



[radical]
EXPERIMENTATION,
[enforced]
MACHINATION &
[involuntary]
STAGE-FRIGHT :
The Utter
Terror
of the
Non-Discoursal

by Zachar Laskewicz



in:

HOMO ORTHOPEDICUS:

Le corps et ses prothèses

à l'époque (post)moderniste

Paris, L'Harmattan: 369-391.

[ISBN 9782747516112]



**[radical] EXPERIMENTATION,
[enforced] MACHINATION &
[involuntary] STAGE-FRIGHT :**
The Utter Terror
of the Non-Discoursal
by Zachar Laskewicz

«A further emblem of our time is *mechanisation*, the inexorable process which now lays claim to every sphere of life and art. Everything which can be mechanized is mechanized. The result: our recognition of that which can *not* be mechanized...»¹

«*Ambassador*: You are in the process of tabulating every thing you can lay your hands on. In the sacred name of symmetry, you slide them into a series of straitjackets and label them with, oh, my God, what inexpressibly boring labels! Your mechanical prostitutes welcome their customers in an alien gibber wholly denied to the human tongue while you, you madam, work as an abortionist on the side. You murder the imagination in the womb, Minister.»²

The three terms in the title of this article refer to three contrasting types of avant-garde artistic behaviour, specifically in relation to movements in twentieth century art. These terms have been assigned signification only insofar as the reader can use them him or herself to colour or provide a contrasting perspective on the reasoning behind certain types of art, particularly in a societal sense. In using these headings, I wish to demonstrate that art doesn't 'echo' life, providing some kind of static response or commentary on what is occurring in the stimulation or oppression of a people at a given place or time, rather that art provides a head-on confrontation with

¹ Oskar Schlemmer, «Man and Art Figure», *Theatre of the Bauhaus*, Walter Gropius (ed.), USA, John Hopkins UP, 1990, p. 23.

² Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982, p.37.



society, forcing us to face those things we have developed no other way to cope with. In other words, avant-garde artistic behaviour can be a dynamic tool used by individuals to help them understand their reality, and I hope that in this article I will be able to demonstrate many clear examples of this process in action.

To return to the rather ambiguous title, three major terms are referred to: [radical] Experimentation, [enforced] Machination and [involuntary] Stage-Fright. Each of these terms refers to a contrasting stimulus for artists to create given artistic works in a wide variety of fields, including the graphic and performing arts. The bracketed adjectives preceding the terms in the title signify the general way in which those artistic movements receive active expression. I relate this terminology to particular movements in the avant-garde of the twentieth century, from Russian *Cubo-Futurism* through Russian *Constructivism*, to movements on the continent such as *Dada* and *Bauhaus*. Although the three points on the triangle—Experimentation, Machination and Stage-Fright—may edge the reader to view an artistic phenomenon in a particular way, it is ultimately impossible to reduce art to an easy analytical formula. Dada performance-art is experienced by many as being rather radical in its total rejection of existing approaches to art. Its main exponent (the sound-poet Hugo Ball), however, was fascinated by Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and had attempted to work with more traditional forms of theatre before founding Dada. Similarly, the Russian theatre movement used the influence of the mechanizing force of Constructivism both as a tool for their own avant-garde development and to further their own quite contrasting theatrical ends. Purity, artistic or scientific, is a theoretical fantasy. I want to emphasize here the fact that in adopting this terminology I am in no way attempting to be exhaustive, only to illustrate general movements which *tend* and have tended to recur, and to explore some of the reasons why.

With the term 'society' I am referring to the complex array of interlocking systems formed from a combination of cognitive processes and practical necessities. Being able to communicate with one another through the use of signs, we are given the tools to perform social functions and interact with one another as well as being provided with the basic material with which we can form an image of ourselves in relation to those around us.



Society is responsible for imposing many of these systems, resulting in certain ways of thinking or viewing the world.

Whether we like it or not, this is a natural part of being the member of a culture. The first two terms in the title—Experimentation and Machination—are the easiest artistic sources to explain, the third—Stage-Fright—the most difficult and as such the most often misunderstood. In previous works I have referred to ‘Top-Down’ and ‘Bottom-Up’ sources for the understanding of artistic behaviour. If an existing societal or ideological structure is seen as rigid or conservative, groups of artists often begin to come together to create a code of signifiers which is intended to provide some sort of antidote to this conservatism. These artists, unsupported by society, work from the ‘Bottom-Up’, without the assistance of an ideology: they often create their own, and are therefore seen as ‘radical’ experimenters. Examples of [radical] Experimentation include the Russian Cubo-Futurists, the Dada movement, Italian Futurism and French Surrealism. If, on the other hand, the society itself takes matters into its own hands and applies a dogma, be it religious, natural or political, it will inevitably have consequences for art. Because this system of signifiers or ideological codes is imposed by society, I refer to it as ‘Top-Down’ artistic influence, and as I hope to demonstrate—not only in twentieth century performance but in the performing arts throughout history—the tendency is towards *mechanisation* of the human form in such a way that the body is controlled or restricted to a certain specific amount of movements and gestures. This can be justified in terms of either natural or ideological structures, i.e. in terms of what should be ‘natural’ for the body to do or what should be good (politically) for the society in question. Unfortunately, but inevitably, this *mechanisation* is most often enforced, sometimes via subtle indoctrination, sometimes via less subtle physical methods. In any case, [enforced] Mechanisation is a fascinating expression of art and just because the stimulus to create comes from a society rather than an individual or an avant-garde movement does not reduce its worth in any way.

The third source of artistic stimuli has defied, and for many still defies, clear explanation. It has expressed itself in many different artistic forms, including the *Theatre of the Absurd* and the *New Music-Theatre*. The term Stage-Fright itself is actually taken from Clifford Geertz’s interpretation of the Balinese culture, specifically the fear the Balinese have of their ‘masks’ being



removed showing ultimately who they really are rather than who they have created themselves to be in a societal context. In terms of our own model, the third corner of the triangle refers to the moment the artist, otherwise embedded in one or both of the artistic environments described above, out of the corner of his or her eye notices that the structures imposed either from 'Bottom-Up' or 'Top-Down' are only that, a system of empty signifiers in the Saussurian sense, a structure without ultimate purpose. This brings about what I refer to as [involuntary] Stage-Fright where the intention of the artist becomes the questioning of the very apparatus in which that structure is created. Beckett, perhaps the most ideal exponent of this approach to artistic expression, creates worlds filled with characters who cannot communicate, or who attempt to define their reality with very limited means. Here the theatre becomes a frightening metaphor, expressing the fear of what would happen if we woke up without any means to comprehend our world, facing reality without a discourse (hence the *Utter Terror* in the title).

