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The Preemptive Image

If the age turns away from the theater, in which it is no longer interested, that is because the theater has ceased to represent it. It no longer hopes to be provided by the theater with myths on which it can sustain itself.

– Antonin Artaud

These words of Artaud, written more than sixty years ago, continue to hold true today: the theatre does not represent our age, or doesn't represent our age nearly as fully and centrally as it might. It does not provide the age with sustaining myths, by which I think Artaud surely didn't mean "lies," the way we speak of political or social myths today. He meant accounts, wrought in the imagination and then enacted, or (to accord with one of Artaud's visions) fashioned directly on the stage – accounts of how it feels and what it means to be alive. And to be alive in that mysterious double way that art offers to us, the life of this moment together with the life of the long line of existence of which our time is both an instant and an instance.

Put another way, the crucial difference between the theatre and its upstager, film, is this: theatre began as a sacred event and eventually included the profane, by which it has since been overwhelmed; film began as a profane event and eventually included the sacred, by which (at its best) it is now dominated. It was Artaud, again, who spoke of the movies' having taken over what he called the "distribution" of modern myths, and if we take the meaning of "myths" here to be *tales told in images* – and images that are literally larger than life – *enactments of what life is like, and what it embodies, at its highest pitch,* then I think this is true also.

It has often been said that representationalism (realism or naturalism) has been usurped by film, because the cinema is able to go to actual places and capture truthful behavior in authentic environments to an extent impossible in the theatre. Yet film's representationalism,

even in a well-made, neatly compressed, climactic adaptation, never precludes a mythical or allegorical component. To wit, a film such as *The Piano Teacher* (2001) reminds us, more evocatively than any (literal-minded) documentary on the subject of the Holocaust, of the physical horror implicit in the inspirited artistry of the past; reminds us not only that Vienna, that archetypal European cultural capital, was the site of the welcomed Nazi *Anschluss* in 1938, but also that arty Austria is the home today of the fascist political leader Jörg Haider. And *Our Lady of the Assassins* (2000), with its graphic depiction of brutal violence, pervasive drug use, rampant materialism (even among the poor), and sexual abandon alongside fervent religiosity in contemporary Medellín, Colombia, becomes something of a metaphor for the decline of the West – particularly when one considers that this Latin American city has massive fireworks displays each time one of its cocaine shipments arrives safely in the United States.

Film isn't flourishing just now the way it did from the late 1950s for a decade or more, when Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, Ray, and the French New Wave created their marvelous series of works, and when, with the publication of *Agee on Film* in 1958, there was the beginning of a change in general attitudes toward serious film criticism in America. Yet Susan Sontag's proclamation not long ago that cinephilia is dead seems premature – it would seem especially so to the Iranians and the Chinese – and, professors aside, film still interests most intelligent people more than theatre does. (Indeed, if anything has helped to shrink the audience for serious movies, it is the academicization or compartmentalization of film – in courses, departments, "majors," colleges, advanced degrees, and universities – throughout Euro-America.) Why people group these two art forms together in the first place is a matter for some consideration, especially to someone like me – married to the theatre as I am, yet long ago seduced by the cinema.

The ability of film, for example, to select and isolate factors in a work instantaneously gives the medium a power that the theatre does not have. (Moreover, pictures like *Run Lola Run* [1998] have extended this "fluidity" to include alternative streams or chronologies of action, dependent upon which character's perspective is being adopted at any given moment.) Let me give an example, a negative one. I once saw a production of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* – a striking and even shocking play by the Jacobean dramatist who died in 1639, not a racy Western by the late American movie director of the same name. In the last scene the incestuous brother, Giovanni, comes in with his sister's heart impaled on a dagger and stands there with it almost until the end

of the play. Now such an action is simply impossible to carry out these days. There's no way that this character can stand on stage with his sister's heart on the end of a dagger and play a long speaking scene with a host of other people.

