

At the Cutting Edge Between Semiology and Phenomenology: Performances of Orlan and Franko B*

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The body – whether it is seen as being a material, substantive entity or dematerialised, semiotic sign, or even a technological abstraction – is always caught up in a discourse at the intersection of art, technology and body politics, where social and political structures are often (re)enacted and (re)produced through individual acts and practices. The machinic body, gendered body, historicised body, performing body, fragmented body, objectified body, phenomenological body and the body in pain all point to the ineluctable, historical discursivity surrounding the body, from a Western metaphysics of presence to a de-subjectified semiotics to a postmodernist revision of notions of embodiment, where the body (as well as identity) is relegated to fictive, dialogical or constantly emerging and shifting positions. This paper aims to show how the artistic practices of the bodily-based performance artists Orlan and Franko B, who theatrically cut and refashion their bodies in front of a large audience through the use of machinic and technological devices, attempt (and yet fail) to stretch the body's boundaries and to collapse the material body into the abstract body-machine-image complex by merging life and machinic processes. It also points to the very real limits of using semiology as a hermeneutical system.

The body – whether it is seen as being a material, substantive entity or dematerialised, semiotic sign, or even a technological abstraction – is always caught up in a discourse at the intersection of art, technology and body politics, where social and political structures are often (re)enacted and (re)produced through individual acts and practices both on- and off-stage. The machinic body, gendered body, historicised body, performing body, fragmented body, objectified body and the body in pain all point to the ineluctable, historical discursivity surrounding the body, from a Western metaphysics of presence to a de-subjectified semiotics to a postmodernist revision of notions of embodiment, where the body (as well as identity) is relegated to fictive, dialogical or constantly emerging and shifting positions.

As far as theatrical conventions within Western culture are concerned, the body has often been viewed and perceived as being like a stage or a kind of the-

* An electronic version of this paper has appeared in *Leitura Flutuante: Journal at the Centre for Studies in Semiotics and psychoanalysis (CESPUC)*, 4.2 (2012): 41-74.

atrical text against which various subjectivities can be inscribed and reinscribed. In opposition to phenomenology, which addresses the physical and material realities of the performance situation and the experience of the lived body, semiotics – with its poststructuralist (or, in my view, almost antitheatrical) bent, views theatre (and of course the body) as imbricated in semiology or a system of cultural signs rather than perception.

The audience of any theatrical performance receives pleasure from interpreting a multiplicity of semiotic signs, the physical gestures and performative elements of the theatrical event. This is tied to Hans Robert Jauss's theory of audience reception and what he famously terms "the horizon of expectations", the implicit, cultural assumptions which the audience are thought to have and which they bring to bear in their interpretation of theatrical performances. By way of example, it will be recalled that many Greek audiences, *via* recourse to oral tradition, already knew the story of Oedipus long before Sophocles' dramatization of it. The same, of course, can be said of modern audiences who go to the theatre nowadays to watch theatrical performances of Shakespeare's plays with a horizon of preconceived expectations.¹ Thus, by manipulating and orchestrating an audience's emotional responses, a director could achieve dramatic effects, even directing the audience towards an Aristotelian *catharsis* or the purging of strong emotion.

In the 1980s and 1990s semiotics, which concerned itself with how meaning was constructed and modified in society, was seen as being one of the main driving forces in dramatic theory, displacing phenomenology and leading Anne Ubersfeld to note that pleasure derived from the theatre is semiotic to the extent that it fills in the gap of the absent signifier, be it in the form of "a god, the spool of thread for the mother, the stage for an absent 'reality'. Theatre as sign of a gap-being-filled" (qtd. in Bennett 73).

