Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre
Author(s): Philip Auslander
Source: *Theatre Journal,* Vol. 39, No. 1, Theatrical Perception: Decay of the Aura, (Mar., 1987), pp. 20-34
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207618
Accessed: 14/04/2008 09:47

Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre[1]

Philip Auslander

In Memory of Samuel Liberman

A number of critics and theorists have expressed alarm over the supposed apoliti-cality of recent American experimental theatre, alarm which often seems to imply nostalgia for the impassioned engagement characteristic of the experimental theatre community of, say, fifteen years ago. Some decry what they label the "formalist" bent of recent experimental theatre as ideologically regressive;[2] some suggest that the deconstructive modality of much current experimental theatre is inherently anti-

Philip Auslander teaches in the English Department of The College of William and Mary. He has published articles on surrealism, acting theory, and contemporary theory, and is completing a book called The Problematics of Presence.

[2]See Richard Schechner, "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde," *The End of Humanism* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 11–76. Schechner is greatly concerned with the frontal orientation of current experimental theatre "because to experiment with the space of the whole theatre, and to bring the theatrical event into the world outside the theatre building, is to investigate most directly the relationships between performers and spectators, and between theatrical events and social life. I read the retreat to frontal staging as an avoidance of dealing with these relationships" (29). See also Timothy Murray's response to Schechner, "The Theatricality of the Van-Guard: Ideology and Contemporary American Theatre," *PAJ* 24 (1984), 93–99. Murray argues that "the theatricality of the van-guard demystifies the hegemonic ideology of progressive avant-gardism. . . . the van-guard directly confronts not merely a relevant political position, but any attempts to deny the social function of aesthetic praxis as the work of criticism in action . . ." (99).

thetical to meaningful political *praxis*.[3] Deconstruction and apoliticality are often linked in these writings with the concept of postmodernism: deconstruction is seen as a characteristically postmodern aesthetic strategy, apoliticality as either a cause or a symptom of the prevalence of the deconstructive aesthetic.[4]

I would like to suggest here that "the postmodern condition"[5] has not rendered political theatre impossible — though it has made it necessary to rethink the whole project of political art — and to propose a rough schema describing a postmodern political theatre, its concerns and strategies. I will begin with an account of the cultural situation confronted by the postmodern political artist which has necessitated the transition from *transgressive* to *resistant* political art described by art critic Hal Foster. I will then examine the concept of *presence*, which is the specific problematic theatre theorists and practitioners must confront in reexamining our assumptions about political theatre and its function, before offering an analysis of what I consider an example of postmodern political theatre, the Wooster Group's *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*.

Political Art Under Postmodernism

If there is a crisis in the theory and practice of political art at present — and there clearly is — it is a historical crisis brought about by uncertainty as to just how to describe our cultural condition under multi-national capitalism, by the obvious inappropriateness of the political art strategies left over from the historical avant-garde of the early 20th century and from the 1960s, and by a widespread critical inability to conceive of aesthetic/political *praxis* in terms other than these inherited ones. As the profusion of terms describing our times (postmodern, postindustrial, super-industrial, late capitalist, neo-capitalist, multi-national capitalist, etc.) suggests, a clear picture of the present is not easy to come by, though all of these formulations imply that the classical conceptions of capitalism and modernism are not adequate to its description.[6] Whether this is the result of a historical or epistemological rupture and exactly when such a rupture may have occurred are important

[3]See Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte, "From Formalism to Feminism," *Theater* 16 (1985), 62–65. Case and Forte argue that "The problem is that in the closed system of deconstruction the only possible reference is to the dominant ideology it deconstructs. In effect, it reproduces things as they are" (64). I take up this issue later in the present essay.

[4]See Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," trans. Loren Kruger, *Modern Drama* 29 (1986), 18, and Johannes Birringer, "Postmodern Performance and Technology," *PAJ* 26/27 (1985), 23. Pavis sees the current experimental theatre's "fascination with textual manipulation and the deconstruction of every work" as symptomatic of a general postmodern depoliticization. Birringer describes the textual theory of Derrida and Barthes as deconstruction "at its politically weakest," locating apoliticality within deconstruction itself.

[5]Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[6]Not all commentators agree, of course. Mike Davis, rejecting Fredric Jameson's characterization of the postmodern as "late capitalist" (Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 [1984]), takes the view that we are witnessing "not a new, higher stage of capitalism . . . but a morbid symptom of the financial overaccumulation prolonged by the weakness of the US labour movement and productive capital's fear of a general collapse" ("Urban Renaissance and the

issues but lie beyond the scope of this essay. My assumption here is that the transition from modernism to postmodernism in American experimental theatre, especially in the role of politics in that theatre, occurred in the early 1970s, though it was anticipated in the late 1960s by, for example, Richard Foreman's early plays and some performance art.[7] In developing a framework in which to understand the nature and function of postmodern political theatre, I have drawn on the rich and suggestive work of Fredric Jameson and Hal Foster.

