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The *coup de théâtre* and the enchanting object of performance

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ABSTRACT

Examining three examples from theatre productions in London and Edinburgh between 1997-2001, this article explores the *coup de théâtre* as a theatrical phenomenon. It argues for the importance of enchantment in conceptualising the *coup de théâtre* and that the suspension of the rational in relation to such theatrical moments is central to their impact. This sense of enchantment revolves around the changing status of the object in the *coup de théâtre*, which, it will be suggested, is linked to the shift between animacy and inanimacy. By destabilising rational modes of understanding, the *coup de théâtre* enters into the temporality of death and mourning, as objects occupy dual ontologies, both living and inanimate, literal and metaphorical. The *coup de théâtre*, it will be argued, is a point in performance in which perception and memory, the visible and the conceptual, converge, and in which the permanence of death is troubled by the reanimating effect of theatre.

KEYWORDS

*coup de théâtre*; enchantment; death; object; transformation.
A horse, autumn leaves, a small child - animal, vegetal matter, human being; three familiar things that become integral to the unforgettable moments of performance which this article will explore. This essay is an attempt to explore why these moments, these *coup de théâtre*, have remained such powerful memories for the author, and, in the process, to reflect on different modes of engaging with acts of theatre which enchant, seduce or elude us. It asks what role theory (or theoretical thinking) can play in understanding the ‘magical’ and ephemeral effects of performance, and, secondarily, explores how these moments are linked to death and mourning, both thematically and affectively. It acknowledges and celebrates the role that subjective experience plays in the way these events persist as formative memories of performance, avowedly reading them through the lens of grief and mourning, linking the *coup de théâtre* to the *coup*, or blows, of death and bereavement which frame the period between viewing them and writing critically about them.

The first *coup de théâtre* to be discussed comes from Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s *Giulio Cesare* (1997), an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, directed by Romeo Castellucci. The *coup* in question involved a live horse being brought onstage early on in the performance. This occurrence became an occasion for self-questioning: why was this moment so shocking and surprising? Why should the presence of the real horse in the sphere of representation cause such disruption to the theatrical world of signs? Why is the real object, the live horse, so unexpected in this context? The second comes from Formalny Theatre’s *School for Fools* (2001), directed by Andrey Moguchiy, based on the 1976 Russian novel of that title by Sasha Sokolov about a young boy sent to a school for children with mental disabilities. Whereas in Castellucci the real horse is implicitly replacing a theatrical horse, a puppet or mechanically animated one, here, the *coup de théâtre* involves the more explicit transformation of an object. At one point, autumn leaves, scattered around the performance space, are swept into a pile, and suddenly, as if by magic, become a freshly-dug
grave in a cemetery. The theatrical object (the leaf) goes from being a generic signifier of autumn and decay, via a performative gesture – someone sweeping up - to embody death, loss and grief. In the final example, from Complicite’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1997), directed by Simon McBurney, an apparent puppet is revealed to be a live human child. The moment of transformation is all the more surprising because of the length of time spectators have seen the actors manipulating what we thought was an object. Once again, the *coup* operates through substitution, but in this case, one that was in place from the beginning, bringing ideas of deception, delusion and pretence into the equation.

In each of these *coup de théâtre*, the relationship between the living body and the body as object, becoming-object or as dead or absent object, is central. Objects in performance can be used in multiple different ways: the object can be itself, represent itself, represent something else, or be used in a non-representational way; Patrice Pavis provides us with a list of the different uses of theatre objects, ranging from the naturalistic, pragmatic, aesthetic or poetic, functional, ready-made, found, poor and so on (Pavis 1998, 239-40). For Alice Rayner, objects ‘can expand into meanings as signifiers with historical attachments and concepts, or contract into aesthetics as form, surface, and texture’ (Rayner 2006, 101); they can be ‘symbols of other things, like an abstract concept […], or they can contract into something close to pure image’ (101). These examples catalogue the symbolicity of the object in performance. Building on Rayner’s analysis, this essay will suggest that in the *coup de théâtre* above, it is the object’s shift between the literal and the figurative, either visibly or conceptually – establishing the both/and rather than the either/or of the theatre object’s ontology - which alters our perception of the object in performance and creates moments of theatrical enchantment.

