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# The Missing Actor: The aesthetics of absence and the politics of disappearance

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**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the displacement of the figure of the actor from the centre of the theatrical stage concomitant with the 'scenographic turn' in contemporary theatre. It seeks to historicise the de-centring of the figure of the actor in a scenographically oriented 'aesthetics of absence' by demonstrating this is indirectly related to the political disappearances that have characterised the contemporary period – the disappearance of people not only from the *mise en scène* of the theatrical stage, but from the lived reality of post-war European history.

Heiner Goebbels's *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018) is examined as a case-study of how this history and its theatrical staging are intertwined. In demonstrating how the process of twentieth-century history finds its mode of presentation in the composition of space and action rather than the representation of figure and narration, the essay argues that the scenographic operation enables the production of performative historiography rather than simply historical *mise en scène* (Kear 2013). It traces how Goebbels's *Everything that happened and would happen* opens a space of aesthetic encounter (rather than simply a theatrical work) which implicates and involves the viewer and invites a critical and creative practice of spectatorship to animate its affects.

Rather than celebrate the displacement of the figure of the actor, the essay seeks to situate its emergence in relation to the political disappearance of actual people. The essay thereby argues that the theatrical appearance of the missing actor intersects with the historical tracing of the politics of disappearance.

## Introduction: Traces of traces

In the third interview of the book *Positions*, philosopher Jacques Derrida proposes a relational conception of *différance* which draws attention to the interanimation and co-constitution of seemingly oppositional and hierarchically organised terms such as appearance and disappearance, presence and absence. He contends that these binaries are

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performative constructs, ineluctably ghosted by the materiality of their semiotic operation. As Derrida points out, 'nothing … is anywhere ever simply absent or present. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces' (1987, 26). In this configuration, the trace of the trace continues to shadow the moment or event of its displacement or disappearance, reinscribing absent presence as an indeterminate spectral resonance. Its signifying power resides less in direct indexicality – pointing to something directly and consequentially – than as an enigmatic indication of the event's reverberating evanescence and continuing aleatory effects. Similarly, image-theorist Georges Didi-Huberman maintains the trace of the trace to be 'all the more efficacious because it *is not manifest*' and only enters the domain of the visual as a series of 'event-symptoms … as so many gleams and radiances, "traces of articulation", as so many indices' (2005, 31). For Huberman, these indices point towards something veiled, obscured, or undisclosed – whether a work, a remnant, or a memory – 'that has nowhere been fully described, attested, or set down in an archive, because its signifying "material" is first of all the image' (2005, 31). The material trace of disappearance enters the visual as precisely something that has not otherwise been made visible, disturbing appearance's self-evident certainty as it 'eats away at the visible' and destabilises its ontological consistency. Huberman suggests that historical traces of articulation (in the sense of both enunciating and conjoining) can be seen as powerful indices of absent presence at work in the image, operating as 'the *materia informis* when it shows though form, … presentation when it shows through representation, … opacity when it shows through transparency, … the visual when it shows through the visible' (141—142).

This article aims to investigate how material traces of presence can be seen to operate within and upon the aesthetics of absence which have displaced the figure of the actor from the centre of the stage in contemporary visual performance. In examining how the semiotic motility of scenographic practices enable the construction of theatrical *mise en scène* which testify to sites and scenes of disappearance that may otherwise remain unseen, the article explores how the material realities and histories of disappearance both effectively inform and inevitably haunt the visual modes of performance through which they can be seen to appear. The article investigates the relationship between tracing the unseen scene of disappearance and the aesthetic construction of the appearance of absent presence in Heiner Goebbels's *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018). Co-commissioned by Artangel, 14-18 Now WW1 Centenary Art Commissions, Park Avenue Armory, and Ruhrtrienalle, this monumental music theatre landscape play evokes and examines the cultural memory and haunting legacy of the traumatic events of twentieth century European history through the orchestration of scenographic resources – sound, light, bodies, voices, images and objects – which rearticulate the affective traces of residual material presence and resonant historical absence which it unfolds. The article offers a case-study analysis of the work's première performance at Mayfield, a Manchester International Festival cultural venue – and future home of Factory International – sited in a disused industrial railway depot in Manchester, England. By examining the work's co-compositional address to its audience, the article demonstrates the scenographic scene as testifying *to* the materiality of absent presence and the material presence of disappearance, without necessarily signifying its historicity directly. Here, the traces of articulation linking the scenographic scene to the obscured historical or veiled memorial scene are emphasised, thereby re-animating the power of

the scene itself to function critically and methodologically. Reading the work historically, it contends, enables the spectator to supplement the composition of the theatrical scene with the evocation of intimated but unseen material traces ghosting its visuality. Ultimately, the article seeks to historicise the *aesthetic* of absent presence by demonstrating that the decentring of the figure of the actor in a scenographically-oriented aesthetics of absence is indirectly but indissociably related to the *political* disappearances that have characterised the contemporary period – the disappearance of people not only from the *mise en scène* of the theatrical stage, but from the lived reality of post-war history.

