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MEMORIAL RECONSTRUCTIONS: PRESENCE AND (RE)-PRESENTATION IN CARBONE 14'S *LE DORTOIR*

Francois Girard's 1991 video adaptation of Gilles Maheu and Carbone 14's stage production *Le Dortoir* is a moving exploration of identity and memory that takes as its primary theme and point of departure the "man-who-remembers" *desire* to bring his past to unmediated presence and projects a *fantasy* of his desire's fulfillment on stage, but articulates this fantasy with a view to the impossibility of its realization. The manner in which *Le Dortoir* insistently activates the semiotic value of 'context' as an operant condition of its performance suggests that identity—and the partial, fragmentary memories it re-constitutes and through which it is constituted—is inevitably mediated by representation. However, despite its demonstrably postmodern attitude toward the self and representation, *Le Dortoir* frequently strives to bring into focus the inherent semiotic ambiguity of its dancers' bodies—a move which engenders in the audience an intimation of *presence* and works to mimetically reproduce the narrative's ostensibly modernist preoccupation with recovery and fulfillment. Having never experienced *Le Dortoir* as a live performance event, but only in its remediated form, I approach the work from a problematic but potentially productive intermedial standpoint. I situate my analysis at the intersection of live performance and media studies, and the theoretical framework I rely on derives from recent developments in the former. By bringing a specifically theatrical conception of presence to bear on my mediated experience of an imaginarily reconstructed 'live' performance—the form and thematic preoccupations of which mark it as a potentially illuminating case study—it is my hope to extend and complicate the critical discourse on presence and absence.

L'adaptation vidéo que signait François Girard en 1991 de la production théâtrale de Gilles Maheu et Carbone 14 intitulée Le Dortoir est une exploration émouvante de l'identité et de la mémoire qui a comme grand thème et point de départ le désir d'un homme qui plonge dans ses souvenirs en souhaitant faire de son passé une présence non médiatisée et qui projette sur scène le fantasme de son désir, tout en exprimant ce fantasme de façon à le rendre impossible à réaliser. La façon dont Le Dortoir active avec insistance la valeur sémiotique du « contexte » en tant que condition

opérante de la performance laisse entendre que l'identité—et les souvenirs partiels, fragmentaires qu'elle reconstitue et qui la constituent—a inévitablement comme médiateur la représentation. Or, malgré son attitude évidemment postmoderne à l'endroit du soi et de la représentation, *Le Dortoir* cherche souvent à mettre en valeur l'ambiguïté sémiotique intrinsèque des corps des danseurs, une manœuvre qui crée chez l'auditoire le sentiment d'une présence et qui tente de reproduire par mimétisme la recherche de guérison et d'accomplissement d'un récit manifestement moderne. N'ayant jamais assisté à une représentation en direct du *Dortoir*, et ne connaissant que la version remédiée de la pièce, l'auteur aborde l'œuvre à partir d'une position intermodale problématique qui pourrait tout de même être productive. Son analyse se situe au croisement de la représentation en direct et des études médiatiques, et le cadre théorique utilisé s'inspire d'éléments nouveaux en études médiatiques. En imposant une conception proprement théâtrale de la présence à son expérience médiatisée d'une représentation « en direct » reconstruite dans l'imagination—dont la forme et les préoccupations thématiques en font peut-être une étude de cas éclairante—, l'auteur souhaite complexifier le discours critique sur la présence et l'absence.



Near the beginning of Francois Girard's 1991 video adaptation of Gilles Maheu and Carbone 14's stage production *Le Dortoir*, there is a moment of extraordinary beauty and strangeness: through the upper window of a disused dormitory, a long white arm extends slowly into the centre of the frame and trails the body of a young woman behind it. A successive shot shows her, along with five other young women in nightgowns, gliding languidly into the space, while sustained, eerie notes play on the soundtrack. The evocative power of the scene is considerable, and over the course of my many viewings of the video production, it has never failed to instill in me a disquieting frisson, which I am inclined to describe as a sensation of 'presence.' In the context of the work's framing narrative, the ensuing scenes make it clear that these very *corporeal* apparitions are meant to represent the recollected memories of a character loosely identifiable with the director of the theatrical production as they re-inhabit a site significant to his childhood. In its immediate context, however, the sequence of images is unexpected, inexplicable, and yet profoundly stirring.