**Enchantment and the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’**
In each of the three cases discussed, the *coup de théâtre* produces a magical, enchanting moment of theatre, a counter-intuitive occurrence, one that produces emotions of wonder and surprise, as well as curiosity and self-questioning. Enchantment is a term which has had a lot of critical attention recently. Critics like Jane Bennett, Rita Felski, and others, have used it to launch a critique of rationalism in the context of cultural and aesthetic analysis. In this context, it allows us to think about the *coup de théâtre* in relation to the non-rational, the sensory and the corporeal in performance. Rather than trying to explain away the magical effects of the *coup de théâtre*, the critical concept of enchantment lets us be *carried away* by it. For Felski, enchantment challenges ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’\(^1\) in literary theory, the impulse ‘to purge [literature] of its enigmatic and irrational qualities’ (Felski 2008, 54).

Establishing the poetics of enchantment is a way to question the tendency of literary or critical theory to try to explain (away) or expose art’s conundrums. This validation of enchantment is particularly apt for theatre as an artistic practice that relies on bodies and space, since, as Felski says, ‘[o]nce we face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and a theoretical ideal […] we can truly begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience’ (76).

The *coup de théâtre* is enchanting: that is why we remember it long after the event. In other terms, it ‘casts a spell’, a ‘magical’ transformation that we cannot explain easily in logical terms. For Bennett, enchantment is a particularly physical, sensual experience: ‘Enchantment includes […] a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be caught up and carried away – enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects’ (Bennett 2001, 5). Felski likens this transformation to altered states of consciousness: ‘[e]nchantment is soaked through with an unusual intensity of perception and affect; it is often compared to the condition of being intoxicated, drugged or dreaming’ (55). Enchantment, in other words, is a
term that brings us back to the bodily experience of art or theatre, to the sense of wonder it generates; it is not aimed at discounting theory or critical investigation altogether, but to operate dialectically with them. Enchantment, one could say, forces explanatory forms of theory to go back to moments of experience, as they are felt perceptually and visually; in the case of theatre, the effect of this is to preserve the productive confusion and affective vertigo generated in live performance.

In the _coups de théâtre_ discussed below, enchantment derives from a scene of transformation or substitution. Central to each scene is the role of the object and the way in which the boundaries between the living and the non-living are blurred. In each case, the event generated a shock of recognition and a desire to understand which made the coup de théâtre compelling and memorable. This essay thinks through the tensions between the pleasure of a theatrical memory and the impulse to explain its logic, reckoning with the possibility that the memory depends on its inexplicability and that this enigmatic resistance to theorisation might be linked to other forms of loss of meaning, in particular the experience of loss and grief. That is to say, my attraction to these moments of performance, their determination as exemplary _coup de théâtre_ is shaped by the way they help me conceptualise death and mourning, their enigmatic quality opening a space for such projections of affect.

_Coups d’histoire_

The OED connects the primary meaning of enchantment with magic or sorcery, before citing the word’s figurative links with something overpowering or that creates a ‘(delusive) appearance of beauty’ (OED). The reference to ‘delusive’ here is relevant to my analysis of these _coups de théâtre_, which often involve a feeling of deception, a self-consciousness about our own willingness to be enchanted. We return to a moment of theatrical enchantment as if spellbound, unable to explain its hold over us. It is disorienting: ‘[a]esthetic enchantment’,
says Felski, ‘leads inexorably to ontological confusion, to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfilment’ (53). This confusion, I suggest, energises memory and generates the impulse to try to comprehend what we have seen. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, ‘[e]nigma does not block understanding but provokes it’ (Ricoeur 1970, 18), precisely because it forces us into other relationalities with the artistic object than simple quests to expose and scientifically dissect it.

