



Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clío Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 131–40

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Reenactment in Theatre

Some Reflections on the Philosophical Status of Restaging

CITE AS:

Daniela Sacco, 'Reenactment in Theatre: Some Reflections on the Philosophical Status of Restaging', in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clío Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 131–40
<https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21_14>

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ABSTRACT: Theatre, because of its ability to represent through restaging, would seem to be the quintessential platform for reenactment. The *Oresteia (una commedia organica?)* by R. Castellucci and Societas Raffaello Sanzio, restaged at the Paris Automne Festival in 2015, twenty years after its 1995 world premiere in Prato, is the starting point for a reflection on the status of restaging in theatre. This case study is the occasion to apply Walter Benjamin's philosophical concept of the *Jetztzeit* to a theatrical context, and to consider also the 'citational' value of theatrical reenactment. These concepts are useful to study not only the reenactment of theatrical gesture and acting but also to consider the practice of restaging related to the theatrical event conceived in its entirety.

KEYWORDS: Theatre; Castellucci, Romeo; Oresteia; Benjamin, Walter

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Theatre, because of its ability to represent or present through restaging, would seem to be the quintessential platform for reenactment, which is so widespread recently in a variety of artistic endeavours, especially in the performing arts. Indeed, 'to enact' means 'act out (a role or play) on stage' or 'put into practice': 'to reenact' means the repetition of the acting out.

Since the 1990s, reenactment has moved from the context of historical reconstruction to artistic and curatorial practice. It emancipated itself from the phenomenon of Living History where it functioned as a revival, or as a reenactment, of its historical antecedent. As an art form, it has changed meaning not by strict adherence to the original model but by highlighting its difference while maintaining respect for the original.

As noted by André Lepecki, reenactment as an art form is an interpretative gesture that never produces a real repetition but always an opening of meaning, a variation that denies the action of merely

* A different version of this article has been published in Italian as 'Re-enactment e replica a teatro. Riflessioni sullo statuto filosofico della ri-presentazione', *Materiali di Estetica*, 4.1 (2017), pp. 340–51.

copying.¹ The concept of reenactment enters fully into performative practice when the rule that prevented repetition is disregarded: that is, when the performance, which asked for the absolute authenticity of the *hic et nunc*, has, for example, accepted the practice of preserving and repurposing props, or using the documentation itself as an art form.² The most relevant case is the transition that Marina Abramović made from considering ‘no rehearsal, no repetition, no predicted end’ as the laws of performance to taking the act of reenacting her life and work as the only means of creating distance after her break-up with Ulay, her former partner in art and life.³ The most mature and well-known outcome of this change in perspective is *Seven Easy Pieces*, a performance in which Abramović reenacted seven famous performances previously realized by her and the precursors of Body Art in the 60s and 70s. Performed in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, this reenactment took place over the course of seven days.

Even if the concept of reenactment is tied to performance and is widespread in other artistic fields, precisely because of the great importance that performance art has developed in recent years, a reflection on the sense of restaging as reenactment can also be made in reference to the most traditional form of theatre. Even though the principles that support traditional staging differ considerably with respect to the performative event and performance art, and the main objective of performance artists has historically been its difference with respect to theatre, the comparison is enough to observe the mechanism of repetition in theatrical practice itself. This mechanism exists in several forms, not least of which is the repetition of the ‘same’ theatrical event (at least as intended) in different contexts and times. These attributes of repetition can thus serve to widen the reflection on reenactment to theatre considered in its entirety.

1 André Lepecki, ‘The Body as Archive: Will to Re-enact and the Afterlives of Dance’, *Dance Research Journal*, 42.2 (Winter 2010), pp. 28–48 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767700001029>>.

2 Cf. Domenico Quaranta, ‘RE:akt! Things that Happen Twice’, in *RE:akt! Reconstruction, Re-enactment, Re-reporting*, ed. by Antonio Caronia, Janez Janša, and Domenico Quaranta (Brescia: LINK Editions, 2014), pp. 43–52.