Thus, through the lens of performance, cultural and psychoanalytic theory many theorists have either tried to bridge the gap between the theatrical signifier (gesture) and its signified (meaning), between vision and perception, message and conceptual sign or to widen it and open out a plenitude of interpretative possibilities by recourse to various theories concerning the theatre, the self and the other. One strand of this can be discovered in the work of feminist theorists on performance, notably the work of those such as Jill Dolan, Rebecca Schneider and Elin Diamond, to name a few, who have pursued this line of inquiry by ex-

1. Written from within this theoretical milieu of "reader-response theory" and strategies of reception, Jean E. Howard's *Shakespeare's Art of Orchestration* (1984) seems to be quite an attractive reading: "I assume that in writing plays for performance Shakespeare was partly writing with an eye to the potential responses of the audience; that is, as he orchestrated the play, he was indirectly orchestrating the theatrical experience of the viewer" (qtd. in Bennett 14). While it is impossible to verify this, it is safe to assume that in later theatrical productions of Shakespeare's plays, directors would play with visual effects in order to create specific responses in their audiences.

aming the intricate relationships between viewing and perception in what is typically identified as phallogocentric theatre and how performance is inflected with intersubjective permutations and assumptions about the material body, gender, race and even class, assumptions which can be challenged or interrogated through aesthetic, theatrical forms in order to undercut – even subvert – phallic discourse.

By recourse to Plato's notion of the *chora* in his *Timaeus*, it is possible to view the theatrical stage as “a labile and unstable notion with undeniable feminine and maternal resonances” (Bianchi 124).² It is a space which functions “as a zone of creativity where dwelling, living, being *as becoming*, is always already taking place” (142). According to Anne-Marie Smith-Di Biasio, there is a phantasmatic, dream-like quality to this *chora*, this “mode of perception like dream, in which the image hovers phantom-like and transitional between reminiscence and existence, reminiscence of things past and the existence of the day's residues where it embeds itself” (217). In Kristevan terms, it is also a semiotic, almost prelinguistic space marked by its own motility and cadent rhythms which precede the Lacanian Symbolic or its laws of signification.³ Hence the theatre can be viewed as a space which exists prior to language and representation.

In *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Deleuze in fact posits the existence of such a theatre in a dynamic model of the theatre as repetition, which “is opposed to the theatre of representation just as movement is opposed to the concept and to representation which refers it back to the concept”. In such a theatre, nature and history come together in “a language which speaks *before words*, with gestures which develop before organised bodies, with masks before faces, with spectres and phantoms before characters – the whole apparatus of repetition as a ‘terrible power’” (11-2, italics mine).

In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and his collabo-

2. *Timaeus*, 52b. Although Emanuela Bianchi explains in her footnote that she is indebted to Desmond Lee's translation, it is interesting that she skips the cosmological aspects of Plato's narration in the translated section in which he assigns this *chora*, strictly speaking, neither to the earth nor sky: “Ἄδ δὲ μήτε ἐν γῆ μήτε πού κατ' οὐρανὸν οὐδὲν εἶναι”.

3. I say this space is “almost prelinguistic” because I wish to avoid the pitfall many feminists make of criticizing Kristeva for positing a utopian or ou-topic space outside culture or history. Although Judith Butler, for example, contends in *Gender Trouble* that the *chora* is confined “to a site outside culture itself” (88), a rereading of Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* shows that, in terms of her theory of signification, the *chora* “is not yet a position that represents something for someone” (26). I deliberately read the *chora* as extralinguistic – even “paralinguistic” – rather than strictly prelinguistic. Cf. Maria Margaroni in her “‘The Lost Foundation’: Kristeva's Semiotic *Chora* and Its Ambiguous Legacy”, (84): “In this light, the *chora* should be perceived as neither a preverbal space nor as a timeless time before history. Its effect, as Kristeva has repeatedly pointed out, is *transverbal* (moving through and across logos) and *transhistorical* (alongside, opposite to and in the margins of history)”. Quite clearly, this reading dynamically situates the *chora* *within* history at the same time as it constrains it by its contingency on socio-historical forces. That certain feminists should read Kristeva against the grain is baffling indeed.

rator Félix Guattari posit that such a theatre is opposed to that of representation through a psychiatric practice which they call *schizoanalysis*, which serves to destroy “beliefs and representations, theatrical scenes” (314). Whilst such a theatre may seem antivisual, even antitheatrical, I would like to hold on to this idea of a theatre which speaks “before” words, since it illustrates Deleuze and Guattari’s attempts to move beyond representation – to shatter all representative forms – in the search for a mechanistic body of origins which is linked to the repetitive processes of its own desiring-production and “disengage[s] the deterritorialised flows of desire” (314).