## The missing actor

Tracing the displacement of the figure of the actor from the centre of the theatrical *mise en scène* requires not only a long view of the development of scenography as an art form *sui generis*, but a significant re-conceptualisation of the role of theatrical representation in codifying historically specific ideas of human agency and action. It also entails situating the linkage between the aesthetic appearance of absence and the political reality of disappearance as central to the twentieth century's reconfiguration of tragedy as a critical and historical framework. In this respect, it is worth recalling philosopher Giorgio Agamben's insistence on the impossibility of following 'the tragic paradigm' after the events of the mid-twentieth century and the singular catastrophe of the Shoah specifically (1999, 99). For Agamben, as for Theodor Adorno previously, the 'absolute event' of the appearance of the death camps marks both the defining political space of modernity itself – 'the hidden matrix of the politics we are still living' (1998, 175) – and the decisive moment of breaking with the classical model of representation, ethics and aesthetics. After Auschwitz, the classical 'hero has left us forever, he can no longer bear witness for us in any way' (1999, 99). Correlatively, the individual figure of the actor is no longer capable of shouldering the burden of embodying the vicissitudes of historical being. The impossibility of representing the criminal mass murders, orchestrated disappearances, and moral destitution of the camps without reproducing their craven maleficence directly has led to the development of a range of indexical practices testifying to the event of 'the Nazi *arcanum*' whilst eschewing its 'unknowing repetition' and modes of invisibility (Didi-Huberman 2008: 26). The challenge has been, and remains, to reveal 'the process by which disappearance is produced, right down to its own disappearance' (Rancière 2014, 46).

The basic proposition of this article is that the post-war emergence of a scenographic aesthetics of absence is indissolubly connected with the ethical diremption of representing the historical scene of disappearance. As political theorist, Jenny Edkins, has argued, in the chaos and confusion of the second world war and its aftermath, vast populations were displaced, dismantled, and disappeared, whether through direct destruction or the demobilisation and deterritorialization that followed it. She maintains that when someone goes missing, when someone disappears, it is precisely their someone-ness that is drawn to attention, the singularity and specificity through which 'the person-as such is acknowledged'. For all the attempts to count people as numbers of disappeared or missing, or to give an historical account of the conditions or circumstances of their disappearance, this fails to account for their uniqueness or irreplaceability. Accordingly, Edkins explains, 'it is impossible to specify what makes a person irreplaceable … something unfathomable:

maybe even the person's unfathomability in relation to our own. The person cannot be pinned down: *the person is missing*. It is a sense that very 'missingness' that makes the person irreplaceable' (2011, viii—ix). 'Missingness', she thereby contends, reveals a relational, transitive structure of subjectivity in which *the subject is missing* – missing to themselves, constitutively, as well as within the political regime of appearance that seeks to render the individual simply a measurable unit of the social and economic apparatus. The flipside of this, as Latin Americanist and performance theorist Diana Taylor (1997) has demonstrated, is the instrumentalization and strategic organisation of disappearance as a mode of political terror and authoritarian repression of dissident populations. Here, the appearance of uniqueness offers a mode of resistance to political disposability and contestation of state-orchestrated violence. Both perspectives illustrate the critical necessity of historicising the reconfiguration of the role of the actor in relation to the stage – and state – apparatus not only as an aesthetic but fundamentally political redistribution of conceptions of subjectivity and modes of de-subjectification and re-subjectification.

With this in mind, and in this context, it might be better to cease referring to the idea of the subject altogether, as cultural theorist Bifo Berardi suggests, with its implication of conscious, intentional 'mediation between the action and its actor', and simply substitute it with its theatrical signifier and performative chimera, the actor. In the contemporary historical moment, Berardi contends, 'the actor is absent: you see the actions, but you don't see the actor' (2011, 125). The appearance of actions without an actor comes close to describing the distinctive tendency in contemporary scenography and performance being outlined in this article. It seeks to demonstrate that scenographic practices enable the theatrical realisation of the presence of absence, tracing modes of disappearance to make visible their invisibility as visuality without recourse to actorly figurations of subjective agency or intentionality, thereby making the appearance of 'the inhuman felt, perceptible' (Rancière 2014, 50).

Whilst the long history of the decentring and displacement of the figure of the actor can be traced back to the nineteenth century innovations of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig – notwithstanding the former's genuflections towards the actor's continued primacy in the hierarchical ordering of the elements of the theatrical *mise en scène* – the 'slow death of the spectacle performed on stage by actors for spectators' (Rancière 2013, 184) has taken a decisive turn since the events of the mid and late twentieth century and the forced disappearance of social actors from the stage of political history. Following Jacques Rancière's investigations of the historical distribution and sedimentation of 'ways of acting, ways of seeing and ways of speaking' (2011, 14), we can see in Appia's rediscovery of the primacy of spatiality in the construction of theatrical meaning and the logic of staging a decisive shift in the mediation and perception of lived historical experience and creative expression. In anchoring the presentation of what Rancière terms 'sensible reality' in 'the material reality of the stage' (2013, 115), Appia reanimates the composition of the dynamic visual image within the theatrical *mise en scène* as a visible, plastic form of thought – thought as a form of making-visible drama's subjective interiority and actantial relationality.

## Missing en scène

Rancière credits Appia with the discovery that 'the theatrical idea is an idea that is realized in the construction of a space' (2013, 184), and not simply the representation of an action.