One of my own music-theatre compositions ZAUM, based as it is on Russian Cubo-Futurist poetry, expresses each of these three forms of artistic stimulus in a different way, forming part of a phenomenological journey of self-discovery and an understanding of my own work in relation to my reality and the reality I share with others. Using examples from twentieth century art, particularly performance, and my own compositions, I hope to demonstrate in detail how useful this terminology can be in understanding what stimulates our artists to create, even in the fragmented world which the twentieth century has left us with. We begin with a discussion of [radical] Experimentation as it has expressed itself in the work of avant-garde movements starting with Italian and Russian Futurism and from there to the Dada movement which took place firstly in Switzerland and then spread across Europe through France to Germany and even the Netherlands. The next subject brought into the spotlight is [enforced] Machination which received its expression perhaps in its extreme form in Russia after the communist political upheavals changed the face of Russian theatre forever. The Soviet state brought with it a 'Top-Down' constructivist aesthetic via the work of the Russian graphic artist Tatlin. In the theatre, performing artists lost their individuality and became mechanized expression of constructivist, most often pro-Soviet theatrical goals. It is interesting to note that the chaos of the



Russian Cubo-Futurist movement led to the cool stasis of Constructivism in Russia, just as the hectic antics of German-speaking Dada was to lead onto the strict mechanized aesthetic principles of the Bauhaus design school, and by extension the Bauhaus theatre. After exploring these two areas, we move directly to exploring [involuntary] Stage-Fright as it has been expressed in contemporary performance. We begin directly with a discussion of the term as it relates to the Balinese understanding of *lek*, the realisation that one is being looked at not according to the terms of the role he or she plays, but rather his or her vulnerable self. After this we explore the metaphorical extension this can have for the more problematic areas of contemporary performance by focussing on the primary ways this theme has received artistic expression. We do this by looking at individual works from the Theatre of the Absurd (particularly Beckett) and the New Music-Theatre (particularly Ligeti and Kagel). The conclusion is preceded by a discussion of my own work in relation to each of these three major perspectives on the performing arts of the twentieth century.

[radical] Experimentation

Avant-garde art, reacting against ‘Top-Down’ imposed conservatism, has often resulted in a given group of artists literally running amok with symbolic material taken from their culture or absorbed willy-nilly from other cultures. This has both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage is that it provides its artists, its participants and its possible audience with a degree of liberation from the existing conservatism, informing them of alternative ways of experiencing their reality and questioning the one they have been saddled with. On the same token, however, and as is much more often the case, artistic extremism can serve to alienate its audience, prime-material to be made use of by Top-Down conservatism. Our own culture is rich with examples of this type of experimentation. As the Newtonian universe transmogrified into the Einsteinian one, the models for reality presented by the existing art traditions around the turn of the century were no longer sufficient for a changing world, and thus artists—many of whom were familiar with the scientific world—adapted their artistic models. According to Richter of the Dada movement which took place in Switzerland, the myth that everything in the world could be rationally explained had been «gaining ground since the time of Descartes» and that «an



inversion was necessary to restore the balance.»³ Art began to be experienced by many around this time as being a «metaphor linking man to all of nature in a coherent vision.»⁴ If the institutions of a given society attempted to confine the boundaries of artists, they very often got together and formed groups involved with experimentation of some kind. In Marinetti's Futurist manifestos, for example, in addition to glorifying the sound of the motor car, he particularly denounced artistic institutions which attempted to make a static museum out of art, existing instead for active utilisation by the members of a society.⁵

The results of these movements were often multi-disciplinary: Italian Futurist artists are remembered for their work as diverse as Futurist graphic-poetry, Futurist painting, Futurist theatre and even Futurist 'Noise' music,⁶ each sharing its particular leaders, schools and techniques. Similarly, the work of those artists remembered today collectively as the Russian Cubo-Futurists⁷ involved painting, radical sound-poetry, absurd theatre and opera. The Russians called for a theatre in which «everything turns – disappears – reappears, multiplies and breaks, pulverizes and overturns, trembles and transforms into a cosmic machine that is life.»⁸ In contrast, the term 'Zaumni Yazik' or *transense language* (abbreviated to 'Zaum') was invented by the Russian Cubo-Futurist poets for use in poetry that had no meaning in terms of verbal discourse. Traditional conceptions of language bound within the strict confines of grammar and the connotations of socially

³ Hans Richter, *Dada: art and anti-art*, London/New York, Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.64.

⁴ Charlotte Douglas, «Views from the New World», Ardis Lakeland Press, 1980, p.359.

⁵ «Museums: cemeteries! ... public dormitories where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings.» Tristan Tzara, «The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,» *Futurist Manifestos*, Umbro Apollonio (ed.), London/New York, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p.22.

⁶ «The ear of an eighteenth-century man could never have endured the discordant sound of certain chords ... To our ears, on the other hand, they sound pleasant, since our hearing has already been educated by modern life, so teeming with variegated noises.» Luigi Russolo, «The Art of Noises,» *Futurist Manifestos*, Umbro Apollonio (ed.), London/New York, 1980, pp.75-76.

⁷ Despite the fact that the Italian and Russian movements shared (part of) a name and a time period, they have contrasting artistic influences and goals. Italian Futurism was directed towards the future and in particular technology and combat. In addition they chose their name. The Russian Cubo-Futurists, although a collective, were burdened by the press with their title. They were actually directed towards a [radical] rediscovery of the past (rather than the future).

⁸ Rosalee Goldberg, «Russian Futurism and Constructivism», *Performance Art*, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p.48.



indoctrinated meanings were completely turned inside out. The tired language left behind by the symbolist poets was considered unsatisfactory for new poetic communication, and traditional concepts of sound and meaning were completely rethought.