A fundamental aspect of postmodern culture may be the collapse of the distinction between the economic and cultural realms, the "breakdown in the old structural opposition of the cultural and economic in the simultaneous 'commodification' of the former and 'symbolization' of the latter."[8] As Jameson suggests, this breakdown is "to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm" rather than a distintegration of the cultural.[9] This conflation of the cultural and the economic renders "critical distance" impossible — the cultural can no longer presume to stand back from the economic/political and comment on it from without. From one point of view, this situation presents an insurmountable problem, for without critical distance, critique seems to become impossible. Jameson and Foster agree, therefore, that we have to be able to conceive of postmodern culture not as a "closed and terrifying machine" against which "the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial" (Jameson, p. 57), but as "a conjuncture of practices, many adversarial, where the cultural is an arena in which active contestation is possible" (Foster, p. 149).

Jameson and Foster part company to an extent over the exact historical status of this conception. Jameson feels that postmodernism (which he describes as "the cultural logic of late capitalism") has created such social — and even perceptual — confusion that the primary function of the postmodern political artist is a pedagogical one: to provide "cognitive maps" which will help us "to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle" (p. 91). Foster, who does not use the term "postmodernism" extensively and who sees the present social formation as "a new conjuncture [of contesting forces] — not . . . a

Spirit of Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 151 [1985], 109). Barbara Foley, in a general attack on deconstruction, suggests that a classical Marxist/Leninist analysis remains appropriate to contemporary society ("The Politics of Deconstruction," in *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale*, eds. R. C. Davis and R. Schleifer [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985], 113–34, esp. 131–33). Fredric Jameson argues in "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate," *New German Critique* 32 (1984), that any argument concerning postmodernism, whether favorable or antagonistic toward its cultural products, whether affirming or denying the very notion of a postmodern era, reflects the arguer's ideology.

  [7] My placement of the historical point of transition from modernism to postmodernism in theatre is later than others' formulations for other cultural and artistic areas (e.g., architecture, the visual arts). Perhaps the conventional wisdom that theatre is a relatively conservative art form which tends to follow rather than to initiate trends is apposite here.

  [8] Foster, "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," 145. Second and subsequent references to all sources will be cited parenthetically in the text.

  [9] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 87.

clear epistemic break" (p. 152), does not stress the need for "cognitive mapping" prior to the identification of the adversarial practices which make up our culture. Foster suggests that the "transgressive" politics of avant-gardism presuppose cultural limits which are no longer relevant to the seemingly limitless horizon of multi-national capitalism and calls for an understanding of political art as "resistant" rather than transgressive: "the political artist today might be urged not to represent given representations and generic forms but to investigate the processes and appara-tuses which control them" (p. 153). This investigation must take place within the terms of the postmodern cultural formation: "we are *within* the culture of postmod-ernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt."[10] As Foster emphasizes, the transition from transgression to resistance is not merely a theoretical proposition — one can see it clearly in the visual arts in the development from the programmatic avant-gardes of the 1920s to the "cool" demeanor of pop art to the deconstructive experiments of today. A similar transition can be traced in theatre from the workers' and agit-prop theatres of the 1920s and 1930s to the communitarian radical theatre troupes of the 1960s to the postmodernism exemplified by Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, the Wooster Group, etc. This is not to suggest that all postmodern art or theatre is culturally resistant; as Foster notes, "a postmodern of resistance . . . arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the 'false normativity' of a reactionary postmodernism."[11]

Foster also suggests that a resistant political/aesthetic practice might work to reveal the counterhegemonic tendencies within the dominant discourse (i.e., the underdogs amongst adversarial cultural practices) and even to propose a vision of "the utopian or, better, the desired"[12] along with a deconstruction of the processes of cultural control. Foster's suggested strategies do not exclude Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping; taken together, their theorizing suggests a comprehensive view of the role of the political artist in postmodern culture, a role which incorporates the functions of positioning the subject within dominant discourses and of offering strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant with-out claiming to transcend its terms. This formulation resembles Jacques Derrida's call for "A new writing [to] weave and interlace . . . two motifs of deconstruction"; his definitions of those motifs and of *caveats* associated with them are instructive in this context. The deconstructive options are:

> a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house . . . . Here, one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating . . . at an always more certain depth, that which one alleg-edly deconstructs.

[10]Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate," 63.

[11]Foster, "Introduction," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), xii.

[12]Foster, "Readings in Cultural Resistance," in *Recodings*, 179.