Interestingly, Kristeva’s semiotic can also be interpreted in this way. “Rather than [being] a system of signifiers”, it can be read as “a system (a machine) of breaks-flows, constantly separating from and connecting with the machine(s) of the symbolic, continually grafting onto its body-parts their process of production”. This would explain the irruption of *jouissance* in the thetic phase, as well as the inscription of this phase “within a logic of repetition and renewal” (Margaroni 88).

Such a logic of repetition implicates desire and trauma in a mimetic reproduction of discourses – the constant search for origins which defies historicity – without grounding the body firmly in a materialised subjecthood. Unlike feminists such as Luce Irigaray, who reads Plato’s description of a cave/chora in his *Republic* “as the womb, from which imprisoned men are led up to the sun of enlightenment by the philosophy tutor” (Hodge 104), Kristeva resists the nostalgic urge to return the subject to his or her ontological, embodied consistency. There is no unified subject or unified history of the subject, despite Irigaray’s desirous attempts to posit a maternal womb as source of origins. Desire for this other/mother is mechanistic and remains *always already* deferred, constantly pointing to the traumatic and glaring gap between subject and object, origin and historicity, and the impossibility of suturing them.

In opposition to phenomenology, which, as we have already seen, addresses the physical and experiential realities of the *felt* and lived body, semiotics – with its poststructuralist bent – views theatre (and of course the body) as imbricated in semiology or a system of cultural signs rather than perception. There have been several modern bodily-based performance artists who either discard phenomenology in favour of the body’s semiotic function or who attempt to collapse the material body into the abstract body-machine-image complex by merging life and machinic processes. The body’s mediation with technology is often seen as both transforming (even cancelling) it and prosthetically extending its possibilities *ad infinitum*. Like other performance artists such as Stelarc, who uses the most advanced robotic technology to refashion his body, Franko B and Orlan use machinic and technological devices to impinge upon and even stretch their bodies’ boundaries.

This paper will attempt to argue that this collapse of the material body into an abstract semiotic sign or the body-machine-image complex does not lead, paradoxically, to a unified synthesis but points to a crisis in representation or

identity, where the fragmented body or body-in-pieces becomes a representative text of the failure to merely read the body as abstract, semiotic sign rather than – or even solely as – an embodied and sentient entity which can feel and experience pain. The body proves – or rather fails – to be as resilient as Orlan and Franko B desire it to be.

It has often been claimed by several feminists that Orlan dismantles the male gaze from its fixed locus of fetishising the female body in representation through her theatrical performances and surgical practices, in which she has surgeons cut up her skin and re sew and spatially reconfigure facial parts, thus positing – in true postmodernist fashion – her fragmented body as text, the body-in-pieces which resists conforming to the typology of beauty standardised in the Western literary and artistic canon. Since Orlan claims to feel no pain during these operations, her performances may be read as attempts to alienate her spectators. Additionally, her invocations to theological cosmogonies and her attempts at reincarnation can be interpreted as an achievement of what Elaine Scarry calls the aversiveness of pain, the “sign of pain’s triumph” (4).⁴ However, such an identification of materiality and discourse, the body as text or textual referent, may alert us to the stakes involved in eliding the “aesthetics” of Orlan’s performative acts.