The Dada movement represented a similar radical break with the past. As Richter notes, himself an important artist within the movement, «we were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell.»⁹ To achieve this goal the intention was to break *all* ties with the past, and went further than Futurism in that it not only rejected the institutions which elevated certain elitist types of art—such as museums—but art itself. Richter informs us that «Dada's only programme was to have no programme.»¹⁰ The Dada artists are particularly remembered for their radical exploration of sound-poetry; Ball's premiere performance of his sound poem beginning with the line «*gadji beri bimba glandridi laula loni cadori*»¹¹ heralded the beginning of a new age. Another important 'radical' form of performance was introduced: *simultaneism*. Simultaneism involved the spontaneous performance of potentially unrelated events 'simultaneously', meaning that at Dada performances dances on stage could be accompanied by unrelated readings of contrasting texts, musical performances and noises from other sources. If any meaning was to be found in the performance the audience member had to find it there him or herself. On March 30th 1916 the first simultaneous poem was performed at the Cabaret Voltaire, the well-known meeting place of the Dada artists in Zurich.

⁹ Hans Richter, *o. c.*, p.25.

¹⁰ Hans Richter, *o. c.*, p.34.

¹¹ Hans Richter, *o. c.*, p.42.



[enforced] Machination

The [radical] Experimentation of Dada was to produce a backlash of equable proportions, finding its extreme expression in the cool angular forms produced by the Bauhaus school of architects, just as a couple of years earlier the nonsensical and chaotic work of the Russian Cubo-Futurists was followed by the angular and functional productions of Constructivism. As history has shown, society reacts from Top-Down against radical artistic schools and thus [enforced] Machination takes place as artists struggle to find the means to express artistically the dynamism of their new temporal and spatial environments, i.e. even if artistic ideas are based on politically motivated goals, it does not reduce their potential to signify dynamically and to perform a function transcendent of its ideological origins. The pressure from Top-Down, however, can sometimes be over-paternal, attempting to dictate certain types of artistic creativity as ideologically sound and forbid others from existing, even if the artists are attempting to conform to the political goals of their societies. Artistic experimentation taken over for the 'good of the people' can be a societal tool of oppression, and as will be demonstrated Russian Constructivist theatre is an extreme example of this: very often the body became nothing more than a machine for the expression of what still seems to many to be little more than communist ideology.

Before discussing the examples of *mechanisation* I'd like to focus on the forms *mechanisation* can take when it is realised by society. The first major expression is linguistic, and the second musical. Linguistic *mechanisation* is based on the understanding that we are, at least to a degree, what we say; man is largely a by-product of language, eternally ruled by the parameters of his or her discourses. Language is taught in the home and contemporary psycholinguistics has demonstrated that language acquisition is involved with dynamic interaction with the world. Society, however, does have some say over how language is perpetuated within culture through control over educational institutions, in addition to the control it has over the forms in which literature is perpetuated, especially in literate cultures such as our own. In his well-known novel *1984* George Orwell presents a frightening vision



of linguistic *mechanisation*.¹² It is set in a future world where language is gradually reduced restricting the forms of discursal expression. On the other hand we have musical *mechanisation* which is based on non-verbal regimentation of what I refer to as the ‘musical’ or the ‘artistic’ text. Here society can exert its control over the arts in its many different forms, be that through supporting certain ideologies and artistic philosophies in educational institutions, or through the support of funding bodies which encourage artists and organisations who conform to the pressure from Top-Down. Extreme expressions of this type of *mechanisation* includes the active physical ‘disencouragement’ of artists who stood against the grain as has been so painfully represented in western history. Examples include what happened to Constructivist theatre in Soviet Russia and the Bauhaus school in Nazi Germany, at least to the artists who could not conform to the strict confines of icily conservative political regimes. We will begin our discussion by describing the Russian example of [enforced] Machination.

Constructivism is a general term used to describe an art movement which started in Russia as a reaction to the new and dynamic communist aesthetic which swept across the nation-state in the early 20th century. Officially the school was founded by the Russian sculptor and painter Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), and was based on the idea that art should be useful or ‘functional’ (hence the term *functionalism*) and at the same time ‘utilitarian’ or easily accessible and socially useful to its audience. Both of these conceptions related directly to the dogma of the relatively new communist state. Tatlin managed to merge his own Constructivist artistic goals with the functional aesthetic of communist ideology, and thus became a figure-head for the movement. Other artists, as will be demonstrated, were busy with very similar forms of *mechanisation* under this dynamically imposed Top-Down force called communism, many in other disciplines including the performing arts. We will be discussing in particular the work of the important Russian stage director Meyerhold who used the Constructivist ideology to create a unique and vital form of expression in the theatre.

¹² George Orwell, *1984*, London, Penguin Books, 2000.



Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) is particularly well-remembered for his *mechanized* form of theatrical training known as *bio-mechanics* which literally turned his actors into machines. What many people do not know is that his *bio-mechanics* had a precedent in the work of other artists who were similarly fascinated by the new artistic environment. Nikolai Foregger, for example, was intrigued by the «mechanisation and abstraction of art and theatre»¹³ which was stimulated by the pre-revolutionary avant-garde and the dynamism of the new Constructivist aesthetic. He eventually developed a training method known as ‘tafiatrenage’ which functioned to stress the importance of technique in maintaining a certain level of control over physical and emotional factors. Using the words of Foregger himself: «we view the dancer’s body as a machine and the volitional muscles as the machinist».¹⁴ Goldberg describes the first performance of Foregger’s *Mechanical Dances* in February 1923 as follows:

«One of the dances imitated a transmission: two men stood about ten feet apart and several women, holding onto each other’s ankles, moved in a chain around them. Another dance represented a saw: two men holding the hands and feet of a woman, swinging her in curved movements. Sound effects, including the smashing of glass and the striking of different metal objects backstage, were provided by a lively noise orchestra.»¹⁵

Despite the fact that it was influenced by Top-Down *mechanisation*, its resemblance to European radical avant-garde performance assured disapproval from the critics and restrictions from the Top-Down, just as the Soviet machine was finally to close in on Meyerhold’s experiments. In essence, Foregger’s system of performance was similar to Meyerhold’s *bio-mechanics* and it is probable that the two influenced one another in some way. For Meyerhold it was a means to an end, just as other elements from Constructivist art were to be taken to realise disparate theatrical goals. *Bio-mechanics* functioned to provide Meyerhold’s actors with a rigorous sense of emotional and physical control not seen before in the theatre, influenced not only by the Constructivist ethic but also his work with Asian theatre and circus. It was basically a rigorous

¹³ Rosalee Goldberg, *o. c.*, p.38.

¹⁴ Rosalee Goldberg, *o. c.*, p.39.