Everyone in the audience was tittering. First, they knew that the heart was fake, and, second, even had it been a real heart, the scene couldn't have held the stage because obviously the distraction (to put the matter mildly) would have been too great. We're conditioned by film now to want what's important to be singled out and shown apart. A film director could have cut away from that damned heart-on-a-dagger so that you wouldn't have had to see it through the whole scene; you would have seen only the face of the brother or the faces of the other characters, or both in alternation. That's more than a mere convenience: it's in the nature of the filmic medium so to allow you, effortlessly, to arrange space and assign prominence.

Is this particular ability what accounts for the continuing ascendancy of film over theatre? That's a large question for which I don't intend to offer a single explanation or solution, but I will offer a few more thoughts. I think that the very abstraction of film – the fact that on it there are no *real*, physical bodies or objects, but only their images before our eyes – is another source of its power and freedom. I believe that the theatre's very confinement to place, the fact that it occurs here, now, on this stage, with these performers and those objects – conditions usually thought to be the source of its own power relative to film – may be a source of its present weakness.

It's true that experimental groups such as the Living Theater, the Open Theater, and the Performance Group created environmental theatre to try to overcome conventional drama's spatial limitations. They did this by using an existing environment that was as close to reality as possible, or by designing such an environment so that it enveloped the audience and thereby not only erased any distinction between viewing space and playing area but also freed the spectators from static positioning or a single point of vision. The cinema, for its part, responded to the same challenge to "get real" by experimenting with three dimensions through the use of special multicolored, seemingly multilayered eyeglasses, as well as by inventing such wide-screen processes as CinemaScope, Cinerama, and Panavision along with audio systems like Sensurround.

This may be a paradox, but in the age of technical miracles, of the annihilation of time and space, of technologized existence, if you will, an existence in which immediacy no longer has the simple meaning it

once had and in which the line between a thing or a being and its image or reproduction has been nearly obliterated – in such an age the theatre's very "live-ness" may be what so often makes it seem to be less fully alive. Moreover, although theatre is inherently more life-like because it occurs live and in three dimensions, the presence of three-dimensional actors in a theatre – a non-real or artificial space – may actually undercut a production's resemblance to life at the same time that the actors increase its live-ness. (Indeed, theatre performance, by virtue of its live-ness, disappears as soon as it is said and done, while film performance, by nature of its preservation on celluloid and now on videotape or DVD, is kept "alive" in its original format in a way that even the best-taped theatrical productions – as opposed to their sources or blueprints, dramatic scripts – cannot be.)

How many times have you noticed, for example, that when in a play a film strip is suddenly employed, everyone's eyes instantly turn to whatever is shown on the screen, be it a face or something else? This has very little to do with the nature of what's being shown and everything to do with the way we are fascinated by the sheer presence of film, by its still mysterious, nearly ineffable, nature. Maybe our fascination has something to do not only with the framing of the motion-picture image and the manner in which that framing commands our voyeuristic gaze (as it certainly does, on a smaller scale, in painting), but also with film's god-like ability either to replicate our own world or to create out of the dark an alternative, imaginative universe of its own. Then there is the cinema's capacity to transcend the laws of physics (also biology, chemistry, you name it) and take us along for the ride; to make us think that we are dreaming though we are wide awake, and to wake us from our waking sleep by itself fading back into the black of an unfathomable void; even to make us believe that, at one time in the past, people lived their lives in black and white.

Whatever the case, I can remember watching a play during which a film sequence featuring the protagonist was shown – a dull sequence, by the way – while the actor himself was still on stage doing lively things, and finding myself looking at the film to the exclusion of the actual man, as almost the entire audience was doing. In a somewhat different vein, I recall that in a production by Mabou Mines of *Dead End Kids* from the early 1980s, by far the most effective sequence in this anti-bomb theatrical work was the showing of a short film made by the Atomic Energy Commission to extol the benefits of nuclear weaponry as a means of keeping the peace. "We turned the archives against themselves," the director, JoAnne Akalaitis, later said. Indeed they did, but

how much less effective *Dead End Kids* would have been had Mabou Mines tried to enact on stage what the film was saying. Ironically, not only was Akalaitis' title itself taken from the series of films Warner Brothers made with the "Dead End Kids"(who, for their part, started out on Broadway in Sidney Kingsley's play *Dead End*) in the thirties and forties, but her Off-Broadway production itself was turned into a film in 1986 – also directed by Akalaitis – on the history of nuclear power, where it comes from, and what it does.