As we have seen, the body – whether it is seen as being a material, substantive entity or dematerialised, semiotic sign – is caught up in a textual discourse at the intersection of art and body politics, where social and political structures are often (re)enacted and (re)produced through individual acts and practices. The gendered body, historicised body, performing body, fragmented body, objectified body and the body in pain all point to the ineluctable, historical discursivity surrounding the body, from a Western metaphysics of presence to a de-subjectified semiotics to a postmodernist revision of notions of embodiment, where the body (as well as identity) is relegated to fictive, dialogical or constantly emerging and shifting positions.⁵

4. Another reading (which may seem paradoxical) is to assert that the power or potency of pain can be negated through repetition. I find J. B. Pontalis’s formulation of psychic pain quite adept in relation to Orlan’s work. As he points out in *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis*: “Sometimes obvious, noisy, repeated suffering serves as a screen for pain. Is not the function of some suffering to *evacuate* psychic pain, and I am thinking in particular of sado-masochistic suffering in which the subject is his own producer and master of his own scenario. To suffer a lot, at the necessary time and for the necessary duration in order not to suffer too much, and for ever?” (203-204). This would lend some credibility to Orlan’s asserted refutations of pain, had it none been for her adamant refusal to associate her performances with masochistic practices.

5. Postmodernist theory is certainly not without its opponents. Judith Butler finds the term “postmodern” to be vague and reductionist, if not meaningless. Her theory of performativity, however, has been very popular with many postmodern feminists in the 1990s. In *Gender Trouble* she points to how gender is a social construction which is performatively produced.

The fact that the body can also function as a powerful sign of absence or loss within the discursive domain is especially prevalent in theatrical practices in which the female body is either not represented or comes dangerously close to being under constant erasure, suspended as it is “between the polarities of presence and absence” (Phelan qtd. in Wray 193). The dialectic of absence/presence can be a very powerful political tool in augmenting the hegemony of male desire, with the absent and missing female body, as Juliet Mitchell notes in *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria*, typically being linked to the hysterical body (221) and where even the very visibility of the female body can be seen, paradoxically, as a succumbing to phallogocentric visual culture.

Having said this, it is worth noting that this visual realm is never completely secure. There is always a space *beyond* the visual medium or field which remains as lack, “which cannot be controlled, the unsymbolizable [Lacanian] Real” (Lowry 280). The real can be read as a spatial or psychic category and has been linked to trauma since it resists both categorization and symbolic representation. Whatever the case, there is always an enigmatic residue which alerts us not only to the limits of what Edmund Husserl calls our visual horizons but also of our constant hermeneutical activity.

In late industrial and postmodernist culture technological machines or visual apparatuses are read as prosthetic extensions of the body’s capabilities. What is more, the boundaries between bodies and machines, interior states of subjectivity and the external world, come crashing down only to be reconfigured in new ways, in “stylized assemblages of bodies, mechanisms, and landscapes”. By drawing on “the logic of the modernist industrial design of *streamlining*”, machine culture replaces the natural body with the naturalised body, and the machine itself becomes “anthropomorphized and domesticated” (Seltzer 242). The body itself is no longer seen as simply being an image or semiotic sign; it is an inner machine covered with outer skin. “Under the skin, the body is an overheated factory” (Artaud qtd. in Seltzer 242).

This inside/outside divide has led to an obsessive desire to rip or tear the skin apart in order to see what lies underneath it. In her discussion of Gothic horror and modern horror movies, Judith Halberstam illustrates how the skin “forms the surface through which inner identities emerge and upon which external readings of identity leave their impression”. In horror movies the viewers are provided with what Halberstam refers to as skin shows or “a virtual skinfest” whose main focus is “the shredding, ripping, or tearing of skin as a spectacle of identity performance and its breakdown” (141). For critics such as Baudrillard, this description would hardly seem virtual in an era of post-industrial capitalism, where the wounded, fragmented or torn body can be found everywhere and is merely an abstract sign divorced from any anatomico-physiological setting, a mere symbol in “a world where all value has been reduced to the symbolic exchange of signifiers and as a result is fated to ‘indifference’ and equivalence, or rather the loss of all value” (Harris 74).