> b. To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference . . . such a displacement can be caught [in "forms of trompe l'oeil perspective"], thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted. . . .[13]

Derrida's second problem is theoretically less exigent for Jameson and Foster than for deconstruction *per se*, for neither claims that postmodernist political art can place itself outside dominant cultural formations. The danger which Derrida underlines, that of simply restating the original formation rather than mounting a genuine critique of it, is, however, endemic to the kinds of practices Jameson and Foster describe, as we shall see in my discussion of the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.* But before offering an analysis of that production, I would like to examine the problematic which theatre theorists and practitioners must confront in reconceiving political theatre after the 1960s as resistant rather than transgressive.

The Problematics of Presence

In 1972, Joseph Chaikin published a book called *The Presence of the Actor*[14] which, along with much theoretical and quasi-theoretical writing of the period, suggests that the actor's presence before the audience is the essence of theatre and that the use any particular theatre makes of that presence defines its ideology. In theatrical parlance, *presence* usually refers either to the relationship between actor and audience — the actor as manifestation before an audience — or more specifically to the actor's psycho-physical attractiveness to the audience, a concept related to that of *charisma*. Concepts of presence are grounded in notions of actorly representation — presence is often thought to derive from the actor's embodiment of, or even possession by,[15] the character defined in a play text, from the (re)presentation of self through the mediation of character, or, in the Artaudian/Grotowskian/Beckian line of thought, from the archetypal psychic impulses accessible through the actor's physicality.[16] The assumption behind much of the experimental theatre and performance of the 1960s (really the period from about 1964 to about 1974) was that because the presence of the actor as one living human being before others is spiritually and psychologically liberating, pure presentation of performer to audience is the best means available to the theatre to make a radical spiritual/political statement. This assumption no longer seems tenable in light of the suspicion that has

---

[13]Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 135.

[14]Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor* (New York: Atheneum, 1972). Although I cite Chaikin's book as a reference point, his own theorizing is more sophisticated, complex and contradictory than the general trend discussed in this passage.

[15]For a classic formulation of dramatic characters as autonomous beings which may possess the actor, see Charles Dullin, "The Birth and Life of Characters," in *Actors on Acting*, eds. Toby Cole and Helen K. Chinoy (New York: Crown, 1970), 226–34.

[16]For an account of this school of acting theory, see my "'Holy Theatre' and Catharsis," *TRI* 9 (1984), 16–29.

been cast upon the whole notion of "presence,"[17] a suspicion which derives from the apparent collusion between political structures of authority and the persuasive power of presence.

The 1960s was a difficult decade for the American theatre. "Establishment," professional theatre could say little about what was going on around it and even radical theatre movements had trouble competing with the theatre of the streets. Additionally, as the Living Theatre was forced to admit at Avignon in 1968, radical theatre supported, willy-nilly, authoritarian social systems by generally participating in the structure of theatre as an institution.[18] Even more disturbing was the growing tendency to see political reality as theatre: "spectacle managers" from all points on the ideological spectrum staged rallies and demonstrations; "guerilla theatre" events were designed in many cases to be indistinguishable from spontaneous behavior. To an important extent, the ideological battle became a battle for control of the means of persuasion. As in Genet's *Balcony*, the revolution succeeded in changing the imagistic content of life-as-theatre for a while, but retained its essential dramaturgy.[19] Those radicals who believed that the point of the upheaval was to substitute "peace scenarios" for repressive ones failed to see that to adopt the concept "scenario" is to construct the new ideology on the cornerstone of the old.[20]

The manipulation of opinion through performance and the blurring of distinctions between theatre and reality during the Viet Nam and Watergate periods contributed to the discrediting of theatre as a potentially radical art form. That Abbie Hoffman and Richard Nixon seemed to have fundamentally the same ideas about the manipulation of presence led to a growing suspicion that to invoke the power of presence is to link oneself inextricably with the workings of a repressive status quo. In a thoughtful essay, Canadian artist Vera Frenkel cites a psychoanalytical definition of charisma as "projection . . . by which we attribute to others, especially a leader, entertainer or artist the secret images within ourselves."[21] She goes on to state that postmodern performance seeks to escape presence by working against mutual

[17]An analogy between Derrida's critique of the western "metaphysics of presence" and the anti-charismatic tendency in postmodern performance is possible, though to argue that the term "presence" functions in exactly the same way in both contexts may be to stretch the point somewhat. For a Derridean look at acting theory, see my "Just Be Your Self: Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory," *Art and Cinema* (New Series) 1 (1986), 10–12.

[18]This portion of my discussion is "ghosted" by my reading of Herbert Blau's *Take Up the Bodies: Theatre at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982). Blau argues that the theatre must reclaim theatricality from the political arena, a point of view I do not share. My argument here is that theatre can make us aware of the ways in which mediation commodifies political rhetoric and action, but need/can not claim to stand outside the realm of mediation as it does so.

[19]R. G. Davis pointed out in 1971 the failure of Yippies and other radicals who sought to produce change through the media to recognize that the power of the media belongs to those who *own* the media, not necessarily to those who manage to have their messages conveyed by them. See R. G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto, CA: Ramparts Press, 1975), 167–68.