Upon their first appearance, the floating bodies do not seem to explicitly express anything more than their strangeness—their weightlessness and more or less impassive extension in space. *Le Dortoir* contains many such startlingly evocative bodily images and movements that do not comfortably resolve into a precise or singular meaning despite the work's relatively transparent narrative and its tendency to ground the signifying potential of what Erin Hurley calls the “intelligent and responsive body” (“Carbone” 26) in recognizable, if stylized, quotidian movements and social practices.

In what follows I will argue that *Le Dortoir*'s exploration of identity and memory takes as a primary theme and point of departure the *desire* of the man-who-remembers to bring his past to unmediated presence and projects a *fantasy* of his desire's fulfillment on stage, but articulates this fantasy with a view to the impossibility of its realization. The manner in which *Le Dortoir* insistently activates the semiotic value of ‘context’ as an operant condition of its performance suggests that identity—and the partial, fragmentary memories it re-constitutes and through which it is constituted—is inevitably mediated by representation. However, despite its demonstrably postmodern attitude toward the self and representation, *Le Dortoir* frequently strives to bring into focus the inherent semiotic ambiguity of its dancers' bodies—a move which engenders in the audience an intimation of *presence* and works to mimetically reproduce the narrative's ostensibly modernist preoccupation with recovery and fulfillment. Having never experienced *Le Dortoir* as a live performance event, but only in its remediated form, I approach the work from a problematic but potentially productive intermedial standpoint. Galvanized by my affective response to the video, I will attempt to account meaningfully for my experience of ‘presence’ within its thoroughly mediated representational framework en route to examining how the video works to focus and re-emphasize certain of the issues explored by the theatrical performance.

While the concepts of presence and absence have a long and complex history in film theory, it is not my intention, nor can it be within the scope of my essay, to engage with this history directly. Also, I will not be attempting to navigate the dense theoretical distinctions to be made between analog (cinema) and digital (video) representation. Rather, I situate my analysis at the intersection of live performance and media studies, and the theoretical framework I rely on derives from recent developments in the former. It is my hope to extend and complicate the critical

discourse on presence and absence by bringing a specifically theatrical conception of presence to bear on my mediated experience of an imaginarily reconstructed 'live' performance, the form and thematic preoccupations of which mark it as a potentially illuminating case study. The sense of presence-in-absence generated by what Christian Metz identifies as cinema's "imaginary apparatus"¹ (Rushton 109) is not the object of my analysis; instead, taking the video's status as 'imaginary signifier' as given, I will focus on the semiotic values of the actors' bodies represented onscreen as they appear within and occasionally seem to exceed the bounds of the fiction's diegetic attributes. By attending to the *semioticity* of these representations while accounting for my phenomenological response, I hope to arrive at a relatively demystified understanding of theatrical 'presence'—and, potentially, to contribute some new considerations within the issue of presence and absence in film theory. I acknowledge that the concept of theatrical presence has proven perpetually problematic for semiotic analysis, which often falters in the attempt to account for its phenomenological dimensions, and that for some semioticians the issue is largely immaterial.² Nevertheless, a project like *Le Dortoir* demands explication of the phenomenon, and in this regard my analysis is indebted to Erika Fischer-Lichte's recent study, *The Transformative Power of Performance*.