Whatever the implications of Baudrillard’s bleak and “valueless” postmod-

ern outlook, I would like to hold on to Halberstam's notion of identity performance as spectacle, as well as her focus on skin-shows, since it can help us to shed some light on modern dramatic performances such as those of Orlan and Franko B, whose radical skincutting in front of an audience, what I call blood play, allows us to reconceptualise the relationships between the body and the skin, materiality and consciousness.

Indeed, some critics such as Steven Connor have even tried to refute this relationship. As Connor notes in *The Book of Skin* the skin is not the body but can be viewed as "the body's twin, or shadow". The skin "is always in excess of, out in front of the body, but *as another body*". The skin is thus always in part immaterial, ideal, ecstatic, a skin that walks" (29). This notion of a walking skin is reminiscent, perhaps, of Orlan's assertions that her body is merely a "vehicle" in her search for her own identity. (This is reminiscent also of Henri Bergson's assertion that the body is a vehicle of human choice.)

For while critics such as Baudrillard see wounds as being primarily "symbolic" and semiotic, as disembodied artefacts or signs which circulate in a meaningless semiotics, the gaping wounds of Orlan's face and Franko B's body seem to specify otherwise. For they may be abstract signs, but they are *also* embodied, "real" events. "They [describe] an exact language of *pain* (emphasis mine) and sensation, eroticism and desire" (Ballard 90).

Wounds are never quite singular events: they are iterable, repeatable, reproducible. They are concrete markers of pain that may also function as abstract, disembodied signs. As such, they are disseminated along the semiotic system like signatures, infinitely reproducible and infinitely prone to simulation. As Derrida aptly points out in *Margins of Philosophy*, signatures function only in so far as they are repeatable or *iterable*, and thus able to be repeated in several different contexts (that is, the very fact of the signature's grounded repeatability ensures precisely that it can be repeated *elsewhere*). "In order to function, that is, in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production" (328). Hence a signature, like a wound, can be endlessly counterfeited, imitated and simulated. This is nowhere more powerfully depicted than in Orlan's constant reproductive simulation of injuries through the mediation of her photographic images.

In her attempts to objectify the body – from the very moment, in fact, that she discards or renounces any notion of physical or psychological pain – Orlan transforms or reduces it to a semiotic function or abstract sign. Her project can be viewed as being based on a binary between semiotics and phenomenology where substance – the very experience of existing in a body – gives way to semiotics and where the vital and living body becomes for Orlan a mere conceptual or abstract image that is open to representation.

In effect, Orlan's belief in the complete obsolescence of the human body allows her to assume (even if phantasmatically) the position of a "posthuman self where a multiplicity of selves are constantly shifting and in motion" (Ashby

48). I say phantasmatically because there is no way to avoid humanism – and paradoxically so – when positing the posthuman condition. It is all very well, *pace* Derrida, to say that the “post” in humanism is always already returning, that this movement is in effect always taking place, but it is also the case that there is no clear way out of this very impasse. “There is no pure outside to which ‘we’ can leap. To oppose humanism by claiming to have left it behind is to overlook the very way that opposition is articulated” (Badmington 9).

What this means is that despite Orlan’s protests to the contrary, she needs the body in her performances, and the body feels pain. For while Baudrillard sees wounds as primarily “symbolic” and semiotic, as disembodied artefacts or signs which circulate in a semiotics without any meaning, it is my contention that Orlan’s gaping wounds, the open orifices she exposes in her photographic images, delineate a very precise economy of pain frozen and petrified in time. Indeed, the fact that the wounds themselves may be read as abstract signs does not preclude them from *also* being or becoming embodied, “real” events. They may possess an ambivalent status, in their attribution as at once psychical and social, virtual and real, a matter of both representation and perception at the same time, yet it is not easy, perhaps even impossible, to relegate the body to some pre-subjective or even pre-objective state of being. (I am reminded here of a kind of Husserlian *something*, the *something* of consciousness, the consciousness of, which we cannot extricate ourselves from.)

