as the site of an ineradicable past, a history, and a politics. For Blau, work on and against such adherence (or identification without separation or difference) to the past is precisely what allows for enabling and sustaining different orders of audience and community. The work of cultural memory in theater must be performed as a community of the question, which is a remembering as well as a forgetting that I believe he takes to be neither involuntary nor accidental.

Ghosting within performance as separation and difference is essential to remembrance and the making of history, especially that unrepresentable history that cannot be narrated within the culture of total visibility, which in its apparent obviousness, imposes a theater “without shadows” (Artaud). Theater in Herbert Blau, as the instantiation of cultural memory, has much to do with Lyotard’s notion of the unrepresentable in postmodernity and what he calls its “task of having to bear witness to the indeterminate.”⁶⁵ The question as to whether history, memory, and the unconscious are threatened by being increasingly in sync with capital in the society

of the spectacle and its totalizing reproduction of images is precisely the substance of today's most far-reaching debates. Imbuing these issues with a particular drama, urgency, and voicing, Blau anticipates but also precipitates these debates, linking them inextricably to the vital relationship between cultural memory, difference, and performance in a resistant theater for the 21st century.

Notes

A combination of endnotes and parenthetical citations have been used in this article in those places where multiple references are made to a single source. The first reference to a source is cited with an endnote.

1. Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theater* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982). See Jill Dolan, "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the Performative," *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 417-41. Rpt. in *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan UP, 2001). See also Philip Auslander, ed., *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literature and Cultural Studies*, 4 vols., (London: Routledge, 2003).

2. Herbert Blau, *To All Appearances: Ideology and Perform* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 94.

3. Jean-François Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: U. G. E., 1973). See also his *The Tooth, the Palm*, trans. Anne Knab and Michel Benamou, *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) 282-88. Jacques Derrida's notion of the "parergon," which defines the supplementary logic of framing, is developed in *Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

4. Antonin Artaud, "Le Théâtre de la cruauté (Second Manifeste)," vol. 4 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 317. My translation.

5. Dolan, "Geographies of Learning" 417-419.

6. Dolan, "Geographies of Learning" 420-424.

7. Blau, *Blooded Thought* 30.

8. Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982) 9.

9. *Blooded Thought* 33.

10. *Take Up the Bodies* 11.

11. *To All Appearances* 54. See Bonnie Marranca, "The Virtual Theater of Herbert Blau," *Ecologies of Theater: Essays at the Century Turning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) 277-285.

12. Herbert Blau, *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 163.

13. *To All Appearances* 50.

14. In *Blooded Thought* xiv, Blau invokes Bert States's work and his own *Take Up the Bodies* in referring to theater and its ontology of disappearance.

15. *To All Appearances* 86.

16. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) xiii, 40.

17. *To All Appearances* 37. See Marvin Carlson's discussion of Blau in *Theories of the Theater: A Historical and Critical Survey, From the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 515-18.

18. *Take Up the Bodies* 17.

19. *To All Appearances* 108.

20. See Blau's discussion of Aeschylus in *The Audience*.

21. Herbert Blau, "Forum: Forty-one letters on interdisciplinarity in literary studies," *PMLA* 3 (1996): 274-75.

22. *The Audience* 47.

23. On the problematic of the "we" in post-Holocaust philosophy and history, see Jean-François Lyotard, "Discussions, or Phrasing after Auschwitz," *The Lyotard Reader*, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989) and *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988). On the "we" in identity politics, see Elin Diamond, "The

Violence of 'We': Politicizing Identification," *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992).

24. *The Audience* 355.

25. 334. On Ground Zero and art in a time of crisis, see Blau's "Art and Crisis: Homeland Security and the Noble Savage," *PAJ* 75 (2003): 6-19.

26. *The Audience* 355. An almost identical formulation recurs in the context of Blau's subsequent discussion of theater's capacity to "work toward collectivity only through a double assumption that virtually denies it: the splendid remoteness of the actor and the splendid isolation of the spectator" (371).

27. 28.

28. 8.

29. 25-26.

30. 75.

31. 273.

32. Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theater Anthropology*, trans. Richard Fowler (New York: Routledge, 1995).

33. *The Audience* 271.

34. 271.

35. Jean-François Lyotard, *Instructions païennes* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), 16; see also Chapter 6 of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1981).

36. *Blooded Thought* 26.

37. *Take Up the Bodies* 248.

38. *Blooded Thought* xvi.

39. *To All Appearances* 89.

40. Julia Kristeva argues that to combat the normalization of communication, which blocks access to the workings of the unconscious, the languages of culture must become a form of psychic resistance and revolt. *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) and *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia UP, 2000).

41. *The Audience* 333.

42. Dolan, "Geographies of Learning" 435-436.

43. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope in the Theater* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005) 10.

44. *The Audience* 137.

45. *Blooded Thought* 40-41. The Kraken is a Nordic sea monster that lives fathoms deep and dies when it surfaces.

46. Jean-François Lyotard, "The Unconscious as mise-en-scène," trans. Joseph Maier, *Performance in Post-Modern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Carmello (Madison: Coda Press, 1977), 87-98.

47. *The Audience* 41.

48. For an interesting discussion of Lacan's mirror stage and Freud's *fort/da*, see Anthony Kubiak, "Impossible Seductions: The Work of Herbert Blau," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 19:1 (Fall 2004) 101-11.

49. *The Audience* 54.

50. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

51. Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1992) 172. See his article "Live From Cyberspace or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot," and Herbert Blau's "The Human Nature of the Bot, a response to Philip Auslander," *PAJ* 70 (2002): 16-21 and 22-24, respectively.

52. *Eye of Prey* 183.

53. *The Audience* 379.

54. *Eye of Prey* 181.

55. *The Audience* 366. See also Anthony Kubiak, "Impossible Seductions" 101-111.

56. *Eye of Prey* 172.

57. *Take Up the Bodies* 195.

58. *Eye of Prey* 165.

59. *Take Up the Bodies* 15. The concept of memory places located between memory and history is developed in Pierre Nora's "Presentation," *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, dir. Pierre Nora, English ed. Lawrence D. Krizman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia

UP, 1996).

60. *The Audience* 296.

61. *To All Appearances* 129, 130.

62. *The Audience* 382.

63. *Blooded Thought* 75.

64. *The Audience* 383

65. Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *The Lyotard Reader* 3.