¹⁵ Rosalee Goldberg, *o. c.*, p.40.



system of physical and mental exercises which all his actors had to undergo before getting onto the stage. It consisted of twenty dramatised solo and group exercises or studies,¹⁶ where he «demanded from his actors the vigorous elimination of all human feeling and the creation of an order based upon mechanical laws; the actor was to function as a machine.»¹⁷ According to Braun, the way Meyerhold ‘couched’ his system in fashionable ‘industrial’ terminology represented both his desire to discredit other directors and their methods, and at the same time to demonstrate to the system that his own *mechanisation* or complete acceptance of the Communist ideology was present in his work even if that may have not been the case.¹⁸ Meyerhold, considering the rigid artistic environment, experimented radically with *mechanized* means, and was inevitably in for Top-Down penalties. Initially at least, however, the precision of his actors and their ability to act and interact as they did delighted Soviet audiences, in addition to the fact that his theatre appeared to coincide with politics, and thus his theatre was a success.

Meyerhold was an innovative Russian theatre director of the 1920s and 1930s. Initially a member of the Moscow Art Theatre, he reacted against Stanislavsky’s social and emotional methods and declared that theatre should differ radically to everyday reality. He started his own theatre and experimented with many different forms of expression, including circus, *commedia dell’arte* and the Chinese Opera. According to Braun, his early theatre showed «his deep involvement in the escapism and aestheticism that typified the arts in the final decade of tsarist power.»¹⁹ Demonstrating himself to be remarkably adaptable, Meyerhold’s theatre changed after the October Revolution: within a month of this important event, Meyerhold had identified himself with the Bolshevik cause and it wasn’t long before these influences became apparent in his creative work. In addition to his *bio-mechanics* method of teaching, he made particular use of Constructivist designers to help him build a multi-purpose, utilitarian stage which «could be erected anywhere, without resorting to conventional stage

¹⁶ Edward Braun, *The Director and the Stage*, London, Methuen, 1987, p.135.

¹⁷ James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre: From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989, p.28.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Edward Braun, *o. c.*, p.130.



machinery ... which could be easily dismantled and reassembled.»²⁰ This enabled him to realise his dream of extra-theatrical performance, where the stage could be transported to politically motivated sites such as the deck of a ship or the Red Square as necessary. Particularly well-remembered is his production of Crommelynck's *The Magnificent Cuckold* which involved a collaboration with the Russian Constructivist artist and designer Liubov Popova (1889-1924). According to Goldberg, this production «actually transformed the nature of acting and the very intent of the play through devising such complex 'acting machines'.»²¹ Even [enforced] Machination, however, was not enough for the strict and confining doctrine of socialist realism, and as a result Soviet Russia was to come down very hard on Meyerhold, smashing his *machination* as part of an even more extreme sociopolitical aesthetic. During the era of Stalin, experimental art was banned completely, and Meyerhold's life was made progressively more difficult. Finally in June 1929 he was arrested and deported to a concentration camp in the Arctic, where he died. During the Stalinist era which followed Meyerhold's downfall the Soviet Union produced «hundreds of doctrinaire plays about collective farming, hydro-electric plants, dam building, and the heroes of the revolution and of the civil war.»²² And so the curtain came down on Russian Constructivist theatre which brought with it a veritable eclipse on Russian experimental art for the coming decades.

Germany was also to go through a similar stage of *mechanisation* within the field of experimental art followed by total political obliteration under the Nazi regime. Not being able to accept any non-conformist art, the Bauhaus school was to fall under its ugly hammer. Bauhaus was basically a German school of design and architecture which has had a great deal of influence on contemporary art. It was founded by Walter Gropius in the German city of Weimar in 1919. Similar to Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus stood for efficient and useful design concepts which were at the same time easily accessible. It resulted from the fusion of the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts and the Weimar School of Arts and

²⁰ Rosalee Goldberg, *o. c.*, p.44.

²¹ Rosalee Goldberg, *o. c.*, p.46.

²² James Roose-Evans, *o. c.*, p.34.



Crafts, and because of its goals it offered classes in «crafts, typography, and commercial design, as well as in sculpture, painting, and architecture.»²³ In addition to Gropius, teachers at the school and thus of the Bauhaus style included Swiss painter Paul Klee, the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, the Hungarian painter and designer László Moholy-Nagy and the German painter Oskar Schlemmer. Although many principles of *mechanisation* were present in their design work, the Bauhaus theatre was to demonstrate a particular propensity for mechanising the human body by encapsulating in human movement the whole basis of the political ideology which supported it. This is represented particularly well in the writings of Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and Schlemmer (1888-1943).

Schlemmer was a painter, sculptor and stage designer born in Stuttgart who was to become one of the primary figures in the Bauhaus theatre world. Particular to Schlemmer's work is his experience of spatiality in his painting, set-design and theatre work: he experienced space not only through vision but also through movement, and it was his intention to demonstrate the contact of the human body with its environment in his art. His works were often clear demonstrations of how one could functionalise one's movements in a given space, or the potential of *mechanised* movements in a strict spatial environment. According to Gropius in his work on the theatre of the Bauhaus, Schlemmer «transformed into abstract terms of geometry or mechanics his observation of the human figure moving in space.»²⁴ For Schlemmer the stage became a metaphor for the world which humans move in and react to physically. Some of his writing concerning mechanical absorption of the human figure in space is included below.

«The laws of cubical space are the invisible linear networks of planimetric and stereometric relationships... This mathematic corresponds to the inherent mathematic of the human body and creates its balance by means of movements, which by their very nature are determined *mechanically and rationally*. It is the geometry of callisthenics, eurhythmics, and gymnastics. These involve the *physical attributes* (together with facial stereotypy)

²³ «Bauhaus» Microsoft R Encarta R Encyclopaedia 2000. C 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

²⁴ Walter Gropius, *o. c.*, p.7.



which find expression in acrobatic precision and in the mass callisthenics of the stadium, although there is no conscious awareness of spatial relationships here.»²⁵

This demonstrates clearly Schlemmer's ideas concerning human spatiality in terms of mathematical relationships. This grew from an expression of the functionalist/constructivist aesthetic of the Bauhaus school.²⁶ Moholy-Nagy is another important figure in Bauhaus mechanisation. Originally born in Hungary, he studied art in Berlin and became an adherent follower of the Constructivist movement. From 1923 to 1928 he taught at the Bauhaus school and like Schlemmer became involved in their performance-based projects. Moholy-Nagy called for the recognition of what he refers to as a *mechanised eccentric*, a «concentration of stage action in its purest form.»²⁷ This figure can be compared to the actors in Meyerhold's theatre after undergoing the *bio-mechanics* training programme. This artist would be realising potentialities of the human body only possible if he leaves behind the shackles of 'spirit and mind', becoming a machine restricted only by his 'natural body mechanism'.²⁸ The Nazi propaganda machine with its restriction of art not directly serving its purposes came down on the Bauhaus and thus it was forced to close its doors.