As I mentioned previously, the body feels, even lives, pain. It is not so easy to abstract it from its materiality and root it in some conceptual or even pre-ontological discourse of semiotics. Indeed, the very question of semiotics, of language itself, presupposes the existence of the body, even if only as referential, material sign. As Lacan notes in *Écrits*, “language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is” (95). After Orlan’s “cosmetic” operations, she is left with the reality of the wounds on her face, which serve as very real and unforgettable markers of the mediation between her own body and the surgical instrument, i.e. the needle, the scalpel, the surgeon’s knife. They form “an inexhaustible encyclopedia of *pains* and discharges” (Ballard 39, emphasis mine). They are both part of a conceptual system of signs but also concrete markers of pain which shatter the body’s sense of unity. And, as Vivian Sobchack points out in her criticism of Baudrillard’s reading of *Crash*, a criticism which can be applied with the same cogent force to Orlan’s surgical practices, “there’s nothing like a little pain to bring us (back) to our senses, nothing like a real (not imagined) mark or wound or artificial orifice to counter Baudrillard’s postmodern romanticism”.

The body is as much a subject as it is an object; it is all too easy to forget our lived and imagined sense “of the human body not merely as a material object among others, but as a material subject that bleeds and suffers and hurts for others because it can bleed and suffer and hurt for oneself” (Sobchack). While Sobchack’s argument may read like a romanticised version of a nostalgic desire to recoup once more the body’s subjectivity, which (one may argue) has *always*

already been disseminated and fragmented *via* artifice and technological practices, it is significant that she brings the notion of the material body to the fore once more.

For Orlan cannot escape the body. The locus or site of action is precisely her body, on which she inscribes her own discursive text.⁶ The photographic images taken during and after her operations are like a testament to the vulnerability of the flesh, in which the wounds map out a very precise representation of physical and psychical pain. It is paradoxical indeed that this should take place, especially considering Orlan's complete disavowal and rejection of this very pain on which her work is premised. Unlike many other female performance artists, who tend to magnify their pain and oppression under patriarchal discourse, she attempts to downplay it in her theatre of cruelty, even reduce it entirely.⁷ As Elaine Scarry remarks, this type of logic is untenable precisely because physical pain, even when it is inscribed in an *elsewhere*, transferred onto another object (such as a photographic image, for example), will still retain or carry "some of the attributes of pain with it" (173). Although Scarry is referring specifically to contexts involving war and torture in her astute analysis, where one individual attempts to obliterate the sense of an other's pain, the fact remains that physical pain is real. As a phenomenon it occurs "not several miles below our feet or many miles above our heads but within the bodies of the persons who inhabit the world through which we each day make our way". Furthermore, it is "a sign of pain's triumph" when it effects what Scarry calls an aversiveness by "invok[ing] analogies to remote cosmologies (and there is a long tradition of such analogies)" (4).

6. I use the term "inscription" deliberately here because of the not uncommon metaphorical status ascribed to the ontological body as text, as a site onto which multiple discourses and ideologies are re(inscribed) and re(interpreted). Karen Sanchez-Eppler, for example, in "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," reads the body as a text. Although her essay is primarily an exploration of the critical intersection of feminist and abolitionist practices in nineteenth-century slavocratic America, her focus on the human body of women and (female) slaves is particularly enlightening. She understands the body as "attain[ing] the status of a text", as being the site onto which the inscription of patriarchal readings takes place. For the woman to "reclaim" her body she must "invert patriarchal readings" and find her voice by subversively refashioning the way her flesh is "read" against her. "For women the ability to speak was [and is] predicated upon the reinterpretation of [her] flesh", which leads to her subsequent reinscription into subjective personhood (230). I find Eppler's formulation particularly intriguing in relation to Orlan's radical and shocking body play.