He also describes the development of *mise en scène* – the art of constructing the scene – as modern European theatre's distinctive contribution to aesthetic thought 'in the face of disappearance' (2014, 45). It therefore does not rely on the appearance of the actor within it. Compositionally and methodologically, according to Rancière, the scene does not function as 'the illustration of an idea'. Rather, it is staged as a mode of investigation, a locus of critical and political enquiry, a means of visualising traces of presence. The theatrical scene thereby operates 'as a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving perceptions, affects, names and ideas' (2013, xi) in spatialised aesthetic form, assembling and reconnecting words and images to produce new configurations of the sensible and the intelligible. This 'weaving together' serves to construct not only the theatrical space of seeing – an 'optical machine' or *theatron* in the classical sense – but the very thinking of the event itself through the ocular and imaginative interplay of presence and absence, appearance and disappearance. As Rancière continues, the scenographic composition of the 'scene captures concepts at work, and in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end' (2013: xi). *Mise en scène*, as an investigative visual operation, constructs a space of visibility and criticality; assembling, organising and orchestrating theatre-materials as historical 'traces of traces' rather than cataloguing and documenting definitive indices of appearance and disappearance, presence and absence. In this way, the creation of the theatrical scene is always connected to the materiality of its missing historical scene, demonstrating that theatre 'thinking is always firstly thinking the thinkable – a thinking that modifies what is thinkable by welcoming what is unthinkable' (Rancière 2013, xi). In other words, its thinking is always both political and relational, investigating and inventing relationships between scenes, events, and imaginative possibilities.

For Diana Taylor, it is precisely this mode of relational thinking that characterises performance as a mode of constructing social memory and cultural history. Rather than consign performance as ontologically subject to disappearance into memory – rehearsing and repeating 'the disappearance of the subject', as Peggy Phelan suggests (1992, 146—8) – Taylor views performance as contributing to the formation of social memory and cultural knowledge production not through the privileging of presence and its tracing in the archive, but through 'mnemonic and gestural practices and specialized knowledges' that extend beyond and destabilise ethnocentric conceptions of thought (2001, 230). Whilst the unwritten 'repertoire of knowledges performed through dance, theatre, song, ritual witnessing, healing practices, and the many other forms of repeatable behaviours that build on past materials whilst allowing for the new' exceed the constraints of the archive, remaining unrecorded and uncapturable, Taylor is at pains to stress that this 'does not mean that performance – as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behaviour – disappears' (230). In fact, she emphasises that performance is always recursive and recombinant, reconstituting its processes and materials to transmit 'communal memories, histories, and values' (230). Accordingly, Taylor contends that 'social memory links and implicates communities in the transitive mode of subject formation'; a relational mode which runs counter to normalised, individualised notions of subjectivity, experience and memory. For Taylor, the production of social memory entails 'a relational, non-individualistic understanding of subjectivity' in which 'the I who remembers is simultaneously active and passive (thinking subject/subject of thought)' (2001, 218); a decentred,

displaced actor both producing and produced by the thought-memory they are articulating through the appearance of their own missingness.

So how does this non-subjective reframing of thought produced through the construction of *mise en scène* challenge and change the notion of performance repeating and rehearsing the disappearance of the subject? How might scenography be rethought as a non-subjective form of thought, a thought-memory in which the thinking subject does not necessarily appear? How might an aesthetics of absence destabilise the political and epistemological primacy of presence?

Of course, as Jenny Edkins has usefully cautioned, although such 'thorny and contested notions of appearance and disappearance, absence and presence, personhood and action' may be central to performance aesthetics and understanding their cultural and political significance, the disappearances they directly or indirectly address – 'real disappearances, disappearances of real, live, embodied people, not the disappearance of bodies or the presence that could be said to constitute performance' – are of a different order of magnitude (2014, 135). Whilst it is both critically insufficient and politically inept to suggest an equivalence between aesthetic and historical events, both nonetheless remain implicated in the construction of the political-aesthetic 'distribution of the sensible' – the forms and modes of 'visibility and speech' which, according to Rancière, constitute the very fabric of the social. Both politics and performance involve an intervention into the distribution of the sensible, reconfiguring 'modes of being and forms of visibility' (2004, 13). Although decisively not the same thing as material reality, the construction of aesthetic 'appearance is not an illusion that is opposed to the real; it is the introduction of a visible into the field of experience, which then modifies the regime of the visible' (Rancière 1999, 99). In seeking to explicate scenography and performance as modes and practices of aesthetic thinking, it might become possible to demonstrate how the disappearance of the figure of the actor from the spaces of appearance par excellence – the *mise en scène* of the theatre and of public space – serves to make the social and political apparatus of dis/appearance itself appear. In this, as Agamben opines, 'the task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear' (2000, 94).

## Aesthetics of absence and histories of disappearance

In the introduction to Heiner Goebbels' *Aesthetics of Absence* (2015), Jane Collins notes that the 'aesthetic doubling' of the stage apparatus which normally revolves around the central 'presence of the performer' tends to obscure the material operation of the theatre as a 'thing in itself' rather than simply a form of representation (2015, xv—xvi). She credits Goebbels with continuing the logic of Appia and Craig's renewal of theatrical staging by effectuating the 'dispersal and displacement' of the figure of the actor as the primary locus of dramatic action and expression and developing a de-centred, 'non-hierarchical, non-referential theatricality' foregrounding scenographic, visual and acoustic 'means of production: space, light, sound, performers and text … ' (xv—xvi). Whilst Collins maintains that Goebbels 'is not offering a model or template for an aesthetic of absence' (xvi), she nonetheless situates his spatialized music theatre as an exemplary practice re-animating the immanent potential of theatre and scenography as non-representational forms of thought and modes of aesthetic thinking. Goebbels' insistence

on treating all theatre materials and design elements with equal signifying capacity, working with them methodologically as 'participants', enables non-human resources such as 'pianos, stones, water, salt, wood, and metal' to 'become protagonists as soon as there is an absence of performers' (2015, 28).