Speaking of explosive power, the abstract filmic medium's special effects have become so life-like that (in a reversal of what purportedly occurred at the initial screening of the Lumières' *Arrival of the Paris Express* [1896]), when the first footage of the attack on the World Trade Center was shown on television – captured from a myriad of angles by any number of personal video cameras, then aired by the news media again and again – it was virtually indistinguishable from what Hollywood studios could have manufactured for a picture such as *Armageddon* (1998). When film becomes this close to life, is it therefore life-like, or has reality started to resemble film? When video games of mass annihilation are found in the bedrooms of young people who have donned ski masks and shot their schoolmates, as two teenagers did at Colorado's Columbine High School, do we experience an uncomfortable moment at which we realize that some of our children can no longer tell the difference between created or fabricated images and ineluctable, irreversible reality?

We know that when movies began, for a long time they mostly imitated *theater*, something clearly implied in the term "photo-play," which remained in use well into the 1930s and was one of the reasons André Bazin unrhetorically titled his collected criticism *What Is Cinema?* Over thirty years ago, Jerzy Grotowski came to this country to tell us in lectures and in his book *Towards a Poor Theater* (1968), and to show us in productions like *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, that what practitioners in the theatre must find out is just this: what is theatre? Grotowski's theatrical mission was thus to strip away the trappings of the theatre, to tread a *via negativa* in order to discover what it is quintessentially the theatre can do that no other art form can accomplish, and of course he was thinking specifically of film as the opponent or antagonist. The one thing the theatre shouldn't do, he said, was try to be like the cinema, since movies can manipulate time and space to a much greater extent. No matter how swift a revolving stage you have, how computerized your light board is, or how full of alacrity your stagehands are, how can they compete with the blinding, effortless speed of film editing?

What can theatre do that film can't? To the easy answer that the stage gives us "live" people (ultimately in communion with an equally live audience), I can only reply that I'm not at all satisfied by such an explanation. What sort of live people? What are they doing? What are they saying? And how are they different from, and more compelling than, live people on the street? Why, as I said before, does their very live-ness often strike us as peculiarly, very peculiarly, a source of boredom? Questions like these could hardly have been asked, of course, before the dawn of the modern industrial and technological age, but they have to be asked now.

What *can* theatre do that film and the other arts can't? – theatre the impure art, the so often-arrested and even incestuous form, the "sick man" of the arts, as Edgar Allan Poe called it. One of the ways to address this question – oddly enough, given the fact that theatre, like cinema, is already a composite or amalgam of all the other arts – is to listen to representatives from those other arts and other intellectual disciplines, and think along with them about how communication is made. It is through such dialogue that we are likely to learn more about how the theatre best communicates, and what its inimitable voice might be.

One of the reasons, by the way, that Poe described the theatre as "sick" is that the attitude toward it on the part of American writers is very different from the attitude in Europe. In other words, there is little dialogue across the literary arts in this country, whereas that dialogue is inherent in such artistic creation on the other side of the Atlantic. Namely, most European plays, unlike American ones, are written by men and women who are more than playwrights; very few of the greatest Western dramas have been authored by people who wrote only plays. Theatre was part, and only part, of the instrumentality of their culture. The theatre has always seemed, for the superior European writer, to be an open avenue for one kind of poem, a dramatic poem rather than a lyrical or narrative one. Not so in the United States, which is why earlier I applied the term "incestuous" to our theatre, and why we have had such difficulty in defining what its inimitable voice might be: lacking perspective, distance, or points of comparison, we cannot see our dramatic forest for its histrionic trees. (The example of our greatest playwright, Eugene O'Neill, comes readily to mind.)