7. Cf. Imogen Ashby, "The Mutant Woman: The Use and Abuse of the Female Body in Performance Art" (45): "Interestingly, Orlan has been keen to underplay the pain involved in what she does and this is in stark contrast with other body artists who have used the pain inflicted to represent the oppression, or otherwise, that they experience". Instead of using the politics of pain as a powerful force against which to reinscribe herself in patriarchal discourse, it is almost as if Orlan seeks to sidestep it or eliminate it from her field of vision by a radical subversion of its norms.

Since Franko B does not deploy any language in his performances in order to voice out his physical and emotional pain as an invisible hand offstage cuts through his body, the occasional whirrs and bleeps of the machines and surgical devices which “invade” his bodily interior create a space very much like Kristeva’s semiotic chora as opposed to the symbolic order. Kristeva is indebted to Nietzsche here for her formulation of the two terms: the *symbolic* and the *semiotic*. As Ellmann notes, the former is “dominated by the father, the phallus, and the law”, whereas the latter is “haunted by the vengeful traces of a lost pre-Oedipal maternal world”. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche sets up an opposition “between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles” and Kristeva draws on this opposition, likening the semiotic to the Dionysian and the Apollonian to the symbolic. The former principle “is associated with sonority and rhythm, with the *stuff* of speech, in which language coalesces with the body and the orchestration of the drives; whereas the *symbolic*, like the Apollonian, articulates these primal forces into rational, intelligible forms” (Ellmann 25).

Hence the semiotic is a place which is pre-linguistic even though it is intimately linked with language, “the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his [*sic*] unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him [*sic*]”.⁸ The semiotic is associated with drives, as well as with tones and rhythms which “are meaningful parts of language and yet do not represent or signify something” (Oliver 38). The element of signification is achieved *via* recourse to the symbolic order, yet it is the semiotic itself which “provides the motivation for engaging in signifying processes. We have a bodily need to communicate. And, the symbolic provides the structure necessary to communicate. Both elements are essential to signification” (38). Between structure and bodily drives, soma and psyche, signification becomes both possible and dynamic.

By the same token, Franko B uses his body to communicate. Through the semiotic element of language he expresses his bodily drives, the experience of having – and even feeling – a body. “The tones and rhythms of language, the materiality of language, are bodily. Signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language” (Oliver 39). Through bodily gestures and the technological whirrs and bleeps Franko B is able to bring his body to life and make it materially and linguistically signify. Between soma and psyche, biology and representation, the semiotic and the symbolic, lies the potential for transforming flesh into language and for turning bodily pain into a linguistic register.

We have already noted how the body can function as a text upon which multiple subjectivities can be enacted and reenacted through performative acts. The achievement of catharsis becomes irrelevant in relation to the fluidity of meaning(s) and enigmatic signifiers surrounding the performative and bodily acts. Indeed, meaning becomes, or rather it *is*, as fluid as Franko B’s blood play as he stands leaking blood before his spectators with a catheter in his arm.

8. Kristeva, qtd. in Michel Beaujour, “A Propos of a Separation in Julia Kristeva’s *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*” (33, note 6).

As Habermas points out, our observations, perceptual experiences and habits of inference always engender knowledge or truth within the realm of semiotic representation. He points out in *Knowledge and Human Interests* that it is only when knowledge is based on ideas that it “can truly orient action”. The very word “theory” has religious roots. “The *theoros* was the representative sent by Greek cities to public celebrations. Through *theoria*, that is through looking on, he abandoned himself to the sacred events. In philosophical language, *theoria* was transferred to contemplation of the cosmos” (301). With Derrida, who invokes Nietzsche and the end of humanism, the interpretative and semantic fields of contextual discourse shift *via* recourse to a theory of deconstruction which accommodates a ceaseless multiplication of significations.