3 *Ibid.*

This can also be observed where the theatrical staging does not make specific use of the medium, the use of which has historically favoured not only the phenomenon of reenactment but also reflection upon it. The use of the theatre medium must, in fact, be considered as a component of the larger whole of the reproductive phenomenon: that is, theatre in itself.⁴

Consequently, one could say that repetition is specific to theatrical art, but, as Antonin Artaud teaches us: ‘theatre is the only place in the world where a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way twice.’⁵ Theatre resides in the dialectic tension between these two aspects, which are co-present, and it feeds on this paradox. Artaud, who anticipated the principles later embodied by performance speaks in the name of the vital and creative principle he wants recognized in the theatrical medium. It is no coincidence that in France the great theorists of the relationship between identity, difference, and repetition such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, have found in Artaud an important interlocutor. Thus, the reflections that are valid for works in which the reenactment is expressly practiced — as for example, in today’s perhaps more recognized and effective case of the staging by Swiss director Milo Rau⁶ — can be applied at the same time to works of which we can observe a simple restaging, a simple replication.

A significant example is the restaging of *Orestea* (*una commedia organica?*) by Romeo Castellucci and Società Raffaello Sanzio on December 2015 in Paris, at the Odéon-Théâtre on the occasion of the

4 On this topic, see also Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

5 Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), p. 75.

6 Here we simply recall Milo Rau’s plays: *The Last Days of the Ceausescus* (Teatrul Odeon, Bucharest / HAU Berlin, 2009), *Hate Radio* (Kunsthau Bregenz / Memorial Centre Kigali / HAU Berlin, 2011), *Brevik’s Statement* (Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar, 2012), the trilogy *The Civil Wars* (Beursschouwburg Brussels / Theaterspektakel Zurich, 2014), *The Dark Ages* (Residenztheater, Munich, 2015), *Empire* (Theaterspektakel Zurich / Schaubühne Berlin, 2016), and *Five Easy Pieces* (Sophiensäle Berlin, 2016); on this theme, see also Priscilla Wind, ‘L’art du reenactment chez Milo Rau’, *Intermedialités / Intermediality*, 28–29 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.7202/1041080ar>>; and Enrico Pastore, ‘Intervista a Milo Rau’, *PASSPARnous Teatro*, 22 (September 2014) <<http://www.psychodreamtheater.org/rivista-passparnous-ndeg-22---teatro---intervista-a-milo-rau---a-cura-di-enrico-pastore.html>> [accessed 24 November 2017].

Festival d'Automne, twenty years after the play's 1995 world premiere in Prato, Italy.⁷

In this restaging, the play, at the director's will, remained unchanged. It featured only two of the original actors from the 1995 debut, and the original composer, Scott Gibbons, created new musical tracks, since those from twenty years prior have been lost. The restaging of this work stimulates some observations on the value of the collision of the same form with different historical and cultural contexts, and therefore additional observations on its recontextualization, which always implies new meanings.

With *Oresteia* (*una commedia organica?*), Castellucci and the company overturn a consolidated interpretation of Aeschylus's work. It is no longer the work that tells of the end of myth and the birth of tragedy, and, with tragedy, the beginning of the heroic path of man in the construction of Western civilization. This previous understanding of civilization was based on the institution of the court — the Areopagus — on the *logos*, the reason of the law, which laid the legal foundation of the city against the violence of personal revenge, the justice of *genos*. The director, instead, construes the *Oresteia* as a sign of the defeat of the values that, in the development of Western civilization, are believed to have historically had supremacy. He refuses to conclude the Aeschylean tragedy with the foundation of the judicial system, the institution of a patriarchal and spiritual system destined to win, over the centuries, on the *ius naturale*. For this purpose, Castellucci stages the violence, the life, and the matter, represented by the pre-tragic power of the matriarchal order. He stages this by the presence of heavy female figures and animals: Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and Electra are powerful figures representing the dominant matriarchy. Along with the female presence is also that of the animal, with real horses, donkeys, and monkeys populating the stage.