Although both Constructivism and the Bauhaus school grew as a reaction to anti-societal art preceding it, [enforced] Mechanisation is an essential part of many forms of traditional performing arts. Dance is, after all, a form of enforced behavioural control. It is easy to draw the analogy between forms of Indian temple dance and the art of Schlemmer which demonstrates the human body and its movement capabilities. In parts of Indian dance performances such as *Bharata-Natyam* the musicians chant and beat out a rhythmic 'dance-language' which dictates the movements of the dancer as she stamps, springs out and returns to a central balanced position, resembling uncannily the mechanised figures presented in the art of Schlemmer. The dancer is literally subsumed

²⁵ Walter Gropius, *o. c.*, p.22.

²⁶ «Bauhaus» Microsoft R Encarta R Encyclopaedia 2000. C 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved

²⁷ Walter Gropius, *o. c.*, p.52.

²⁸ Walter Gropius, *o. c.*, pp.52-53.



by the abstract language of syllables known as ‘bols’. A ‘bol’ is commonly translated as a mnemonic vocalisation. It is taken to signify a syllable roughly similar to the sounds produced by the impact of the dancer’s feet on the floor or the drummer’s hand on the drum. These sounds dictate movements and foot stamping sequences to the performer and at the same time drumming patterns to the musicians. This is an unusual union of linguistic and musical *mechanisation* invented by the Indians to ‘attain an exquisite attunement with the one supreme circle of movement and balance existing in the Universe’.²⁹ Here the *mechanisation* of the dancer is considered in terms of a sacred rather than a political order: only the human figure as a machine can become one with God. In other words, the natural order of things are used as a means to explain the cultural rather than vice versa, even though it all forms part of the same artistic process considering the cultural organisations which perpetuate these traditions of *mechanisation*. Bhavani describes the logic of this pseudo-natural (but ultimately cultural) realisation of the sacred in the following passage:

«For this absolute coordination between sound and footwork, the creators of Indian dance ordained that there be a symmetry of count and metre between the finely intricate beats of time and every unit of the dance step and bodily movement. This can only come about when there is a sympathetic unison of spirit and physical being during the performance. Rhythm therefore became the factor which if present was taken for granted, and if absent caused disharmony and confusion. Nature’s lessons constantly guided them with its own evidence of perfect rhythm and pattern, in the regular beats of the heart, in the cosmic waves that put matter into motion, in the grace of the strutting peacock, and even in the clumsy dance of the bear».³⁰

²⁹ Enakshi Bhavani, *The Dance in India*, Bombay, Taraporelava & Co. Ltd., 1985, p.152.

³⁰ *ibid.*



[involuntary] Stage-Fright

Javanese and Balinese forms of dance and mask theatre, such as *Wayang Orang* and *Topeng* also demonstrate an expression of this [enforced] Mechanisation. Javanese dancers move gracefully across the floor, each of his or her limbs moving independently of one another. They move like machines, the individual lost behind a literal or figurative mask, becoming puppets to a *mechanisation* which they have learned through years of cultural training and embodiment of a dogma motivated by the tradition they practice. It is interesting to note, however, that the Balinese have a word for the situation which occurs when one realises that the mask one has created to represent a symbolic world of performance—even in everyday social intercourse—is actually only that, a mask hiding a world of otherness that must be protected. That word is *lek*. This leads directly onto the discussion of our last perspective in the triangle of artistic stimuli: [involuntary] Stage-Fright. For Geertz, an important American anthropologist whose writings on Bali have both been both influential and controversial, Stage-Fright was the best way to translate this Balinese way of seeing themselves in relation to others. Geertz notes that the Balinese have a tendency to formalise relationships with one another, both family and friends, to create a «sociological middle distance where they are close enough to be identified but not so close as to be grasped» where the ‘ceremonialization’ of their own behaviour becomes a matter of «deep spiritual concern.»³¹ In other words, they enforce on themselves a controlled *mechanisation* made up of a complex system of calculated politesse, ritualised behaviour and real ceremony, such as the ‘masked’ performances mentioned above. *Lek* or Stage-Fright refers to the Balinese fear «that an aesthetic illusion will not be maintained, that the actor will show through his part and the part thus dissolve into the actor.»³² It results in an intrusion on the individual’s privacy and mutual embarrassment for all parties involved, and is avoided at all costs.

For our concerns Stage-Fright involves the fear of being faced with what lies behind the [enforced] Mechanisation: the menacing unknown *Other*. Behind the cultural *mechanisation* which

³¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p.399.

³² Clifford Geertz, *o. c.*, p.402.



often protects and nurtures us is the threat of what I refer to as the non-discoursal. For many artists the stage becomes the perfect medium to express and experiment with these fears, to practice what one cannot do in real-life because of our ultimate inability to transcend the discourses we are trapped in, at least socially and intellectually. If an artist realises that what we are playing at in this world is but a game—a strange type of dream-world in which we follow a set of rules and play our roles because if we were able to transcend it we would be forced to encounter the dark and unknown world of the audience which the actor is blinded to while performing—the *theatrum mundi* metaphor doesn't seem such a ridiculous proposition. Stage-Fright involves the fear of the gaping, aching emptiness awaiting us after we've ripped off our masks only to discover that there is nothing underneath, and that behind the constructed 'machinations' surrounding us is a world we do not have the knowledge even to perceive, let alone see. And so the actors on the stage are eternally trapped in their world, and try as they might they cannot transcend it or escape its limiting bonds. This theme is present in a great deal of contemporary Absurdist theatre, particularly Beckett, and will thus become the subject of the following discussion.