Maheu, the founder and director of the Montreal-based group Carbone 14 (1980-2005), has said of his work,

We have to rediscover the art of troubling, of overwhelming. I believe in a theatre of the emotions, of the body. The stage is the centre of fire, of a hurricane, of a storm where forces alive and dangerous confront each other. The things, the actors, their movements and their text are only the exterior medium for a hidden dialogue, of a mystery more profound that is at the heart of all theatrical creation and is the real 'text' of a presentation. The director has the dual roles of Mephisto and Faust at the gates of this mystery. (qtd. in Collins)

That Carbone 14's work was *devised*, improvised from predetermined themes and found texts, and was physically based, expressing itself primarily through images and diverse dance idioms, should not be taken to suggest that it adopted an aggressive ideological stance against textuality or representation in general. Maheu's equal emphasis on the exteriority and mediality of bodies *and* texts suggests that the group's decision to offer the

body as its predominant means of communicating occulted theatrical significance simply marks their sense that the body is somehow particularly well-suited to the task—not only in the sense that it *can* signify without a verbal supplement, but also that it achieves a particular quality of communication that is not necessarily germane to the written text. Diane Pavlovic, one of the most prolific commentators on the group, argues that for Carbone 14 the “body becomes a series of signs, a language in itself, with all the inferences and levels of meaning that are part of any language” (25). Pavlovic’s estimation of the body’s articulateness is apt. The body’s significance, however, is often more evocative than articulate, more multifariously connotative than straightforwardly denotative, and this poses a substantial challenge to an analysis that would attempt to determine its meanings with the precision that we more readily associate with verbal communication. It is perhaps the body’s potential for opacity as much as its potential for articulation that compelled Maheu to use it as his primary medium for the delineation (if not the communication) of a “real text”—the very being of which resides in its inscrutability. By figuring himself as both Faust and Mephisto, Maheu implies that, in the capacity of director, he is at once a seeker of this secret knowledge and an intermediary spirit who holds out the promise of revelation, but who remains forever at its gates. Whatever we make of Maheu’s conflation of mystical language (the “mystery”) with the critical vocabulary of writing (the “real text”), his assertion that there is a “hidden dialogue” shared by *all theatrical endeavour*, which his theatre aims to mediate, suggests on one level, at least, that his work is to a large extent self-reflexive; that is to say, that it is about itself, about theatre and the nature of performative representation. Occupying an ostensibly modernist position, Pavlovic implies that the “real text” of a Carbon 14 production subsists in its embodied expression of universal truths about subjectivity and experience that are brought to presence in the immediacy of performance through a transculturally legible bodily language (Pavlovic 24–26)—what Maheu himself refers to only as a “naïve theatrical language which would address itself equally well to children and adults” (*Styling* 129). Hurley, writing from a more postmodernist perspective, suggests that “Carbone 14 relies on its dancing bodies not to bypass specific cultural discourses to discover a ‘universal’ bodily language, but rather to revivify and re-present them as cast in their ‘corporealities’” (*Styling* 131). While both critics take it as a given that the bodies of Carbone 14 in performance are inscribed

by discourse and evoke an archeological sedimentation of cultural and historical values, their disparate conceptions of the body's signifying potential foreground a polarizing dispute that is ongoing in contemporary performance studies. In *Le Dortoir*, Carbone 14 appears to activate both poles of this critical opposition. That is to say, it takes as a primary theme and point of departure the *desire* for a purely present transcendent meaning and embodied universal expression and projects a *fantasy* of its fulfillment on stage, but articulates this fantasy with a view to the impossibility of its realization. Nevertheless, the production consistently ostends the physicality of its dancers' bodies in ways that serve to disengage them from the theatrical fiction of the framing narrative, freeing the actors' bodies from their immediate semiotic contexts to the performance of their own materialization. The production compels both phenomenological/kinaesthetic and semiotized responses, and I would suggest that the tension it sustains between these modes of reception may well begin to account for the mystery at the heart of theatrical creation to which Maheu alludes—and provides, at the very least, a significant contribution to the very powerful effect that *Le Dortoir* has in performance.