The pervasive presence of female figures and animals symbolizes the overthrow of a destiny that seems to have marked the development of Western civilization: the Olympians are not gods to win over the previous deities, and it is not the masculine principle that

7 See also Daniela Sacco, 'La Jetztzeit del teatro. L'Oresteia della Societas Raffaello Sanzio/Romeo Castellucci venti anni dopo', *Biblioteca Teatrale*, 119–120.2 (2016), pp. 65–84 <<https://doi.org/10.1400/256739>>.

prevails but rather the most archaic Mediterranean worship of the Mother Goddess, who marked the ancient origins of Greek culture. If this interpretation of *Oresteia* was radical in 1995, it turned out to be even more so in the Parisian staging of December 2015. Castellucci re-proposes the piece, accepting the invitation that the Festival d'Automne gives to the artist in order to dedicate a portrait — in this case the *Portrait Romeo Castellucci* — to the theme of the tragic.

Not only does the piece remain essentially unchanged, but Castellucci also distances himself from his poetry of twenty years prior. He considers his work a foreign object that no longer belongs to him. He later stated that 'it was like working with ghosts', and he compared the show to a 'stone', found on earth and collected 'as an unknown object', 'made and thrown by an unknown man, a lifetime ago'.⁸ In Paris, the work is therefore 'moved' and 'relocated' to another environment, different from Italy, which had welcomed it. It is no longer tied to the reasons that had generated it, not only the need for the company to affirm its poetry against a theatre tied to a repertoire but also its resonance with the corruption of Italian political power and the rampant power of the mafia, which was very strong at the time. In Italy, since 1992, we have witnessed the phenomenon of 'Tangentopoli', a term used to define the widespread system of political corruption and, linked to it, the operation 'Mani pulite' — meaning 'Clean Hands' — to indicate the series of judicial investigations meant to check this corruption. Italy was the theatre of the massacres carried out by mafia terrorism, culminating in the assassinations of Sicilian magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. The work no longer reflects the great distrust of political power and justice, which in the 1990s were revealed to be corrupt, and it no longer resonates, even with the violent power of the mafia that, following the first major anti-corruption trial, responded to the sentences with massacres.

Twenty years later, in Paris, the historical context changed. It was no longer national but international, and the most relevant event was the terrorist attack, which struck the French capital shortly before the staging of the play. On 13 November 2015, Paris was brought to its

8 Cf. Romeo Castellucci, 'Il silenzio dell'eroe', interview by Anna Bandettini, *La Repubblica*, 29 September 2016 (my translation).

knees by a series of terrorist attacks claimed by the armed militia of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Syria. It was an event that caused disarray, terror, and military repression culminating in the bombing, in support of France, by the United States and Russia of the Syrian cities inflamed by jihadist fury.

In tune with those dramatic Parisian events, the play turned out to be even more effective; it was a representation of tragedy where tragedy had actually taken place. The organizers at the Odéon had to prepare the audience to avoid public alarm: for example, by warning, shortly before the start of the show, that eight loud shots would be heard.

The overturning of the consolidated interpretation of Aeschylus's work by the Societas Raffaello Sanzio appears even more poignant. *Oresteia* does not represent the birth of Western civilization from the ashes of myth but the persistence of myth and of archaic culture, as well as the possibility, always lying in wait, of its re-emergence in the uncontrolled form of violence. Thus, the idea that man has heroically emancipated himself through his power, for better or for worse, is revealed to be an illusion. Tragedy then clearly shows its origins, which are inseparable from myth, that is, its 'pre-tragic' nature.

In the unrepeatable moment of staging the *Oresteia* in Paris, an intersection occurred between what had been — the play staged twenty years before — and the present. This relationship generated a new constellation of meaning. The evidence of this new meaning is favoured by the exceptional nature of the events that have occurred. It is a macroscopic case, but it is always valid for the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the *hic et nunc* which characterizes every theatrical action.