Drawing on Gertrude Stein's conception of the landscape play, in which action occurs simultaneously across the stage rather than sequentially within the dramatic narrative, Goebbels ensures a dispersal of focus and distribution of attention that ensures 'these polyphonic compositions open up the imaginative space between sound and image, hearing and seeing' (Collins, 2015: xvii). This enables the *mise en scène* to function less as a representation of reality and more as the presentation of the materiality of the stage environment – a 'thing in itself'. It also allows for a shift of emphasis away from a dramatic event represented by actors on stage towards a 'drama of experience' in which the spectator is engaged in processing the landscape and soundscape in which 'the actor has to survive, rather than act' (Goebbels 2015, 2) (Figure 1). The absence of acting, if not necessarily the total banishment of the actor, enables the scenographic construction of the *mise en scène* to achieve a 'gravitational pull' for the spectator, leaving open the space of co-composition by refraining 'from showing the obvious and inhabiting the centre of attention' (79). Both actors and audience are thereby engaged in a 'drama of perception … emerging from what you see and what you hear, what is being triggered by and experienced in the act of watching, and what you do with the seen and the heard' (82).

**Figure 1.** Heiner Goebbels, *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018). An Artangel commission. Mayfield, Manchester International Festival, October 2018. Photo: Thanasis Deligiannis.

In *Theatre and Event: Staging the European Century* (2013), I argue that such an opening up of the theatre event as a space of aesthetic encounter and experience rather than the codification of closed representational practices enables the construction of a range of diagonal relationships between historical, political and theatrical events. Here, I'm likewise seeking to argue that Goebbels' displacement of the actor's resonant absence within the stage composition opens a space of aesthetic possibility, and mode of criticality, that enables the temporalization and historicization of events which seem to be outside of its reach and operation. This is primarily achieved though creating an encounter which implicates and involves the spectator in the sensory drama of experience it presents and the affective 'resonance it creates' (Goebbels 2015, 98). At the same time, as Goebbels notes, there remains a 'twofold drama here' (2) with a doubled perceptual scene. For, if the disappearing actor is to survive the *mise en scène* of their own decentring and the anthropological machine performatively producing them as disposable, they must extend their embodied political presence beyond the transitory moment of aesthetic disappearance. This necessitates finding a different register of theatrical awareness and temporal attentiveness, enabling the audience to actively trace the historical events, scenes, and acts of which they are survivors. In so doing, the spectators participate in a specifically performative historiographic operation, processing visual and sonic materials 'liberated from the pure past' in order to 'open the present of time' as a space of critical and imaginative possibility (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 182).

## Everything happens

Heiner Goebbels' *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018) serves as an important example of how histories of disappearance and their theatrical staging are intertwined. The work assembles – often quite literally – three sets of source material: the text of Patrik Ourednik's *Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century* (2005), which is both read out loud by performers and digitally projected onto screens; the music of John Cage's compositions, *Europeras 1 and 2* (1987), played through an array of instruments, found and formal, including an enormous plastic pipe-organ; and visual feeds from the Euronews *No Comment* news channel offering unedited and unaccompanied images of the day's events. The production also draws upon the industrial site of its assembly – the vast, cavernous space of a disused railway depot, Manchester Mayfield, the designated future home of Factory International and the Manchester International Festival. Each of these four resources – architectural, textual, musical, and media – index the resonant materiality of twentieth century European history as the very stuff of scenic and scenographic composition.

The stage action consists in the performers-cum-stagehands – or perhaps more properly, 'actor-constructors' of the *mise en scène* – assembling a series of visual images or propositional scenes in which the material elements of the performance, themselves included, can be seen to be doing the performing (Figure 2).

Each image or scene appears to be simultaneously under construction and open to immediate critical deconstruction. Whilst each appears to gesture towards an indexically obscured historical event, it is the event of the appearance of the theatrical image which is offered to the audience first and foremost as happening in itself. The process of the performance, showing the careful construction and ostensive staging of the theatrical *mise en*

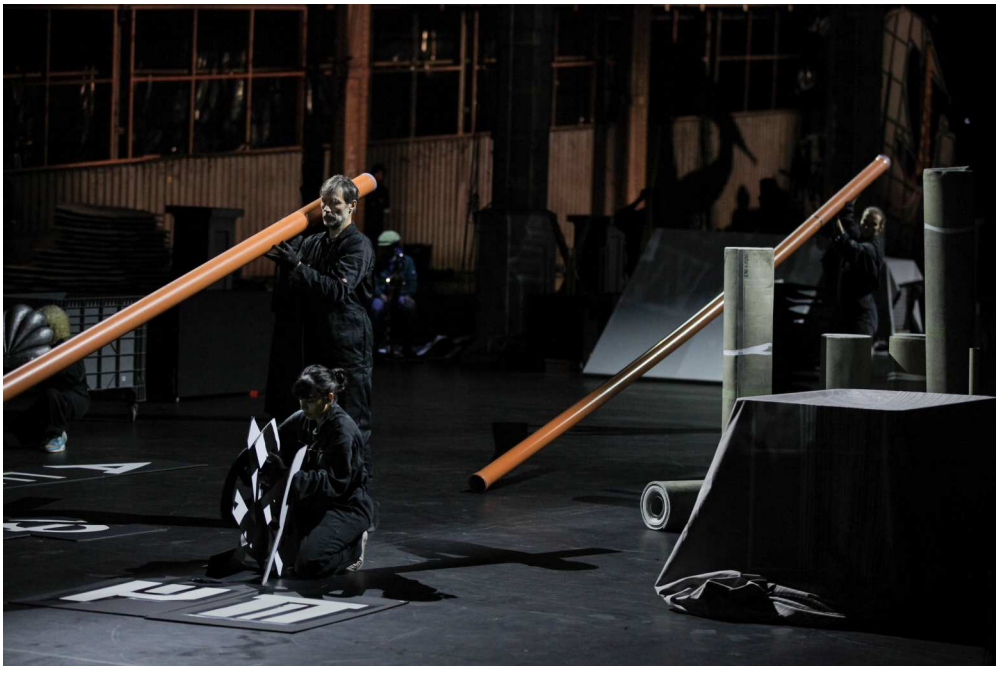

**Figure 2.** Heiner Goebbels, *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018). An Artangel commission. Mayfield, Manchester International Festival, October 2018. Photo: Thanasis Deligiannis.