On a narrative as well as a formal level, *Le Dortoir* constantly accentuates and mobilizes context as an operative condition of its sometimes vertiginously complex semiotic project. In addition to drawing upon a diverse array of international dance idioms and culturally specific social practices for its core physical vocabulary, the work references historical events (such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Algerian war of independence), stages the act of writing (and its erasure) as an extension of the body's signifying potential, incorporates several literary texts, and even bases its final (wordless) dance sequence on Act 3, scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Although *Le Dortoir* privileges the body as its primary instrument of communication, it also incorporates a generous amount of language, both spoken and written, that serves as an index to the characters' development from childhood to maturity, a process that is complemented by the production's use of increasingly complex choreographies. The progress of language in *Le Dortoir* can be traced from its erasure and incoherence in the prologue, to its quiet absence in childhood, through the lyricism of its representations of early adolescence and the experimental citations of turbulent young adulthood, and finally to the poetic articulateness of the closing scene.

But it cannot be within the scope of this paper to attempt a detailed semiotic analysis of the production; let it suffice to say that the codes and contexts that the performance activates are so multiple and pervasive, the associative generativity of the dancer's movements and interactions with various props so bewildering, that one is somewhat surprised to discover in *Le Dortoir* as many semiotically intractable actions and images as one does. For the purposes of this paper, the operative context that I am concerned to explore is that emplaced by the work's framing narrative because it *articulates*—with unusual clarity—the desire for presence that certain aspects of the production's physical work *perform*.

Le Dortoir is set in a large space that is designed to look like the dormitory of the Catholic boarding school the performance's director attended in his youth. Girard's video begins with a traumatized-looking middle-aged man (played by Maheu) entering the dormitory, which has apparently fallen into disuse. It soon becomes clear that he intends to kill himself, but at the fatal moment, with his pistol pressed against his throat, he is interrupted by the otherworldly apparition of the six young women mentioned above who float into the space and who, along with six young men, will dance what appear to be his childhood memories. The scene goes to black. When it fades back in, the dormitory seems to have been restored to its former state and the performance ensues in the absence of the suicidal man.

It is clear from the outset that *Le Dortoir* is a memory play—that the man's return to this significant site of his past is born of a nostalgic desire to retrieve something of himself that he has long since lost. The play's closing monologue confirms this sense and explicitly expresses his wish for fulfillment, for the time of his youth to be brought to transcendent presence and revealed in his heart. Out of this framing context, an important question arises: to whom do these memories belong? It is highly and metatheatrically significant that the performance's *concepteur* appears in its narrative frame in the mediating role of the man who envisions the spectacle to which we are privy. Although Maheu, conventionally, iconically, bears a striking resemblance to himself, he is only partially identifiable with the character he represents. The metonymic slippage between the actor/director's body and the role he plays serves to displace Maheu from himself; far from reinforcing the perception that we are watching a representation of Maheu's personal memories, the enfolding of the director's artistic vision with the apparitional vision of the fictional charac-

ter who recalls introduces a conceptual gap between the representation of what purport to be memories and the consciousness from which they might be said, in part, to derive. Moreover, the fact that the director/character is not identifiable with any one of the dancers and is absented from the scene for the duration of the dance, yet appears to have privileged access to and knowledge of every intimate encounter enacted in the darkest corners of the hall,³ may be seen to drain the putative 'memories' of their specificity and propriety to an individual consciousness. Instead of the recuperative representation of one individual's past, we are offered a series of images that, while resonant and perhaps evocative of shared memories or experiences of childhood, assert the fallacy of ascribing them to an individuated consciousness. On the level of process, a singular identification is further complicated by the fact of the dancers' having improvised their movements from predetermined themes selected by the director; even if the images that the dancers create seem relatively cohesive, they are still the product of a collaboratively devised effort that brings a diversity of experiences and observations to the stage. Within the logic of the narrative frame, the images are fundamentally disidentified from the subjectivity of the man who conjures them and point to the basic impossibility of his retrieving anything more than a ghostly *representation* of an absent past.