There are a number of different forms which seem to bring about [involuntary] Stage-Fright, and I will discuss a few of them here. Both *enforcement* and *mechanisation* can bring about Stage-Fright because the very fact that Top-Down pressure makes one more aware of the rules one is surrounded by or the desperate system in which one is trapped. I refer to this as *enforced theatricality*, referring to the roles we are forced to play in society, the discourses which surround us but which we are led to question. Here the world of the stage represents our world metaphorically. Another factor which plays a role is *enforced corporality*: we are born into bodies which are insufficient to allow us to truly or sufficiently relate to the world. In Beckett's theatre, *enforced corporality* is made particularly clear when characters become restricted bodily in some way, such as Winnie in *Oh les beaux jours*³³ who is buried up to her waist, or *Pas moi*³⁴ which consists only of a constantly babbling mouth. The analogy is clear: when one

³³ Samuel Beckett, *Oh les beaux jours suivi de Pas moi*, Paris, Les Editions De Minuit, 1963.

³⁴ *ibid.*



is struck with Stage-Fright, one realises how insufficient one's own physical abilities are. When artists experience this condition, they are very often led to produce works which question or draw attention to their predicament. In addition to the above-mentioned forms of Stage-Fright, there exists also *enforced temporality*. The very fact that we are trapped in the ongoing sequence of events necessitated by time as we can only experience it can also lead to Stage-Fright. The characters in Beckett's well-known play *En attendant Godot* ('Waiting for Godot') clearly represent this condition. They play absurd and meaningless verbal games with one another to avoid the silences which are as good as death. It is better to say something than nothing.

Estragon: En attendant, il ne se passe rien.

Pozzo: Vous vous ennuyez?

Estragon: Plutôt.³⁵

In Beckettian theatre, worlds are presented in which characters struggle with their means of communication, and try as they might they discover they can never transcend the boundaries of their discourse. As Jewenski comments, «Beckett's mankind is trapped in language, the one tool which gives articulation to his effort to explain what happens in the dark.»³⁶ To use a term of Derrida, there is no *Aufhebung*, no possibility to find a place outside of experience to reflect upon it, for if one attempts to reflect upon anything that is an experience in itself. Beckett represents this theme in various ways. Firstly we have plays with characters who, using language as a means, attempt to transcend their discourse but are ultimately unsuccessful. In the above-mentioned play *En attendant Godot* Didi and Gogo constantly contemplate their apparently meaningless existence. Other plays such as *Fin de partie*³⁷ ('Endgame') and particularly *Oh les beaux jours* ('Happy Days') also stress the Stage-Fright aspect: the characters fill up the void of silence with noise, so that they won't have to face the terror of the non-discoursal. This is another clear expression of *enforced temporality*.

³⁵ Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot*, Paris, Les Editions De Minuit, 1952, p.53.

³⁶ Ed Jewenski, «Beckett's Company, Post-structuralism, and Mimetalogique», *Rethinking Beckett*, London, MacMillan, 1993, p.142.

³⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie suivi de Acte sans paroles I*, Les Editions De Minuit, 1957.



We see *enforced theatricality* perhaps most clearly represented when Beckett's characters direct themselves to their discourse by describing it. In Beckett's play *A Piece of Monologue* the character refers to his actions as he does them, as does Winnie at times in *Oh les beaux jours*, as if they are reading from the script. From *Oh les beaux jours*:

«Je prends cette petite glace, je la brise sur une Pierre (elle le fait) – je la jette loin de moi (elle la jette derrière elle)»³⁸

In many of his plays Beckett demonstrates the limitations Stage-Fright places on us by having the boundaries of the stage as the boundaries of the existing world for the characters involved in the discourse. I call this type of restriction *enforced spatiality*. A prime example is his short play *Acte sans paroles I*:³⁹ if the character does attempt to leave the stage, he finds himself only thrown back on again, suggesting that any form of transcendence is impossible. According to Connor, «the function of the offstage area is to stress that there is no other place permitted for the actor than the stage,» just as Hamm declares in *Fin de partie* that «hors d'ici, c'est la mort.»⁴⁰ Another unique example of this expression of Stage-Fright is his short play *Quad* in which no words are spoken. Paths have only been mapped out for a number of characters. Four hooded figures move in a series of triangles around two sides of a square and diagonally across the centre. Movement to the edge of the square seems to send the players into the middle of the square, just as an approach to the middle seems to push the players back out again to the edge. According to Connor, «like comets they are drawn repeatedly into the gravitational pull of the square, only to be flung off into outer darkness at the end of their courses.»⁴¹ This is an extreme expression of the metaphor of a world filled with rules which we ultimately can't transcend, the edges of the square forming the boundaries for the existence of the players beyond which they will never transgress.

³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Oh les beaux jours suivi de pas moi*, Paris, Les Editions De Minuit, p. 46.

³⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie suivi de Acte sans paroles I*, Paris, Les Editions De Minuit, 1957.

⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie suivi de Acte sans paroles I*, Paris, Les Editions De Minuit, 1957, p. 23.

⁴¹ Stephen Connor, *a. w.*, p.12.



Although Beckett's plays exemplify the tenets of Stage-Fright very well, he is not the only exponent of this theme. Pinter, Ionesco and Stoppard also create characters who are trapped in the confines of their discourses. Ionesco's one-act 'anti play' *La Cantatrice Chauve*⁴² is a particularly important example which actually inspired the absurdist movement and produced a major revolution in dramatic techniques. His play used all the clichés of text from a typical foreign language course. This functioned to create a seemingly humorous vocal exterior which disguised the darker tones of Stage-Fright. This is a clear example of *forced theatricality*. These themes are also present in the New Music-Theatre. This movement involves composers who adopt into their compositional repertoire theatrical elements. Many composers have experimented in this genre, including two important Europeans: Gyorgy Ligeti and Mauricio Kagel. In 1962 Ligeti composed a work called *Aventures* which explored many different types of interactions between three vocalists. There is no text, only a vast range of sounds and syllables from which Ligeti chose to help shape his musical events. In addition to the singers (soprano, contralto and bass) there is a total of seven instruments. The different musical-dramatic atmospheres of the piece are multivarious: crazy 'conversations' with abstract syllables, hysterical chattering voices and ominous echoes. Undoubtedly influenced by Absurdist and Surrealist theatre, his characters seem driven by fear of *enforced temporality*. Like Winnie in Beckett's play *Oh les beaux jours*, Ligeti's three characters seem to be terrified by silence and emptiness and so they find little games to play with one another to fill up the time. They are only alive when they are making noises, because silence means death.⁴³ Similarly my own composition *From a Gable Window* reflects an acute case of [involuntary] Stage-Fright. This composition creates in turn a dark, hectic and terrifying soundscape. Composers in today's world have complete freedom to form their own personal voice; there are so many choices today that they become in effect drained of cultural significance. This means that it is for me no 'language' at all, creating a strong feeling of Stage-Fright. The screams and cries of this composition reflect an

⁴² Eugène Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve suivi de La leçon*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954.