*scène*, makes evident that images themselves appear to 'demonstrate: they rise up' – erupting from the matter of history – 'and sometimes they make us rise up too' (Didi-Huberman 2018, xxii). So, far from being an onlooker on past events happening outside of their own experience, the spectator themselves might be subjectivated, or perhaps more specifically *activated*, by the aesthetic experience of encountering the image. As Didi-Huberman argues in *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions* (2018), the appearance of the demonstrative image, emerging from the fabric of lived historical experience and the materiality of embodied presence, makes 'manifest the fact that politics is first of all a matter of subjectivation and imagination, of desire and memory' (xxii). Here the actor and the spectator are both involved in relationally co-producing and being produced by their construction of the theatrical image. As Didi-Huberman insists, these 'images participate in a gesture', with their theatrical formalisation perhaps even constituting an historical *gestus* (Kear 2024, 94) that 'bears within it, upon it, the very conditions of its own gesture' (Didi-Huberman 2018, xxvii). This means that the image retains within it the traces of the act – the event – indexed through its making. Its composition thereby demonstrates its own historicity. Moreover, the theatrical construction of the image from historical image-materials operates as 'a gesture that transforms time', acting 'in and on history' to render visible not only that which is seen but the historical production of its conditions of visibility (xxv). Their drama relies not on the actor's intentional self-narration but the intensity of the image's appearance within the scenographic and spectatorial dynamics of the theatre-making itself.

However, following Didi-Huberman's insistence that the gestic image discloses the conditions of its appearance, it seems insufficient to deploy the idea of the emergence

of the image alone as the conceptual framework for understanding its performative operation. If the formation of the theatrical image discloses the material scene of its own making, the context of its staging, then the concept of *mise en scène* itself should be revisited as offering critical insight into the historical acts and events it indirectly indexes and invariably traces. Accordingly, in his book *The Century*, philosopher Alain Badiou seeks to locate in the twentieth century theatrical concept of *mise en scène* the analytical apparatus of the 'immanent' aesthetic-political methodology he advocates for investigating the dynamics of historically lived experience, namely the 'examination of what the century meant to the people of the century' (2007: 44). My book, *Theatre and Event* (2013), takes up this prompt as a central optic through which to investigate how differentially lived experiences of twentieth century history are reflected, refracted, and examined in the work of twenty-first century theatre-makers practising what Badiou considers the principal tendency of 'the century of theatre as art': the transformation of the 'the thinking of representation into an art in itself' (2007, 40). Whilst Badiou credits 'the invention of the notion of *mise en scène*' to the emergence of the figure of the director [*metteur en scène*] as the principal thinker of theatre *sui generis* (49), whom he charges with the 'duty of thought' of conceiving 'the century as a living composition' (13), in *Theatre and Event* I argue that it is the post-dramatic reconfiguration of the theatre as a space of aesthetic encounter and experiential event rather than the composition of representational *mise en scène* that enables the construction of diagonal relationships between historical, political and theatrical events as well as an orthogonal relationship between actors and audience. Likewise, here I argue that revealing the process of constructing the *mise en scène* functions as an historiographic operation, enabling the spectators to activate the 'living composition' and animate its affects. In this respect, *mise en scène* can be rethought as the creation of an environment enabling not only 'complex investigations into the relationships between text, acting, space and public' (Badiou 2007, 40), but also the aesthetic configuration of the absent presence of the missing historical scene whose traces it excavates inexorably.

The theatrical scenes under construction and deconstruction in Goebbels' *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018) demonstrate how the process of twentieth century European history – in particular the three key modalities that philosopher Peter Sloterdijk characterises as the manipulation of environment and atmosphere; the technological development and industrialisation of product design; and the governmental management of populations and bio-politics (2009, 8—9) – find a mode of presentation in the composition of space and scene rather than the realisation of character and dramatic action. For example, the unfolding of a scene of environmental exploitation and contamination which takes place over an extended duration (Figures 3 and 4), appears to codify and condense the intersection of these three modalities of historical operation into a gestic theatrical image.

The materials of the composition – plastic pipes and sheeting – reference the by-products of the extractive capitalism of the petrochemical industry devastating the colonised landscape gestured to by the cut-out palm tree. Here the gestic theatrical image is rendered as an act rather than a thing, tracing the materiality of the historical actions that gave rise to its mode of appearance as a thing-in-itself. At the same time, the strange beauty of Cage's music is itself played through the plastic pipes of an automated organ, itself deconstructing and reassembling the traces of operatic theatricality in

**Figure 3.** Heiner Goebbels, *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018). An Artangel commission. Mayfield, Manchester International Festival, October 2018. Photo: Thanasis Deligiannis.