Le Dortoir, on a narrative, formal, and processual level, renders both memory and subjectivity as radically fragmented, mediated, and contradictory concepts. Following Hurley's interpretation of the live performance, this may be taken to suggest that the act of remembering is also an act of imaginative elaboration; thus subjectivity—and the memories it re-constitutes and through which it is constituted—is always filtered through a representational field that is inevitably inflected by its cultural contexts and thus becomes a repository for *common experience*, no matter how partial and fragmentary. On a more formal level, I suggest that the production's fraught conception of memory figures a fundamental logical disjunction between the performers' enactment of the 'memories' and the narrative frame which enables—indeed, encourages—us to read them as memories in the first place. This basic incoherence signals a rupture in the narrative authority of the contextualizing frame and effects a conceptual loosening of certain aspects of the physically devised work from the value of context that the production, at a semiotic level, seems always to demand. While many of the performers' movements are essentially mimetic, elaborated from identifiable social practices, and

can be interpreted into a more or less conventional *bildungsroman* narrative consistent with the unifying conceit of a man who reminisces, there exists within this frame a specifically corporeal element of the performance that is inherently resistant to semiotic encoding and interpretation. Scenes of early development ranging from childhood play and sexual discovery through rote prayer and classroom debates are familiar and accessible enough, but what does it *mean*, for instance, when several actors float through high windows, or slowly roll a ball between them back and forth, or when young women raise and lower themselves over bedrails and caress them with their cheeks, or when a bed is spun round at great speed while bodies leap over and dive under it? While I do not intend to suggest that such images are by any means beyond the reach of semiotic assessment, nor that a semiotic interpretation is only of use in the effort to determine a single, denotative significance, they may be seen as more evocative than expressive of meaning and seem to refer themselves more readily to an embodied perception than to a post-rational interpretive faculty. These images might be said to access what Barba terms a “pre-expressive” (Barba 10) mode of theatrical communication and serve to activate a sense of the performers’ *presence* in a receptive audience.

By presence, I do not mean simply what Philip Auslander describes as “the actor’s psychophysical attractiveness to the audience, a concept related to that of *charisma*” (*Presence* 37), as in “Marlon Brando has great screen presence.” Rather, I locate presence in the viewer’s sensation of a staged phenomenon’s materialized *immediacy* as a self-sufficient physical object or body that resists semiotic articulation—a sensation which tends to manifest itself in a viscerally embodied response (as was the case for my reaction to the floating bodies at the beginning of *Le Dortoir*). How do such phenomena emerge? According to Eugenio Barba, an actor’s presence is generated through pre-expressivity—that “level of the performer’s art in which he or she is alive and present without either representing anything or having any meaning” (10). It is developed through the “in-formation” or training of the performer’s body through the practice of “extra-daily techniques” (10) that transform habituated daily activities and established cultural performance idioms into strange and striking, *decontextualized* movements and poses which are, in turn, addressed to the pre-interpretive level of a spectator’s perception. A pre-expressive movement or pose presumes the performer’s absence of intention to express any particular meaning, while a pre-interpretive reception assumes the spectator’s temporary and

unintentional abstention from ascribing a semiotic value to the image in the moment of perception. The goal of pre-expressive ‘communication’ is to create a feeling of “pure presence” (10) in the spectator by staging “the situation of performers representing their own absence” (Watanabe, qtd. in Barba 10). Pre-expressivity might be seen as a way of focusing and ostending the body’s semiotic ambiguity in such a way that it is immediately decontextualized from whatever semiotic regimes are operative at the moment of its instantiation in order to arrest, or at least frustrate, a viewer’s interpretive faculties and emphasize her bodily response to the phenomenon.

Barba’s notion of pre-expressivity presents a useful means of conceptualizing the emergence of ‘presence’ on stage, but his figuration of pre-interpretive perception as a “‘physiological response’ that is independent of culture, feelings or particular state[s] of mind at the moment of seeing” (203) suggests his apprehension that pre-expressivity somehow precedes and exceeds a representational economy. From a poststructuralist perspective that holds that there is no ‘outside’ of representation, this is a difficult position to sustain. Further, it brings us no closer to a putative “semiotics of presence,” while serving to reinforce the opposition between phenomenological/kinaesthetic and semiotic theories of reception.