[20]See Lee Baxandall, "Spectacles and Scenarios: A Dramaturgy of Radical Activity," in *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, ed. L. Baxandall (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 381.

[21]Vera Frenkel, "Discontinuous notes on and after a meeting of critics, by one of the artists present," *artscanada* 240/241 (1981), 37.

projection between audience and performer and toward "a non-charismatic under-standing which permits us not to believe so readily in the other as the keeper of our treasure and our disease" (p. 38). By undermining her own presence, the performer seeks to escape identification as the Other and the power relations implied by that identification. Frenkel's central examples — Joseph Beuys's performance art and Hans Jurgen Syberberg's film *Hitler, A Film From Germany* (1979) — are both rooted in the experimental arts of the 1960s. Both also respond, however, to Hitler's manipulation of presence and projection for authoritarian ends.

The suspicion of presence and of simple presentation of performer to audience that suffuses postmodern experimental theatre derives, then, from the anxiety cre-ated by recent historical demonstrations of collusion between presence as charisma or salesmanship and repressive power structures. In theatre, presence is the matrix of power; the postmodern theatre of resistance must therefore both expose the collusion of presence with authority and resist such collusion by refusing to establish itself as the charismatic Other. Bertolt Brecht's theory and practice are exemplary in this regard, but Brecht's formulation of the need to maintain a distance between actor and character in performance can be shown to depend on a traditional notion of presence to the extent that the actor's persona as commentator on the character must be invested with the authority of presence in order for that commentary to carry more weight than the character itself.[22] There is much a postmodern political theatre can learn from Brecht, but such a theatre must also move beyond Brecht, for whom the transgression of the conventions of bourgeois theatre remains to the point.

L.S.D. From The Crucible

When we use a concrete example to illustrate a theoretical truth, we inevitably diminish the significance of that truth. Any example entails all sorts of contingencies which cloud the issue, and what is gained in amplification is lost in harmony.
— Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*

A full description and performance history of the Wooster Group's production *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*, presented in New York during 1984 and 1985, are available elsewhere;[23] my purpose here is to examine the production in terms of the theoretical framework I have outlined by looking at the Group's investi-gation of the suppression of difference within cultural and political representations, the deconstruction of presence which enables that investigation to avoid merely restating the images and structure it evokes and finally, the Group's appropriation of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in its own performance text.

---

[22] This passage recapitulates my analysis of Brecht's acting theory in "Just Be Your Self," 10–11 (see note 17 above).

[23] See Arnold Aronson, "The Wooster Group's *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .),*" *TDR* T106 (1985), 65–77. My own account of the production is based on the two versions I saw and on Aronson's description.

Male legs power a dancing doll woman. The Wooster Group, "The Road To Immortality, Part Two (. . . Just The High Points. . .)." Photo: Nancy Campbell.

The Group's manipulation of iconography in *L.S.D.* reasserted the workings of difference suppressed by dominant cultural codes primarily through an examination of racial and sexual representation in *The Crucible*. As Arnold Aronson indicates, the representation of blacks by whites is the issue raised by the Group's use of blackface to present the character of Tituba. He argues, however, that when the actress who plays Tituba goes on, still in blackface, to play Mary Warren, "the sign becomes separated from its object" (p. 76), leaving the audience to impose its own interpretive schema on the displacement. I would argue that it is precisely at this moment of the emptying of the sign that the gesture becomes political, for it is when the arbitrary character of the sign is asserted that the significance of its imposition on one group by another stands out most clearly. In an earlier production, *Route 1 & 9* (1981–82), the Group had performed Pigmeat Markham comedy routines and danced to "soul" music in blackface, allegedly causing the New York State Council on the Arts to revoke their grant for a year (Aronson, p. 67). However one reads the Group's gesture, as satirical, deconstructive, or racist, it clearly raised the question of what constitutes a potentially counterhegemonic appropriation of an image and what merely restates that image.

Just as *L.S.D.* articulated questions about the representation of racial difference, so it explored the representation of sexual difference. *L.S.D.* points out some of the perhaps not so subtle sexism in Miller's play. Miller characterizes Abigail as essentially cynical (threatened with exposure, she absconds with money and vanishes,