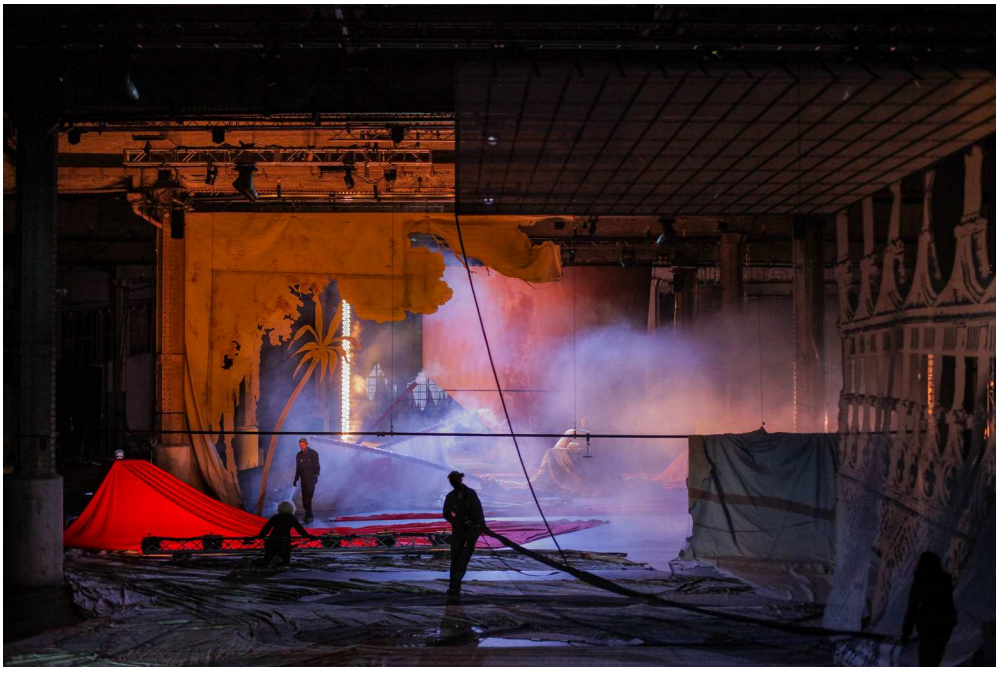

**Figure 4.** Heiner Goebbels, *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018). An Artangel commission. Mayfield, Manchester International Festival, October 2018. Photo: Thanasis Deligiannis.

tonal composition. The eerie score functions less as a commentary on the unfolding landscape than its accompaniment, demonstrating that the art of theatre is co-implicated in the marking out and deterritorialization of the other theatres it evokes and presumes to represent. Accordingly, the captivating white smoke that emanates from the on-stage pipe assemblage seems to reference both the burning of fossil fuels and human bodies, both consequences of industrial modernity, reminding us of Walter Benjamin's dictum that 'there is no document of culture that is not also a document of barbarism' (1982, 233). These documents function as visual and sonic traces of 'how the century thought itself' (Badiou 2007, 3) and serve to explicate its own historicity as material cultural production. Their theatrical composition as *mise en scène* enables the scene to be seen 'through the eyes of the century itself' (Badiou 2007, 14), seemingly looking back on itself, and retroactively staging the actor's historical disappearance within its visual and auditory fields.

## Performative historiography

In this regard, the scenographic operation of Goebbels's *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018) – which appears to involve the displacement of the figure of the actor, as the embodied figure of the subject, from the theatrical *mise en scène* – is also an historiographic operation, demonstrating the effects of twentieth century history. The scenes are not populated by actors, other than the constructors and musicians, coded as the operators of the theatrical apparatus. The people who lived through the twentieth century, and were subject to its vicissitudes, are missing. The examination of what Badiou identifies as the sujectivating mode of its effects – 'what the century meant for the people of the century' (2007, 44) – is missing. People are missing. Missing from the historical scene; missing from the disappearing image; missing from the theatrical image of disappearance. Actors are missing, perhaps decentred, perhaps dispersed into the 'network of cuts and disappearances' (Badiou 2007, 132) that gestures towards their historical inability to give voice to the tragic dispensation anymore. The people are missing, no longer appearing to act on the historical stage. People are missing, perhaps disappeared. The missing actor seems to index this associatively, silently testifying to the absent presence of missing people, bearing witness to the historicity of the disappeared.

Correlatively, their absence is precisely what transists through the scenographic form of the work itself, rather than being captured within or demonstrated by it. Goebbels's compositional mode seeks to show what happens, what happened, and what would happen in a non-hierarchical, distributed theatricality, liberated from the representational requirement to re-animate the past, and re-inhabit the stage, directly. Whilst, for Badiou, the theatre event serves as a formalized thinking of the event – an aesthetic event 'thought in the form of the event' (2005, xx) – for Goebbels, the theatrical event, as a space of aesthetic encounter, isn't limited to the representation of events as 'events'; his decentred, non-representational practice allows for a post-tragic, non-evental performative historiography to take place onstage. He is concerned with how the evocation of absence creates 'a strong gravitational pull' for the spectator, enabling 'indirect contact' with the unseen and creating an interior 'drama of perception … experienced in the act of watching' (2015, 79—82). So, for me, the combination of scenographic elements in the

above scene (Figures 3 & 4) seems to reinscribe what Sloterdijk describes as the disastrous originality of the twentieth century. Its deployment of specific theatrical materials – plastic pipes, smoke, screens – appears to demonstrate visually how its efficacy lay in the combination of the practice of terrorism (as state apparatus), the perfection of product design (as efficient machines and mechanisms), and the weaponisation of environment (as biopolitical operation). Together these marked what Sloterdijk calls an 'acceleration of explication' to maximise resources – human and material – as extractable, disposable, and exterminable (2009: 8—9).