Erika Fischer-Lichte offers a productive reconfiguration of “the de-semanticization thesis” of presence which Barba’s concept of pre-expressivity might be seen to model. Proceeding from the assumption “that meanings generated in performance [...] are mostly meanings that vehemently elude the grasp of linguistic formulation” (147), she attempts to account for those phenomena that insist on their embodied materiality as *presence*. The “sudden, unmotivated emergence” (141) of such semiotically intractable phenomena disrupts the contextualizing schemes of the theatrical fiction and focuses the viewer’s perception on the things in themselves—as when a strange and decontextualized gesture disengages an actor from his ‘character’ and manifests only its “specific materiality” (140). Fischer-Lichte argues that such elements of performance are far from insignificant; rather, they self-referentially reveal their own “intrinsic meaning” (141). The phenomenon that is experienced as presence becomes a sign of itself; it refers to its own materiality and embodies the significance of its own appearance: “What the object is perceived as is what it signifies” (141). As such, “meaning is generated in and through the act of perception” (141) rather than subsequently

ascribed. A host of unpredictable associative resonances may arise for the spectator in the moment of “contemplative immersion into that gesture, thing or melody” (141), and though grounded in the self-reflexive phenomenality of the thing itself, these associations forge new and unexpected connections with the rest of the production’s meaning. Under this formulation, the ‘inscrutable’ percept is brought into a representational scheme such that its ‘significance’ is multiplied exponentially while its resistance to articulation and its ‘embodied-ness’ as ‘presence’ are preserved. Thus, Fischer-Lichte’s self-referentiality thesis may be seen to reconcile provisionally “the divide between the sensual perception of an object, seen mostly as a physiological process, and the attribution of meaning, considered a mental activity” (142).

Fischer-Lichte conceives of a model of reception that consists of the oscillation between two modes of perception: one that registers the “order of presence” and another that registers the “order of representation” (148). The former has to do with the perception of emergent phenomena as things in themselves, while the latter corresponds to the more readily articulable aspects of a performance, especially those that relate to the ‘theatrical fiction’: the generation of character and narrative, for example. According to Fischer-Lichte, one’s perception slips between these two modes, generating new and chaotic meanings as they intermingle and refuse to resolve themselves, a process she terms “perceptual multistability” (148).⁴ As a perceiver works to contextualize and make meaning of a performance, the resistance that phenomena on the order of presence offer to any effort to place them in a semantic scheme—to articulate their meaning with any linguistic clarity—works to interrogate the stability of the semantic contexts through which they erupt. Similarly, carried toward the order of representation by the surge of associations generated on the order of presence, one becomes conscious of the sign structure of the ‘present’ phenomenon and, consequently, of one’s mediated relation to that which appears as pure presence but which, in the semanticizing act of perception, is implicated in a representational economy. Fischer-Lichte suggests that neither mode of perception is allowed to stabilize itself for long, and I would suggest that if they do not operate simultaneously, activating different realms of a viewer’s perception at once, they may be seen to work in such close proximity as to effect a near-instantaneous oscillation between them. As the articulable interacts with the unarticulated (or inarticulable) the result is a

perception of the instability and play of representation in general: the order of presence and the order of representation each reveal the invisible assumptions of the other; they serve to make each other strange and to interrogate the mechanisms of perception, experience, and interpretation.

For instance, toward the beginning of *Le Dortoir*, I observe six male actors slowly performing split jumps over bedrails, each holding a shoe at arm's length, and am immediately struck by the mesmerizing beauty and strangeness of the movement. Within the context of the framing narrative I may reason that these are memories and interpret them into a scheme in which I relate early childhood to simple choreographies and dreamlike play—as opposed to the more complex choreographies and heightened linguistic usage that the work seems to associate with adolescence. But the image's semiotic intractability, derived from the bodies' apparent lack of intention to express anything but their materiality, the strangeness and deliberateness of their movement, destabilizes my reading and opens a fissure in the codes and contexts through which I make such inferences. Apparently simultaneously, the image evokes a range of personal associations that inflect my experience, and I am compelled to reflect on the processes through which I arrive at my 'understanding' of the image. As much as I experience a sensation of 'presence,' and as much as I experience the dancers' bodies and movements as self-referential signifieds, I inevitably become aware of my relation to them as *signs*, no matter how materialized or ostensibly 'present'—an awareness that is reinforced by the theatrical context's insistence on the representational quality of objects and bodies onstage. As my perception on the orders of presence and representation interact, I become aware of the representational means through which the performance activates and frustrates my desire for pure, unmediated presence on an embodied level and for clarity, certainty, and stability of meaning on a semiotic level.