Film may offer greater visual possibilities, not to speak of experiential ones, but that still doesn't prevent some of the most exciting and popular theatre in New York from being highly visual as a way of curing its own sickness. What about Bill Irwin's "new vaudeville" pieces,

Largely New York (1989) and *Fool Moon* (1993), productions that are virtually silent? What of similarly non-verbal productions such as Blue Man Group's *Tubes* (1991) and De La Guarda's *Villa Villa* (1998)? And, as early as 1971, how about Robert Wilson's three-hour speechless epic *Deafman Glance*, which created a combination Theatre of Silence-and-Images not unlike that of silent experimental film? It is precisely by choosing to overcome the limitations of their chosen medium that these artists have achieved success, for what greater thrill can there be than to see an art form transcend the boundaries that we have become accustomed to assigning to it?

Or to see an artist do so, for that matter. Think only of Julie Taymor's predominantly visual theatrical productions, *The Lion King* (1997) and *The Green Bird* (2000), and of her highly literate films *Titus* (1999) and *Frida* (2002). And consider that Neil LaBute makes predominantly verbal films like *In the Company of Men* (1997) and *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998) at the same time as he fills the stage with arresting, even aggressive physical images in such plays as *Bash* (1995) and *The Shape of Things* (2001). The list of such artists could be extended as far back as Ingmar Bergman and forward to David Mamet, who continues to write and direct for the screen as well as the stage. And I nearly omitted the "rehearsal" films, or "filmed theater," made by people like Louis Malle (*Vanya on 42nd Street*, 1994), Denys Arcand (*Jesus of Montreal*, 1989), and Jacques Rivette (*Paris Belongs to Us*, 1957; *L'Amour Fou*, 1968; plus two others). But you get the picture by now.

Getting back to Artaud and the struggle of the imagination with reality, here is something Wallace Stevens once wrote: "One of the peculiarities of the imagination is that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality." For drama and theatre the task is to determine what that reality is, what has changed in it, and what hasn't; the imagination will take care of itself, on stage as well as on screen. For drama, all I can say is that such a reality does not consist of any one of these terms in isolation or combination: revival, musical, reverse adaptation (from film), or Disneyfication; discrimination, patriarchy, hegemony, or homosexuality (collectively making up the Theatre of Guilt, in Robert Brustein's words). And for film, that reality consists of one word for the time being: technology.

That is to say, when I look to the future and envision hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of homes with large, wide-screen televisions and surround-sound theatres, I wonder who will go to the multiplexes

of today, which themselves made obsolete the movie palaces and drive-ins of yesteryear. I believe that in a short time most films will be viewed at home (with a movie title like *Home Alone* [1990] thereby taking on new meaning), or in museums by solitary film scholars, and that the multiplex will become the nearly exclusive province of teenagers trying to get out of the house – a trend, of course, that has already begun.

If I am right, and films become an overwhelmingly private experience, shared by small groups in living rooms, what might then become of theatre? Will the experimental theatre groups of the future perform in our living rooms, or will the desire for human contact and communality, together with a concern for the social fabric, drive us back to more traditional theatres? Alternatively, will 3-D IMAX be replaced by holographic film, creating three-dimensional worlds into which we can walk, until we eventually "holographize" old movies (just as we colorize them now) and offer audience members a chance to sit down with Rick in *Casablanca* (1942), have a drink, and then say, "Play it again, Sam"?

Whatever the case, the invention of the cinema, at its lowest or common level, answered a growing cultural desire to see the world in precise detail, to locate the viewer as closely as possible to both the spectacular and the everyday. For, despite all the advances of the nineteenth-century stage – seen most clearly in the melodramatic spectacles produced by Steele MacKaye, Henry Irving, and David Belasco – only movies could democratically take audiences to places they could not travel and position them closer to calamitous events than might otherwise be safe, in addition to valorizing the quotidian nature of their domestic lives. In a sense, the popular cinema had to be invented (as assertion confirmed by the fact that its invention occurred more or less simultaneously in three different countries): to save the theatre from itself, as more than one wag has put it, as well as to accommodate the entertainment needs of the exponentially growing number of underclass citizens throughout the world.

It is at their highest level, however – a level amply illustrated by this book, I trust – that the movies preempt so much of my time, and why I have been compulsively scribbling about them now for well over fifteen years. No longer in search of theatre as Eric Bentley was for so many years, I remain in search of cinema: *Saint* Cinema of the high arts even as it is a secular searchlight on the material world.