The extended unfolding of the *mise en scène* mobilises the affective traces of material history to create the possibility for the spectator to make their own critical composition. Their individual encounter with the theatrical work, and co-construction of its historicity through weaving together its four sets of sources, theatre materials and scenographic elements, suggests that it is the subjective (and subjectivating) nature of the experiential aesthetic event that mobilises and materialises the interconnectedness of history, memory, and testimony. In marking the affective trace of the historical event in the form of an aesthetic event, Goebbels's theatre stages the traces of articulation linking the spectator to its continuing effects. *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018) creates the conditions of encounter – historical and aesthetic – for examining the lived experience of history and of being historical in a mode of scenographic practice that keeps open the event – aesthetic and historical – as a locus of subjectivation. As Goebbels himself explains by quoting Georges Didi-Huberman, 'to provide for seeing always means to unsettle the act and the subject of seeing' (2015, 57). This suggests

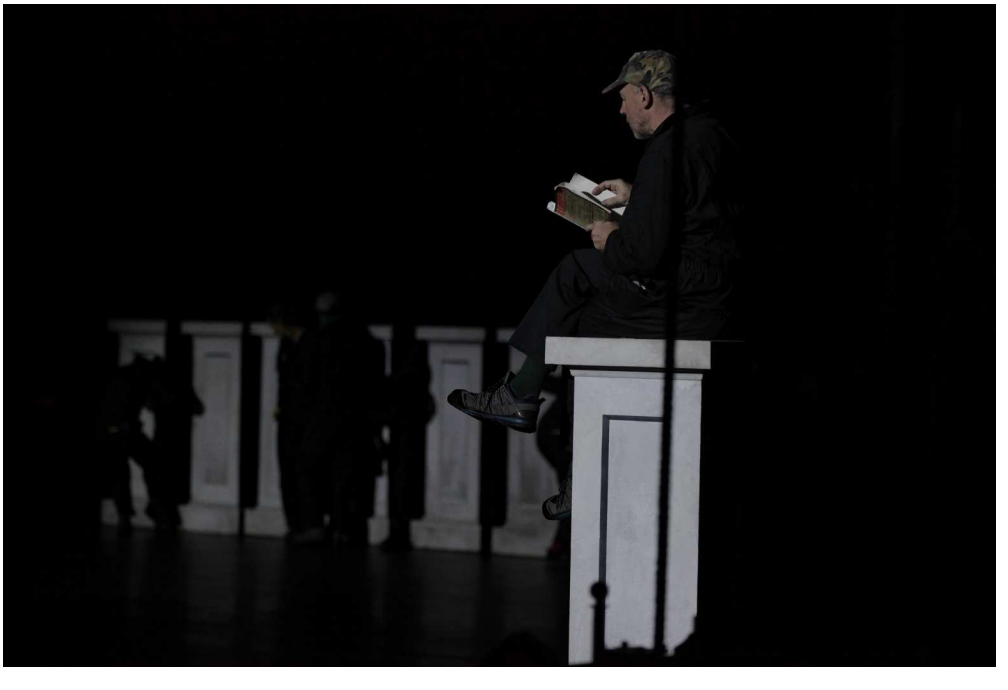

**Figure 5.** Heiner Goebbels, *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018). An Artangel commission. Mayfield, Manchester International Festival, October 2018. Photo: Thanasis Deligiannis.

Some historians subsequently said that the twentieth century actually started in 1914, when war broke out, because it was the first war in history in which so many countries took part, in which so many people died and in which airships and airplanes flew and bombarded the rear and towns and civilians, and submarines sunk ships and artillery could lob shells ten or twelve kilometres. And the Germans invented gas and the English invented tanks and scientists discovered isotopes and the general theory of relativity, according to which nothing was metaphysical, but relative. (Ourednik 2005, 2—3).

Some historians preferred the second world war to the First and said that the First world war was a national and patriotic war, while the Second was for the defence of civilization. And in the First World War people were fighting for narrow-minded concepts that were already outdated, whereas in the Second World War they were defending a humanist ideal. (Ourednik 2005, 112).

The Germans used gas to exterminate Gypsies and Jews in the concentration camps and invented a new gas known as cyclon B, which enabled large numbers of people to be killed cheaply and quickly. Because of its composition, cyclon B was classified as a disinfectant product ... (Ourednik 2005, 21).

And scientists discovered how to make soap for German soldiers from the fat of the gassed people. Ten liters or water was added to five kilograms of fat and a kilo of caustic soda, the mixture was boiled in a cauldron for three hours, a little salt was added, and it was allowed to simmer and left to cool, when a skin formed, which was removed, cut up and allowed to simmer once more, and before it cooled down again a special solution was added so that the soap did not smell. (Ourednik 2005, 25—26).

**Figure 6.** Excerpts from Peter Ourednik's *Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century* (2005), trans Gerald Turner, London: Dalkey Archive Press

that the spectator, aware of their own active spectating, displaces the actor within the space of the *mise en scène* to construct their own relation to the traces of the real it makes visible in 'a parallel perceivable reality' (Sanchez 2019: 8).