Of course, a major problem with my recourse to Fischer-Lichte's semiotic theory of presence—not to mention Barba's concept of pre-expressivity—is that it assumes a live theatrical context: a vital, interactive relation between the spectator and a performer who is objectively present and alive. This prompts the question: to what extent can an imaginarily reconstructed video image of an ostensibly 'live' performance evoke this feeling of presence, of immediacy? Even Eli Rozik, who contends that theatre and cinema are semiotically identical ("Back" 169, 183-84), acknowledges the manifest difference in experiential kind

between the two forms. Auslander argues that mediatized performance engages the “olfactory, tactile, somatic, and kinaesthetic” senses in addition to the “visual and auditory”, even if it does so differently than live performance, and that “a difference in kind is not the same thing as a difference in magnitude of sensory experience” (*Liveness* 55). My visceral experience of what I can only describe as a sensation of presence in watching *Le Dortoir* would seem to bear out Auslander’s claim.

Fischer-Lichte, for her part, categorically denies the possibility of reproductive media’s creating anything more than “presence effects” (101)—irredeemably mediated impressions that hold out the “promise of presence” (100) by *dematerializing* the actual presence of the phenomena they purport to materialize. This understanding is clearly consonant with Metz’s differentiation of the objective presence of theatre from the imaginary signifier of the cinema and would seem to reify the distinction between these media. However, Fischer-Lichte’s effort to semanticize ‘present’ phenomena places them squarely within a representational framework. A body on stage may be a less mediated representation of itself than the image of a body onscreen, but in Fischer-Lichte’s formulation, its ‘presence’ is nevertheless implicated in a representational economy—both theatrically and performatively. If, as I suggest, the mediatized representation of “emergent phenomena” is capable of activating a spectator’s perception on the order of presence, it is owing to the self-referential percept’s *semioticity*—an element which may be translated to video and still generate the experience, however mediated, of materiality and presence. The viewer’s coming to consciousness of this mediation ultimately serves to sharpen the desire for ‘real’ presence, potentially increasing his receptivity to the mediatized performance’s creation of presence effects. As much as such effects may be figured as artificially derived conjurations of presence, I would argue that the affects they engender in the perceiver are no less actual—however differently embodied—than those experienced in live performance.

In *Le Dortoir*, the perceptible “difference in kind” of sensory experience between live and mediatized performance that Auslander refers to becomes particularly palpable in Girard’s use of sophisticated cinematic techniques to evoke an element of the live performance that is categorically absent from his video: specifically, the element of risk. In *Le Dortoir*’s justly celebrated bed-spinning sequence, Girard employs hyperkinetic camera-work that attempts to communicate a sensation of excitement and

speed. Occupying the points-of-view of several dancers as well as the bed itself, and contextualizing these perspectives with an overhead shot, the camera spins giddily and inter-cuts the images of actors leaping over and diving under the perilously twirling bed-frame. While the scene succeeds in generating feelings of *élan* and of presence, upon reflection all its cinematographic busy-ness draws attention to itself and appears to be compensating for the lack of bodily risk inherent to a medium that is pre-recorded and carefully edited from multiple takes. It is the self-consciously mediated quality of the scene that prompts such speculation as, “yes... but imagine it *live*.” This sequence in particular activates the viewer’s perception that the ‘master context’ or constant referent of Girard’s video is always the live performance that it mediates.