⁴³ Paul Griffiths, *Gyorgy Ligeti*, Robson Books, 1983, p.1.



awareness that I stood outside of society and was threatened by the structureless chaos that could be found there.

The most important exponent of the New Music-Theatre genre, however, has to be Mauricio Kagel. Kagel is an Argentine composer, film-maker, dramatist, and performer. As his involvement with such a wide range of media suggests, he has produced a new and entirely individual body of compositions that almost defies classification. In Kagel's important early theatre work called *Sur Scène*, (1959/60) essentially 'meaningless' text is framed in the context of a positively 'meaningful' environment, that of a lecture on the state of new music. The audience, in other words, are led to believe that they will hear something significant, but by gradually decomposing the textual aspect musically the composer forces one to see it as an empty institution. The 'lecture on new music' is exposed as a framework without content, performing the essential function of *enforced theatricality*: the reader continues with his text oblivious to the havoc which is wrought on it. Below is an example of a section of the lecture taken from the English translation of the score:

«Quite evidently we must – and such a thing is possible only in those periods which are essentially creative and are thus able above all to direct their vision towards that which at all times is the essential thing, neither distracted by, nor lost in, mere specifics, such a thing, therefore, as is not yet possible to take an example in our time quite evidently, therefore, we must once again take up a quantity of particulars, gathering them up into larger conceptual structures, tending to fall into place at certain articulated stages which in turn forming a true and final system of musical propositions.»⁴⁴

Another music-theatre composition which represents this theme is Kagel's *Zwei-Mann Orkester*. Two players gradually become trapped in intricately complicated inventions which they become entombed in. According to Matossian, Kagel built these instruments «out of junk, parts of instruments, old discarded

⁴⁴ Mauricio Kagel, *Sur Scène: Chamber Music-Theatre Piece in One Act*, Cornelius Cardew (trans.), Henry Litolf's Verlag / C.F. Peters, Frankfurt/London/New York, 1965, p.2.



instruments and objects of different sorts.»⁴⁵ In viewing the performance, one can't help feeling uneasy as the objects they play begin to resemble instruments of torture. Matossian notes that «the analogy of the performer enslaved to an instrument which makes excessive demands on his body and mind... cannot be missed,»⁴⁶ and it becomes clear that this music-theatre composition reflects a metaphor upon a metaphor: instrumentalists are enslaved behind inflexible instruments in an orchestra, just as we as human beings are enslaved in roles enforced on us in daily life. This is a unique twist on *enforced corporality*. It is also interesting to note that Kagel composed a work called *Pas de Cinq* in 1965 in which five performers tap out rhythms as they move on restricted paths in a pentagon. This is remarkably similar to Beckett's *Quad* introduced above which was not to be written until 1982.

Before concluding I would like to discuss some of my own compositions and how they relate to the terminology presented in this paper. My new music-Theatre composition *ZAUM* is a particularly good example because it uses as a basis radically avant-garde texts of the Russian Cubo-Futurists, but at the same time it makes a comment on the mechanisation of the human body present in Communist Russia. The relationship between *ZAUM* and [radical] Experimentation doesn't go much further than an imitation of Russian slapstick theatre and the adoption of the texts. Most importantly, in the jokes it plays on its audience in creating a language of sound and movement that has no meaning outside of itself, the composition is also influenced by Stage-Fright, as will become clear in the following discussion. This composition is a full scale three-movement composition, each of the separate movements adopting the *zaum* poetry of a different Russian Cubo-Futurist poet. The *zaum* texts form the structural basis for the composition, uniting both the gestural, the vocal and the sound-based communicative forms. The three movements of the work are linked together by a narrative concerning the learning of this 'music-language' by the characters. This language, as limited as it may seem to the audience, is the only tool that the characters have to perceive reality. *Zaum-1*, the first movement of the composition, begins in a state without language, only silence followed by noise and darkness, a complete

⁴⁵ Nouritza Matossian, «The New Music-Theatre», *Music and Musicians*, September 1976, p.24.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*



absence of structure. As the work develops, musical sounds become linked with vocal sounds and movements, and the performers become totally engulfed in the process. Gradually this complete immersion is reduced, and the music begins to provide less and less structure. Designed to represent the abstraction of sound from meaning in spoken language resulting in the arbitrary nature of the sounds we now use, by the end of the first movement, words and sounds initially steeped in primordial and ritual significance, are stripped of meaning and are presented as obsessive gestures. In *Zaum-2* the sound-movement language developed in *Zaum-1* is adopted by the performers in order to represent the restriction of the symbolic load of western theatrical conventions and on a deeper level a dissatisfaction with socially indoctrinated communication systems, whether they be music or language-based: here we see a clear expression of [enforced] Machination. A 'semiotic code' is created on stage, where the audience is deliberately directed into recognising a new, be it limited, 'stage language'. Ambiguity is presented by the contrast between the symbolic nature of the sounds on tape which set up an intrinsic relationship between certain sounds and certain movements. The sound in itself becomes the movement, and a sound-based movement composition is performed. The performers become 'puppets to the language', continually repeating the simple movement series as dictated by the recorded texts. This is a direct representation of a feeling of *enforced theatricality*. *Zaum-3*, the final movement, attempts to move beyond the bonds of traditional theatre language. A rhythmic 'dance' language is created that in the process of the development becomes gradually redundant, leaving finally the music and the movement to communicate alone. The intended symbolic purpose of this division is a representation of music as much more than simply an aural experience, but a force that affects the way we think and act, one which when provided in the context of a cultural experience provides freedom and unity that is not attainable in any other way. Here the attraction of *enforced theatricality* is emphasized: even if our discourses may appear restricted, they are the only tools we have to comprehend the world.