Benjamin's philosophical concept of *Jetztzeit*, as it emerges in his 1940 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', can help elucidate this phenomenon of collision between past and present.⁹ The synchrony of the image of the past caught in the instant, namely, the *Zeit*, is the time that is given in the *Jetzt*, the 'now'. The *Jetztzeit* clarifies that it is always the urgent priority of the present to appropriate the past in

9 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', trans. by Harry Zohn, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), iv: 1938–1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2003), pp. 389–400 (pp. 396–97).

order to re-interpret it. It is precisely the need, the current necessity, and above all, Benjamin warns us, the danger, that dictates the sense of its appropriation. As appropriation will inevitably determine its transformation, the past does not come back as an unalterable datum but is accepted in the new sense that the present attributes to it. Therefore, every appropriation is significant in an unprecedented way. This collision between past and present creates an event, with the novelty of a form identical to the past but in relation to 'the now', which has the originality of an occurrence.

We can observe the same mechanism in the act of quotation: a text unchanged is extracted from a context of origin and relocated, through montage, into a new context. Relocation is always a source of transformation of the original meaning of the quoted text. The same thing could also be noted regarding the operation of translation, where between the original and translated versions there is never a relationship of faithful reproduction but, as Benjamin called it, a 'relationship of life'.¹⁰ It is a relationship that always requires a dialectical polarity of the translation compared to the original, where the tension and the difference are played out with respect to the original. On the other hand, reenactment can be thought of as a form of quotation; it is comparable to an act of appropriation. As Domenico Quaranta observes in the context of performance art, 'art is always a linguistic fact, even when it turns into an event', and the event, once transformed into a fetish, 'becomes an object to be found in the sea magnum of cultural chaos'.¹¹ Quotation, moreover, goes hand in hand with the act of repetition; that is, we repeat what is quotable.

Benjamin understands the particular value of quotation and repetition in the context of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, confirming that theatre is the ideal place to observe the mechanism of repetition. As Samuel Weber observed, Benjamin notes the value of repetition in the text he dedicates to Brecht's epic theatre more than in any other writings.¹² Benjamin understands that what is quoted on the stage of epic

10 Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', trans. by Harry Zohn, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1: 1913–1926, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (1996), pp. 253–63.

11 Quaranta, 'RE:akt! Things that Happen Twice', p. 47.

12 Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 95–96; see also Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*.

theatre happens first through gesture, or *gestus* as Brecht sometimes called it, using a German term with Latin origins. The gesture — that is, as Brecht intends it, the ‘overall attitude’ (*Gesamthaltung*) assumed in front of other people, therefore, the socially connoted act — turns out to be the oxymoronic core of the relationship between identity, difference, repetition, translatability, and untranslatability which quotation reveals. *Haltung*, in fact, is the German word for both ‘attitude’ and ‘posture’, which Brecht uses in combination with *gestus*.

The gesture — the performative act par excellence — becomes quotable through the estrangement technique (*Verfremdungstechnik*), because of the interruption that is created with respect to the flow of action and the context in which it originally belongs. According to Benjamin, interruption is one of the ‘fundamental methods of all form-giving’;¹³ it is the same concept put forth by Artaud when he states that the actor ‘does not make the same gestures twice, but he makes gestures, he moves; and although he brutalizes forms, nevertheless behind them and through their destruction he rejoins that which outlives forms and produces their continuation.’¹⁴ Artaud states that ‘to break through language in order to touch life is to create or recreate the theatre.’¹⁵ His observations confirm the relationship of this kind of performance to life, the vital principle that lies in the revolutionary act of destroying a traditional form and relating the original to the destroyed tradition, a relationship also present in the work of Benjamin.

On the other hand, the vital mechanism of continuation, of the survival of forms through their betrayal and destruction, is also a theme addressed by Aby Warburg, who coined the terms *Pathosformel* and *Nachleben*.

The Brechtian *gestus* could enucleate the concept of *Pathosformel* coined by Warburg. *Pathosformeln*, or *pathos formulae*, which by their nature consist of a durable element — the *Formel* — and a malleable element — the *Pathos* — are energy vehicles of ancient forms, which change in relation to their function in different historical contexts.