Goebbels's theatrical reading of Ourednik's *Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century* (2005) can be seen to offer a scenographic remediation of Alain Badiou's injunction that 'art can and must take a stand on history, take stock of the past and propose new sensory forms of thought' (2011, 122). The text shadows the constructors' operation of the theatrical apparatus and orchestration of the *mise en scène*, acting as an auditory counterpoint to the visual scenes being fabricated. Excerpts from it are either read aloud by the performers in one of the languages spoken by the members of this international company

Historians concluded that in the twentieth century about sixty genocides occurred in the world, but not all of them entered historical memory. Historians said that historical memory was not part of history and memory was shifted from the historical to the psychological sphere, and this instituted a new mode of memory whereby it was no longer a question of memory of events but memory of memory. (Ourednik 2005, 33)

**Figure 7.** Excerpt from Peter Ourednik's *Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century* (2005), trans Gerald Turner, London: Dalkey Archive Press

into which it has been translated or scrolled across a projection screen. Its anecdotal and aphoristic form serves to anchor the scenographic scene in a material historical landscape, with the reading aloud of the text, often beautifully and evocatively without being 'acted' as such, grounding the theatrical image in an 'ontology of historical being' (Ricoeur 2004, 280). The performers sit on, under, and sometimes in, faux Palladian plinths, speaking the text as a document from the archive of European history (Figures 5 & 6).

Whilst the extracts are informational and informative, their juxtaposition and framing ensure they function interpretatively rather than simply incidentally. That said, they appear less as a commentary on the action than a means of activating the audience's critical relationship to it. I recall the renowned post-dramatic actor John Rowley mellifluously intoning a section of text from centre stage (Figure 5), his face gorgeously lit and his actorly posture perfectly poised, like the idealised image of the tragic figure from Beckett's *Catastrophe* (1982). Yet even in this image, at this moment, the actor himself disappears, melding into the fabric of the event being unfolded. His words become part of its acoustic speech material, sublated into its musical score, as his presence is assimilated into the image material of the theatrical *mise en scène*. 'It is absolutely fantastic when you disappear' Goebbels tells his actors (2015, 1). For here the theatricality of the actor's disappearance is precisely what enables historical memory to be reactivated, and for the history of disappearance to be revived and reclaimed.

## Conclusion: Memory of memory

In his monumental book, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), philosopher Paul Ricoeur argues compellingly that 'we make history, and we make histories, because we are historical' (284, 349). He demonstrates how the historiographic operation 'reaches its internal limit in running up against the borders of an ontology of historical being' (280). This opens the space for cultural memory – the 'memory of memory' (Figure 7) – to be afforded critical currency as a means of articulating embodied experience, reflecting the fact that history is the material fabric of the world we live in and through, as historical beings, navigating the traces of its traces and the affects of its effects. As such, our own historical experience and cultural memory is co-implicated in the stories we seek to narrate and the events that animate us as historical subjects. For Ricoeur, it is the subjectivating experience of the event that demonstrates the ultimate interconnectedness of history, memory and testimony, providing the key to their articulation of historically lived experience: 'an event has struck us, touched us, affected us, and the affective mark remains in our mind' creating the imperative to 'become its witness after the fact through narration' (2004, 66).

The theatre event, with its material framing, representation, and narration of historical events, can be seen to offer a unique perspective on this relation. In contrast to critics who viewed *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018) as 'hermetic and unconvincing' (Andrew Clements, *The Guardian*, 18 October 2018), it is important to stress how its aesthetic formalisation of the spectatorial relation demonstrates that the theatre event cannot be thought in isolation but must be considered, following Alain Badiou, as an aesthetic enquiry into the very happening of the subjectivating historical event, its mode of composition 'making an event out of the thought of the event' (2005, 193). Goebbels's distinctive focus on creating a space of encounter for the spectator, centring their aesthetic experience in the 'drama of perception' that enables affective co-creation of the work through 'the

resonance it creates' (2015, 82, 98), extends this notion beyond the representational frame of the composition of *mise en scène*. His deployment of scenographic means and materials (Collins 2015, xvi) is oriented towards the construction of theatrical images that both displace the figure of the actor from the scenes presented and foreground the operation of the theatrical apparatus, disrupting any residually humanistic conceptions of the actor's historical function. The unfolding of these images enables the construction of the theatrical *mise en scène* to take place as a scene in itself; tracing the traces of the traces its material sources contain. In this respect, the theatrical image can be seen to be a material formalisation of the historical scenes which it represents, and which survive beyond its remediation as the traces of articulation of the events and actions which gave rise to them.

In confronting the post-dramatic image of the missing actor, this article has outlined how the decentring and displacement of the figure of the human in the theatrical *mise en scène* and the associated emergence of an aesthetics of absence in contemporary scenography and performance is related to the political disappearance of actual people in the post-twentieth century historical formation. It has argued that the disappearance of the actor from the historical stage is not confined to the theatre but is interrelated to theatre's tracing of historical modes of displacement, deterritorialization and disappearance. At the same time as historicising and contextualising the aesthetic configuration of the actor's absence, it has sought to demonstrate its political operation as an indirect but nonetheless indexical codification of missingness. Mindful of Jenny Edkins's cautionary note against becoming too carried away with the aesthetics of disappearance without acknowledging its material effects on real people and populations, this article concludes with the hope that the historical traces of missingness contained within theatrical images of absence and scenes of disappearance might be reanimated and redirected in support of demands for recognition and restitution. Perhaps by marking these traces of traces and examining the historicity of their conditions of emergence and articulation – by allusively showing everything that happened and would happen, and still could happen – theatre might contribute to the 'everyday, slow, remaking of the world … where action, protest, and the search for justice continues' (Edkins 2019, 145). The actor may be missing, but the spectator continues to trace the action, reverberating its significance as cultural memory and historical resonance.

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