In this paper I have demonstrated particularly extreme examples of the categories invented: [radical] Experimentation, [enforced] Machination, and [involuntary] Stage-Fright. These examples were chosen because they demonstrate clearly the perspectives on movements in art that I wanted to discuss. We have



to be aware of this on the brink of a new millennium where the social orthodoxy is being questioned by utopian desires fired by contemporary movements in technology. Forces as diverse as Quantum physics and 'cyberspace' are forcing artists to rethink their media for a new age, just as society is trying to impose its own order upon individuals. The dynamic created by utopian desires to rethink globalisation in terms of a world order, and the otherwise ever-present factor of a fragmenting post-modern world, new and dynamic forms of *experimentation* and *machination* are being formed. One of the new forms of *theatrical corporality* is being expressed through the globalisation process: the consistent, mind-numbing sound of some forms of popular music is influencing a new generation of young people all over the world on a continuously increasing scale. People who wish to question these structures can suffer from the Stage-Fright discussed in this article. Many people suffering from this condition turn to artistic means to deal with their predicament. Our world may be in a state of constantly increasing change, but the role played by art as the dynamic mediator between ourselves and the *Other* will always be present.

Cet article porte sur trois manières de comprendre le rôle du corps dans l'art d'avant-garde, en particulier l'art de la performance au XXe siècle.

1. L'expérimentation radicale où le corps est censé réagir contre des restrictions sociales, par exemple le mouvement Dada.
2. La machination forcée où le corps devient simplement un produit d'un système politique ou d'un autre système traditionnel, par exemple une religion. Ici le comportement du corps doit changer afin de réaliser un épistémologie complètement inédite. Celle-ci se fait passer pour une attitude naturelle et est utilisée comme modèle par des artistes. Pensons surtout au mouvement du Bauhaus en Allemagne après la première guerre mondiale.
1. L'auteur emprunte à Clifford Geertz, plus particulièrement à son interprétation de la culture Balinaise, l'expression « Stage-Fright » (frayeur de la scène) pour décrire l'attitude des artistes qui réfléchissent sur leurs œuvres et sur la vie. Le théâtre devient pour eux une métaphore effrayante où ils se trouvent pétrifiés par la terreur de la « Stage-Fright ». Le théâtre de Samuel Beckett est probablement le meilleur exemple.



OUVERTURE PHILOSOPHIQUE

HOMO ORTHOPEDICUS
Le corps et ses prothèses
à l'époque (post)moderniste

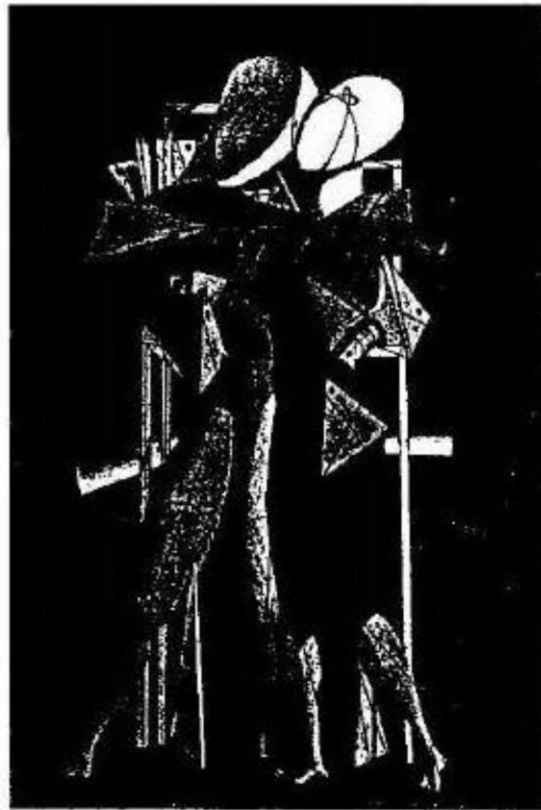
Sous la direction de
Nathalie ROELENS
et Wanda STRAUJEN

H

Sous la direction de
Nathalie ROELENS
et Wanda STRAUJEN

HOMO ORTHOPEDICUS

Le corps et ses prothèses
à l'époque (post)moderniste



OUVERTURE PHILOSOPHIQUE



EXPERIMENTATION, MACHINATION & STAGE-FRIGHT
by Zachar Laskewicz

HOMO ORTHOPEDICUS

Le corps et ses prothèses à l'époque (post)moderniste

En décembre 1999 s'est tenu au musée d'art contemporain d'Anvers un colloque international intitulé « *Homo orthopedicus* » qui réunissait des chercheurs en sciences humaines, tous interpellés par la nouvelle appréhension du sujet et du corps humain à partir de 1900. Sur les débris d'un anthropocentrisme pluri-séculaire naquit à cette époque un homme nouveau, dont le corps n'était plus considéré comme l'enveloppe de l'âme mais était interrogé pour lui-même dans sa complexité, dans sa vulnérabilité et, surtout, dans sa susceptibilité à interagir avec les nouvelles techniques. C'est précisément dans ce contexte que le critique d'art Roberto Longhi, timoré de voir ce nouveau paradigme à l'œuvre dans les mannequins de Giorgio de Chirico, lança la formule « homo orthopedicus ». Formule ambiguë donc, chargée de tout un imaginaire favorable ou défavorable à ce prototype humain moderniste, auquel l'actuelle cyberculture, elle-même en passe d'engendrer des hommes nouveaux, sera cependant toujours redevable.

L'ouvrage que voici, dont le colloque ne fut que le prétexte, explore cette problématique épineuse du corps et de ses prothèses selon cinq voies d'accès: 1. historique, 2. littéraire, 3. esthétique, 4. théâtrale, 5. photo/cinématographique.

Nathalie Roelens enseigne la littérature française et la théorie post-structuraliste à l'Université de Nimègue et est chargée de recherche à temps partiel à l'Université d'Anvers. Ses travaux récents portent sur les rapports entre littérature et peinture. Elle a publié en 1998 chez Rodopi: *Le lecteur, ce voyeur absolu*, elle a dirigé en 2000 chez l'Harmattan Jacques Derrida et l'esthétique et prépare actuellement un ouvrage intitulé *Le portrait après Proust*.

Wanda Strauven est associée à l'Université d'Anvers en tant que chercheur du projet « *La pensée prothétique* ». Elle a publié sur la résonance du futurisme italien dans le cinéma d'avant-garde des années vingt et prépare actuellement la publication en volume de sa thèse de doctorat: *Marinetti et la cinématographie futuriste, entre attraction et expérimentation*.



9 782747 516112

ISBN: 2-7475-1611-3

OUVERTURE PHILOSOPHIQUE



EXPERIMENTATION, MACHINATION & STAGE-FRIGHT
by Zachar Laskewicz