13 Cf. Walter Benjamin, ‘What Is Epic Theatre? [First version]’ and ‘What Is Epic Theatre? [Second Version]’, in Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock, intro. by Stanley Mitchell (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 1–22.

14 Artaud, *Theater and its Double*, p. 12.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Pathosformeln do not remain identical to themselves but are transformed in transmission. Only the contact with ‘the selective will of an age’,¹⁶ which welcomes the formulae through the creative act of the artist, causes them to polarize and transform, to imply a radical inversion of meaning. It is the contact, the new relationship created between the two elements in question, which makes the difference and determines the content of the object, rather than any alleged objectivity or substantiality in itself. This contact guarantees the invariance of the content: the original. Instead, the invariant is the relationship, the contact.

Furthermore, the survival of the *Pathosformeln* in this relationship of repetition and variation gives life to the *Nachleben* — another functional concept of Warburg —, which refers to the posthumous life of motifs, of images of art that maintain a relationship with the originals as if they were echoing them. From this perspective, a Warburgian idea of memory emerges as a reenactment. In the same way, for Castellucci’s *Oresteia* it is the contact with the new historical context in which it is located that determines its re-semanticization.

In every repetition, there is a tearing away from the original and the creation of the new at the time of its reproduction; this is a contrastive mechanism that pertains to the theatre. The distancing from a form — which is intended to be an emotional control — is followed by a creative principle, which is a reinstatement into the *pathos* of a form. This reinstatement, in turn, implies its re-appropriation. On the other hand, emotional control is a fundamental aspect observed in the context of psychoanalysis by Freud in the mechanism of ‘repetition compulsion’, which is also a reflection on repetition and reconstruction.¹⁷

Milo Rau, expressly using reenactment, states that ‘theatre is something that starts all over again every day. It’s terrifying but at the same time it’s something that awakens you’, because it demands that performers ‘face each other everyday with something new and different’, and the actors act in a different way every evening.¹⁸

16 Aby Warburg, ‘Grundbegriffe, I, Notizbuch, 1929’ (p. 26), quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970), p. 249.

17 Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: Liveright, 1989).

18 Enrico Pastore, ‘Intervista a Milo Rau’.

What makes repetition so crucial in theatre, distinguishing it from other forms of art, is presence, including the physical presence of the actor, the spectator, and the communication that such interrelationship implies. Presence is the condition of the relationship, of the contact from which a change of meaning always arises. And the gesture is the embodiment of presence.

For this reason, gesture is a sign of presence as well as a quotable act. The presence, the actuality of the contact that is given in the symbolic relationship of the theatrical medium is the guarantor of a vital relationship that determines form and content of the work of art, always an event loaded with novelty.

According to Amelia Jones, the true event is presence; it is the 're-iteration as the presence that can never be full in/to itself'.¹⁹ Or rather, it is the meaning of presence that the French philosopher François Jullien explored in relation to theatre. In his opinion, Greek theatre was invented as a repository to save presence from corruption, to restore presence to its purity by preserving it in its intensity. The stage is the place of presence: the place where, in the alternation between entering and leaving the scene, presence is torn from loss, from opacity, from the excess of reality from which it is destined to be returned instead to transparency. Theatre realizes and authenticates presence 'through its flaunted unreality, to experiment again (artificially) that a presence is (indeed) possible; to cleanse and purge the ordinary presence through the organized semblance of theatre, freeing it from sinking into the realism that it itself produces'.²⁰

Theatre thus acts as a filter in the relationship between scene and audience, to purify the presence and subtract it from opacity. This is the contribution of theatrical mimesis, which has little to do with reproduction or mere copying. Instead, it has to do with the paradox of the mingling of both presence and absence, which theatre, as an ephemeral art, is able to express.

19 Cf. Amelia Jones, 'The Artist Is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 55.1 (Spring 2011), pp. 16–45 (p. 34).

20 François Jullien, *Près d'elle. Présence opaque, présence intime* (Paris: Galilée, 2016), p. 44 (my translation).

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