only to reappear, Miller tells us in the published text, as a Boston prostitute).[24] Given this portrait, the play is unable to represent the persecution of "witches" as the effort of a patriarchal society to suppress independent women.[25] By juxtaposing sections of *The Crucible* with materials related to Timothy Leary and his place in the history of the 1960s, the Wooster Group somewhat recuperated this interpretive possibility through an implicit comparison of the persecution of Abigail and her followers with that of Leary and his (i.e., Abigail appears as visionary rather than as cynic). The use of male and female iconography in *L.S.D.* addresses similar questions of gender representation. Director Elizabeth LeCompte chose to have the men in the production wear contemporary dress while the women dressed in period costumes appropriate to the Salem locale of *The Crucible*. The men often spoke through microphones, while the women did not. (LeCompte: "The women got the costumes, the men got the mics" [Aronson, p. 72].) This assignment of the trappings of (the [literal] voice of) authority to the men and those of a historical domesticity to the women occupies another uncomfortable space, neither clearly sexist nor clearly deconstructive. This distribution of means can be discussed in terms of the Group's analysis of theatrical signification: in a sort of dispersal of theatrical sign functions, the men received the sign of oral, textual signification, the women that of visual, pictorial signification. But there is still much to unpack in the association of the male with the text, the traditional locus of authority in theatre, and the female with the image, the "secondary" elaboration of text in production. The final image of the *Crucible* section of *L.S.D.*, an image of women "dancing" produced by having the men sit and dangle their legs behind the women, who were standing on a higher level, though visually exciting and very funny, was similarly disturbing. The image of the dancing doll-woman powered by male legs and the assignment of the "work" of dancing to the men while the women stand and pose again may or may not succeed as deconstruction. Clearly, the Group's manipulations of loaded iconography ran the risk of "confirming . . . at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs" described by Derrida. This risk is mitigated, however, by the Group's deconstruction of presence which eschews charismatic projection and thus discourages the spectator from endowing either representation or representor with authority and encourages the spectator to focus instead on the process of representation itself and its collusion with authority.

In modern, Western theatre, the question of presence cannot be separated from that of the authority of the text — the actor's presence is conventionally defined in relationship to character, which in turn is delineated by the dramatic text. The ideological effectiveness of presence, however, requires that the authority of the text

---

[24]Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), 140.

[25]Mary Daly argues that the witch hunts in medieval and renaissance Europe were intended "to break down and destroy strong women," "to purify society of the existence and the potential existence of such women," especially those not "defined by assimilation into the patriarchal family" (*Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1978], 183–84). Although Daly does not discuss the Salem trials, her analysis could surely be applied both to a feminist/revisionist history of those events and to *The Crucible*. Abigail's strong assertion of her sexuality in Miller's play certainly marks her as unassimilable into the patriarchal family as it is represented there.

be conferred on the actor; the authorizing text itself must disappear behind the performance. Elinor Fuchs points out that the Wooster Group employed various types of *reading* in *L.S.D.*, thus asserting its grounding in text.[26] In the first segment, actors read random selections from texts relevant to Timothy Leary; in the second part, they read scenes from *The Crucible* while seated at the same long, narrow table used in the first section. In the first scene, the actors appeared to be reading "as themselves" while, in the second, they invoked a degree of characterization through vocal inflection, gesture, etc. Character thus became a problematic, not a given: is there a distinction between reading someone else's words when those words purport to record the author's own experience and reading someone else's words when those words purport to create the illusion of a fictional character's present experience? Reading's reading; a text's a text. The text, which is supposed to disappear, remained stubbornly, physically present, its pages cluttering the set. (In *Hula*, an earlier Wooster Group production, the same problematic was broached in a different way: the audience could never be quite certain whether it was watching a group of Soho performers doing hula dances for reasons of their own or whether there was, in fact, a kind of scenario being played out. There seemed to be characters, but so slightly delineated as to appear almost accidental.) By asserting their dependence on text yet radically problematizing their relationship to it, the Group dissected the major structure of authority in traditional theatre. It was not a question of declaring, with Artaud, "No more masterpieces,"[27] but of simultaneously occupying and resisting the given structure.

The Group's resistance of presence was also manifested in its acting strategies. Of the two kinds of reading mentioned, the second, reading from the script, seems closer to "acting" than the other, reading from non-theatrical texts. But when performance's origins in textuality are not effaced, it becomes difficult to make such a distinction. The actors made no clearly greater investment of self in one procedure than the other; in both cases, they were literally "on book": the text had not been internalized. Additionally, signs of emotional commitment in acting were distanced and demystified. To depict John Proctor's break-down, Willem Dafoe, the performer reading the part, placed glycerin drops in his eyes to s(t)imulate tears; the image of a crying man was presented alongside the artificial means used to create it. Ron Vawter, reading/playing Reverend Parris, spoke his lines at breakneck speed, substituted gibberish for many of them, yet "played" the emotions behind them through gesture, facial expression, vocal inflection, etc. While Dafoe adhered to the text, he created its externalizations artificially; Vawter, who seemed to produce emotion from within himself, garbled the text. Vawter's performance as the ideologue who speaks gibberish persuasively became a set piece, a pointed, if unsubtle, mini-satire of presence and its collusion with authority. (It should be clear that the concept of noncharismatic performance I am advancing here does not stipulate that performance must be uninteresting or unengaging. On the contrary; what is at stake is a critique of

---

[26]See Elinor Fuchs, "Performance As Reading," *PAJ* 23 (1984), 51–53, and Fuchs, "Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-thinking Theatre After Derrida," *PAJ* 26/27 (1985), 163–73.