As a means of contextualizing the use of media in theatre, Chiel Kattenbelt revisits Stephen Heath’s concept of ‘suture’ and argues that the conventions of “classical film narration” (34) typically strive to conceal “all aspects of the cinematography in order to give optimal accessibility and transparency of the possible world that the film represents” (Kattenbelt 34). Thus, he observes, the classical model of cinematic identification and the feelings of immediacy it is supposed to engender work to create “an illusion of reality” (37). Identification, however, is not an inevitable outcome of exposure to classical cinema, nor is it a process that occurs automatically or uncomplicatedly. The imaginative construction of, and identificatory self-integration with, an immersive cinematic space requires that the viewer engage in an active process of logical inference that is conditioned and enabled by a familiarity with the conventions of classical cinema. If theatre presents an inherently *hypermedial* framework in which the “reality of illusion” (37) is constantly asserted through its insistence on the materiality of its actors and the artificiality of the performance context, it is not insignificant that the theatrical performance of *Le Dortoir* is the primary operative context of Girard’s remediation. The supposedly transparent representational techniques of the video refer unavoidably to the ‘liveness’ and materiality of theatre, and as such their medial nature is ostended and interrogated in turn. On a conceptual, as well as a technical level then, the video seems to reproduce mimetically the thematic preoccupations of its narrative: its cinematographic techniques that presume to provide unmediated access to the subjectivities and actions they represent activate and perform the desire for presence, even as their very absent referent—the live performance—

insists on the impossibility of that desire's fulfillment.

In conclusion, it is not accidental that it is through language and in the genre of prayer that the framing narrative of *Le Dortoir* most definitively and articulately asserts the inevitability of representation's failure to recover to presence the 'memories' of its orienting 'subjectivity.' Prayer, which addresses a transcendental signified, expresses the desire for atonement, for reconciliation of the human with the absolute, and offers itself in the hope for a verbal efficacy that it is not well known for achieving. In this form, most expressive of the wish for presence and truth, the suicidal man implicitly declares the failure of his vision to heal him:

Please, Lord, let a man be great and holy. Grant him a deep infinite night where he may go further than any man has ever been. Grant him a night where all is fulfilled. Let the time of his childhood be reborn in his heart. Reveal to him once again the wonderful world of his early years so full of foreboding. Lord, keep us awake at least once. (*Le Dortoir*)

His utterance of this prayer suggests that if the visions he has witnessed have caused him to foreswear suicide (he puts down the gun and walks away), they have failed to bring to presence the spirit of his youth. It may be inferred that the apparitions invoked in the performance cannot fully heal the wound of his unnamed suffering, not simply because they are only visions, only fantasized representations, but because they are fleeting, as insubstantial as performance itself. However, his wish for transcendence, for infinite fulfillment, might also be seen to resonate metatheatrically with the performance's deep investment in the generation of embodied presence. What the man prays for is an *infinite version of this night*, a revelation of "the wonderful world of his early years" *once again*. Perhaps Maheu is implying that in the moment of their fictionalized enactment, in their performative coming to presence onstage, such fantasies may be momentarily fulfilled—that the sensation of embodied presence approaches transcendence, and may serve to 'awaken' the spectator's soul.



NOTES

- 1 While I recognize the technological disparity between film and video/television as well as their potential differences in terms of reception, perception, and cultural instrumentalization, for the purposes of this paper I follow Metz's assertion that these media are "two neighboring language systems" (qtd. in Seiter 25) and refer to film theory with the assumption that it may reasonably be analogized to Girard's video.
- 2 In line with Peter Boensich's assertion that inasmuch as it is "a primarily semiotic practice, theatre turns all objects into signs to be perceived" (114), Eli Rozik argues that while actors' bodies fulfill certain "functions in the structure of the performance-text," apart from these, such 'de-semanticized' elements of theatrical performance as 'presence' "are of no interest for performance analysis" (*Generating* 17).
- 3 While many of the video's sequences utilize group choreographies, certain moments—as when two dancers engage in a late-night homoerotic wrestling match or when the girls and boys pair off to explore each others' nascent sexualities—insist on their private and individuated nature, an effect that is reinforced by the camera's isolation of these discrete scenes.
- 4 For another view on this phenomenon, see Gumbrecht.

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