Derrida emphasises that reading a text depends on the historical and social contexts in which language is used. But such contexts are never fixed; they are always changeable and changing. There can be an infinite or iterable number of contexts for any given utterance, which makes meaning fluid and undecidable rather than guaranteed. Since contexts are multiple, fluid and heterogenous, it becomes impossible to fix on a single, definitive meaning for any given text. Indeed, any attempts to make sense of a specified text presuppose an act of interpretation, and interpretation already presupposes an endless multiplication of significations. The chain of signification never ends. From a similar angle, and in the same way as Derrida views the reading of texts, all performances themselves can be seen as encompassing a ceaseless multiplication of significations depending upon how the textual body in performance is viewed, read and subsequently interpreted.

The *aporia* resides in the conflict between the decodable and rule-oriented grammatical and social structures in which the body is placed and their rhetorical, even subversive, potential that opens up vertiginous possibilities of reference. The readings are inexhaustible. Franko B’s body, like Orlan’s, can be made to signify in various different ways: it is a marker of the abject, an instance of the body-image-machine complex, an elegiac body of sorrows, the body of a white man, the body of a gay man, even a signifier of the absence of blackness (since he uses white body paint in his performances). At the same time as all these assumptions stand, they are also potential interpretations in an endless process of construal. Franko B’s body stands in referentially for all these interpretations (or maybe just several of them?) at the same time as it stands in for none of them.

The fully articulated meaning of Franko B’s performances inheres in the habits of interpretation of his spectators, which in turn are governed by their interpretative capacities and dispositions within their socio-historical environment, as well as by other sociological factors such as gender, class, sexuality, religion and ethnicity. Since the performance theorists who are writing about Franko B’s work are primarily white and middle-class, their reading is inflected by their social position.

Whatever the case may be, it is impossible to witness such bodily-based performances without being emotionally, or at the very least physically, affected.

Franko B gives himself up to the audience “and invites us to experience the work as not only autobiographical in terms of the artist, but relational – soliciting a personal, emotional, and narcissistic investment from the spectator” (Doyle).⁹

Such a reading or emotional response suggests that a return to phenomenological roots can provide very fruitful ways of reading the body in the field of drama, ways which resist the anti-theatrical readings of semioticians and post-structuralists. Such readings may prove sterile unless they pave the way for a new semio-gnosis which can account for the lived, theatrical body. In short, the body is not, and cannot simply be (despite Baudrillard’s idealised romanticism), an abstract sign. The body feels, even lives, pain. And there is nothing like a bit of pain to shatter all our postmodern illusions of living in a society governed by semiological systems.

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9. I am using this notion of the performer/actor giving her or himself up to the audience in a very definitive sense here. In *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, Philip Auslander refers to Jerzy Grotowski, for whom the performers were “holy actors” who saw performance as being “an act of self-sacrifice”. Auslander quotes Grotowski’s basic principle: “It is all a question of giving oneself” (22). The sacrificial elements of Franko B’s performances, as he stands, Christ-like, with “stigmata” in his forearms and strikes a beatific pose, seem to me to be an apt example of Grotowski’s call for the performer’s self-abnegation. As Grotowski illustrates: “[The actor] must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon’s scalpel, to dissect himself [...] The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask – the innermost core of our personality – in order to sacrifice it, expose it” (Grotowski qtd. in Auslander 23). Thus the performance is an act of self-exposure which “dissects” the actor’s personality. It must be noted, however, that whilst Grotowski is clearly speaking in metaphorical terms, Franko B’s performance is a *literal* dissection, a visceral process of performative self-discovery. Additionally, while Grotowski’s model creates a kind of leeway or aesthetic distance between the actor and the character whose role he or she embodies, Franko B’s performances are slightly more complex to the extent that he conflates the two; in short, he does not simply take on the role of another character – he actually *is* that other character whom he is performing on stage. From this perspective, he is, or rather he gradually becomes, a lived embodiment of his own work, a discursive subject-in-process.

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