[27]Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. M. C. Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), 74–83.
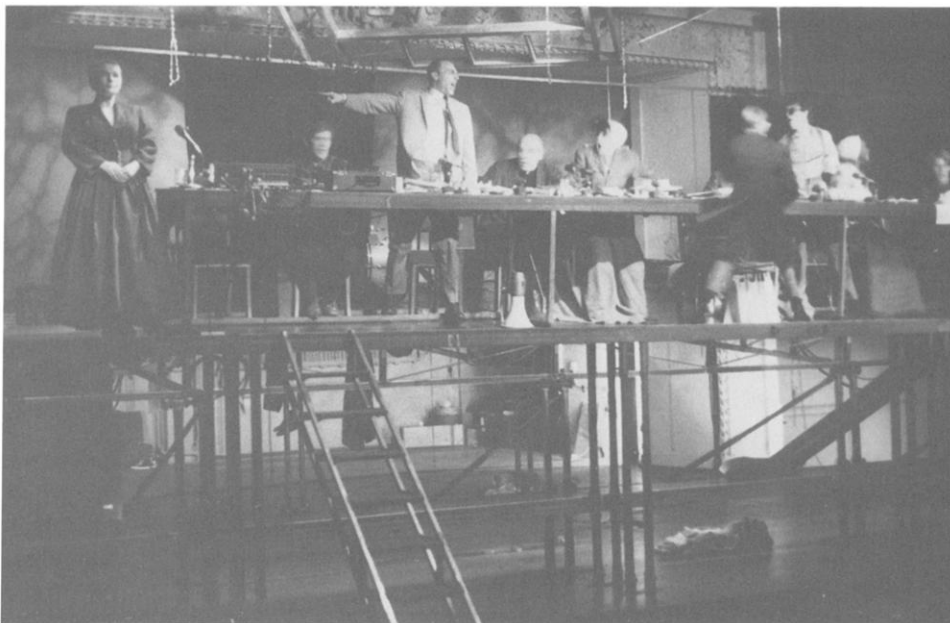
The Wooster Group, "The Road To Immortality, Part Two (. . . Just The High Points. . .)."
Photo: Elizabeth LeCompte.

presence in which the charismatic performance is accompanied by its own decon-struction.)

These performance strategies were recapitulated at a greater level of complexity in the third section of *L.S.D.*, a minutely accurate recreation of the Group members' behavior while trying to rehearse its reading of *The Crucible* after having taken L.S.D. Ironically, this most conventionally mimetic section of the piece may have done the most to decenter the audience's relationship to the production. The actors *played* themselves *reading* characters from *The Crucible*, already a dispersion of the conventional concept of self in western acting. The use of the hallucinogen widened the gap between the actors playing themselves and the selves they were playing. Because they had used the drug, the actors were unable to retrieve their own experience for use in the scene—their behavior while using L.S.D. was videotaped and the scene was a recreation of the experience, unavailable to the actors themselves, as mediated by the taping. The actors' mimetic presentation of what had been their own reality was in fact grounded in a second-hand, textual record of an experience whose very nature made recreation at first hand impossible. The audience was thus deprived of the ability to assume it could read the imprint of the actor's self back through her performance; this blurring of identity nullified the possibility of charis-matic projection.

The actor's disinvestment of self in this kind of performing, especially in the context of post-war American theatre and its affection for confessional, "method" acting, raises the specter of formalism. As Dafoe explains it, "The way I get off in the performances is when I hit those moments of real pleasure and real clarity and an

understanding about myself in relationship to the structure."[28] He makes little distinction between his working method in Wooster Group productions and his approach to film acting, which he describes as being more about the actor's relationship to the process than to character. Indeed, the seeming ease with which the post-1960s generation of American theatre experimentalists has adapted itself to the demands of commercial film and television may seem disturbing; certainly, the ability to move back and forth fluidly between commercial and political/aesthetic performance was not considered a worthy objective by the sixties generation. This is not to suggest that theatrical experimentalists of that decade did not participate in commercial projects, but only that the current generation clearly no longer feels the need to justify such work on the grounds that it makes other, politically subversive, work possible. (L.S.D. in fact includes a film of Ron Vawter in Miami which can be construed as a memento of his participation in an episode of the Miami Vice television program.) From one point of view, this adaptability is arguably symptomatic of a healthy lack of distinction between high and popular art in postmodern culture; from another, it could be seen as implying an alarming lack of integrity on the part of young experimental artists. Certainly, the phenomenon raises the question of whether or not the avant-garde or political artist need claim to take up a position outside of the dominant discourse; my argument here suggests that such a claim has no clear utility under postmodernism. In order to address a conception of culture as a conjuncture of adversarial cultural practices, the artist must position herself among those practices.

The thematic terrain of L.S.D. is broad and far reaching. The performance juxtaposed a number of kinds of historical documentation. The testimonial writings of the first section (first- and third-person accounts of and by the Beat generation and Leary's circle) preceded the Crucible section. The Crucible, of course, is partly about the nature of false testimony, and so immediately problematized the material preceding it. Miller's play is itself a metaphorical historical document of the McCarthy era;[29] the Group played dangerously with Miller's metaphor by staging parts of his play a if it were a Senate hearing, with the actors seated at the table, speaking into microphones, pushing papers, consulting one another before answering. This staging made explicit Miller's implicit metaphoric strategy and held it up for examination. The Group also conducted its own research, tape-recording interviews with Ann Rower, once employed by Leary as a babysitter. During the performance, actress Nancy Reilly listened to the tape on headphones and repeated lines from it. The articulation of these many documentary forms through the varieties of acting/reading/performing already discussed raised questions about the nature of both the materials themselves and their (re)presentation. Is the babysitter's informal spoken testimony more dependable than the "official" (for-the-public) writings presented in the first section? Are there meaningful differences between the performers' reading in the first section, reading/acting in the second (Crucible) section, acting/reading in

---

[28]Quoted in Philip Auslander, "Task and Vision: Willem Dafoe in L.S.D.," TDR T106 (1985), 97.
[29]For Miller's own political reading of The Crucible, see "It Could Happen Here—And Did," The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller, ed. Robert A. Martin (New York: Viking, 1978), 294–300.

the third (*Crucible* on L.S.D.) section and Reilly's act of *repeating*? What the production ultimately demonstrated was the eradication of difference amongst these many types of messages and articulations — written and spoken, "factual" and "fictional," "literal," and "metaphoric," public and private — through the mediation of performance.

This effect was compounded and projected onto a specifically social plane by the inclusion in the final section of quotations from the recent public debates between Leary and G. Gordon Liddy. History contracts, vertiginously: Liddy, one-time Watergate "plumber" in the service of President Richard Nixon who, as a Congressman, was a central figure in the House Unamerican Activities Committee hearings referred to metaphorically in *The Crucible*,[30] ends up teamed with Leary in a traveling road show debate. Needless to say, Leary, Liddy and Nixon have all written books, made the rounds of televised "talk" and "magazine" shows, and so on. The telescoping of historical discourses and performance mediations in *L.S.D.* becomes a figure for what Jean Baudrillard calls the "mediatization" of politics in contemporary society, which has broken down the distinctions between political and purely social activities: "if, thanks to the media, the political re-emerges under the category of *faits divers*, thanks to the same media the category of *faits divers* has totally invaded politics."[31] This eradication of difference, by effectively neutralizing the political ("the media . . . are in deliberate pursuit of the political act, in order to depoliticize it" [p. 175]) abets the dominant ideology which, Baudrillard argues, is "homogeneous with the general form of the mass media" (p. 174). Thus, ideological distinctions, if any, amongst Leary, Liddy and the shadow figure of Nixon disappear under mediatization, as do distinctions amongst their various crimes against state and citizenry and their respective punishments (or lack thereof). Baudrillard's vision is the dark underside of Jameson's notion of "a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm." For Baudrillard, the incursion of the cultural into the social has destroyed the possibility of a cultural critique of the social; for Jameson and Foster, the same condition has revitalized the possibility of such a critique. In Baudrillard's terms, the glut of "information" produced by our seeming willingness to accept anything as grist for the mediatizing mill "devours its own contents": "Instead of causing communication, *it exhausts itself in the act* of staging the communication; instead of producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning."[32] We are left with the stagings: Liddy and Leary's hollow spectacle of a debate, presented on college campuses and documented on film; Liddy playing a parody of the persona described in his book, *Will*, on television's *Miami Vice*.[33]

---

[30]Nixon was particularly prominent in the Alger Hiss case of 1950. See Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade and After: America, 1945–1960* (New York: Random House, 1960), 132, 135.

[31]Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 175.

[32]Jean Baudrillard, "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media," *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton, and J. Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 97–98. Original emphasis.

[33]G. Gordon Liddy, *Will* (New York: Dell, 1981). That members of New York's experimental performance community, rock stars, and political figures have all taken "guest villain" roles on *Miami Vice* suggests a cultural leveling of dizzying dimensions!

That the Wooster Group does not stand apart from this mediatizing and the resulting commodification of political action and rhetoric is clear from Dafoe's and Vawter's participation is mass-cultural forms. *L.S.D.* demonstrates the workings of mediatization, but is also caught up in them. The production makes no attempt to assess the truth value of any one documentation over any other, any mode of presentation over any other: the production is as much a *symptom* of information's self-consumption as an analysis of it. The Group's deconstruction of presence, however, makes its presentation self-conscious enough to resist the numbing effect of mediatization as described by Baudrillard and to work somewhat as Jameson's postmodern political art by making clear that if we are to position ourselves politically, we must be prepared to contend with the commodification of politics which levels discourse and masks difference, and the mediatization by which the dominant ideology nullifies the counterhegemonic.

I have tried to suggest that the Wooster Group's *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)* represents at least a preliminary step toward a postmodern political theatre. Such a theatre of resistance "investigate[s] the processes which control [given representations]" (Foster) through its examination of iconography and the effects of mediation on political imagings, and operates within the terms of postmodern culture conceived as a conjuncture of adversarial practices and discourses. *L.S.D.*, with its many layers and types of discourse, can be seen as an *image* of culture conceived "as an arena of contestation" (Foster); arguably, it may be said to serve the pedagogical function described by Jameson by encouraging a mode of perception that will enable the spectator to make sense of the dislocating postmodern sensorium. If this theatre is less programmatic than more traditional models of political theatre, if it seems to ask as many questions as it answers, it may be well to bear in mind Foster's observation that "clearly this is not a 'confrontational' moment in the classical political sense" (p. 153) and, paraphrasing Foster, to describe the Wooster Group as "a theatre with a politic" rather than a "political theatre."[34]

The Wooster Group came closest to the confrontational, transgressive stance of the historical avant-garde in its appropriation of Miller's play, which led to a quasi-legal skirmish between author and theatre. The details of Miller's maneuverings with the Group are available in an article by David Savran;[35] suffice it here to say that Miller found the Group's use of his text objectionable and obtained a "cease and desist" order against them, closing the production in January of 1985. In constructing their performance texts, the Group seems to assume a poststructuralist idea of textuality like that advanced by Roland Barthes, for whom a text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of

[34]"For a Concept of the Political," 155. LeCompte's own account of the Group's political stance is that they are looking for "another way of making theatre, another way of viewing politics that is not literal, issue-oriented — it's not attached, so to speak" (quoted by Aronson, 74).

[35]David Savran, "The Wooster Group, Arthur Miller and *The Crucible*," *TDR* T106 (1985), esp. 99–103.

culture."[36] This formulation creates obvious problems for the legal concept of text as property upon which Miller based his claim. If the text is made up of quotations to begin with, if it arises in some sense from the culture itself and not from the idiosyncratic mind of the writer (who must therefore be described as "scriptor" rather than as "author" [Barthes, p. 147]), what right of ownership may that writer assert over it? To posit a distinction between the issue of textual interpretation and that of legal entitlement as does Savran[37] is to miss the point, not only because the law is itself always a matter of interpretation,[38] but because the theatre is precisely a locus at which critical/aesthetic and social practices intersect. What distinguishes the Group's appropriation from a confrontational, avant-gardistic gesture is its unintentional character. LeCompte correctly describes the conflict with Miller as "an inevitable outcome of our working process" and as a part of the Group's "necessary relationship to authority";[39] confrontation with authority is a *result* but not the *object* of the Group's process. The Group seems blithely, perhaps utopianly, to proceed as if the poststructuralist critical/theoretical concept of text as "a tissue of quotations" belonging more to a culture than an individual were already in place as part of the social hegemony. The effect of the Group's action is not so much to question Miller's rights over his text as to show what would be possible in the realm of cultural production if those rights were not in force, thus emphasizing the importance of the connection between the cultural and the social/political. *L.S.D.* can therefore be seen as an example of the dual writing described by Derrida, which both uses "against the edifice the . . . stones available in the house" and opens a window in the wall of the house to provide a glimpse of what lies beyond it.

[36]Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image/Music/Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

[37]See Savran, 101. See also Gerald Rabkin, "Is There a Text On This Stage? Theatre/Authorship/ Interpretation," *PAJ* 26/27 (1985), 142–59. Rabkin attempts to use Barthes's distinction between "work" and "text" in constructing a defense of authorial rights on the grounds that protection of an author's control over her product will encourage good writing.

[38]See Ronald Dworkin, "Law as Interpretation," in *The Politics of Interpretation,* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 249–70.

[39]Quoted by Savran, p. 103. A quotation from Leary which appeared on a poster for *L.S.D.* (reproduced by Aronson, 69) describes his conflict with social authority in terms of the Harvard-Yale game: as a perennial, necessary, essentially symbolic conflict in which each side plays by known rules and expects the other side to respond in kind. The conflict between Miller and the Wooster Group can be seen profitably in the same terms. The role of the Wooster Group in the game is to resist the legal requirements governing their use of Miller's text. That they played resistantly rather than transgressively is indicated by the fact that they stopped performing the piece rather than provoke a court battle.