The coup de théâtre has historically been associated with the sensational, the unexpected or the sudden, and was especially criticised as a phenomenon during the Enlightenment rationalism of the 18th century onwards. The OED defines a coup de théâtre as ‘a sensational turn or action in a play’ and, by extension, ‘any sudden sensational act’, while French dictionaries put the emphasis on an ‘unexpected event’ ['événement inattendu'] (Larousse) or a ‘sudden reversal’ ['brusque retournement'] (Robert). Two of Aristotle’s key components of tragedy in Poetics, anagnorisis (recognition) and peripeteia (reversal), can be viewed as different forms of coups de théâtre, one focusing on character, the other on plot (Halliwell 1987, 38). For Aristotle, an unexpected event explicable in relation to the preceding plot was a key element of the highest form of tragedy. The coup de théâtre was a crucial component of the tragic play, but only if it was logical and plausible.

The earliest use of the phrase ‘coup de theatre’ cited by the OED is in a 1747 letter by Horace Walpole. Edward Gibbon employs the phrase ‘Quel coup de théatre [sic]’ figuratively in his French-language Essai sur l’étude de la littérature in 1762 in the course of a discussion of Virgil’s Aeneid (Gibbon 1762: 45). For specifically theatrical uses in English, we can turn to The Critical Review edited by Tobias Smollett in 1769, where we find the phrase ‘a happy coup de theatre’, without accents, used as part of a discussion of the final act of John Hoole’s play Cyrus performed at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden in 1768. Edward Taylor uses the
phrase, again without accents, when talking about Voltaire’s 1748 play *Semiramis*, in 1774 (116).

In the French-language context, one of the most notable figures to explore the term early in its existence is Denis Diderot. Peter Szondi quotes Diderot’s definition in the *Entretiens sur le fils naturel* (1757) of the *coup de théâtre* as ‘an unforeseen event [*incident imprévu*]’ which finds expression in the action and which suddenly alters the circumstances of the characters’ (Szondi 1980, 328). Szondi explains that the *coup de théâtre* was objectionable to Enlightenment figures like Diderot because it did not embody the logical or scientific; instead, ‘it is perceived as untrue, as merely theatrical, that is to say, created exclusively in response to the needs of the theater’ (328). For art critic Michael Fried, Diderot ‘urged playwrights to give up elaborate *coups de théâtre* (surprising turns of plot, reversals, revelations), whose effect he judged to be shallow and fleeting at best’ (Fried 1980, 78).

Unlike writers who have seen the *coup de théâtre* as merely a plot twist or a piece of shallow theatricality for its own sake, I want to suggest that the *coups de théâtre* below constitute themselves ontologically through absence, by recurring in the memory, inexplicably, and by evoking the enigmatic and the unreasoned. These *coups de théâtre* are points of convergence for complex issues around materiality in performance. I do not claim that all contemporary *coups de théâtre* operate in this way. However, I do suggest that the current analysis can model a way of thinking about theatre which combines memory, affect, autobiography and performative criticism, acknowledging the perceptual disruption that *coups de théâtre* provide, but also suggesting how we can inhabit these dialectical tensions through scepticism about metatheories and by embracing more performative and affective modes of writing about theatre.

**Castellucci’s horse**
Speaking of a Dublin performance of *Giulio Cesare* in 1998, Michael Billington called it:

> an Artaud-like meditation on themes within Shakespeare’s play: rhetoric, power, violence, apocalyptic visions […] Castellucci bombards us with strange images and cacophonous sounds: suspended statues, industrial detritus, a real horse, toy animals, the sound of distant trains or a needle scratched across a record’ (Billington 1998, 10).

The production was indeed notable for its ‘strange images’: the use of an endoscope to project live video material of an actor’s throat and larynx onto a cinema screen; outsized or ageing, naked human bodies; ritual washing, industrial, mechanical soundscapes; a live horse, and a horse’s skeleton. Lighting, sound and bodies all formed a distorted symphony of ritualised actions in the production, placing the accent on rhythms and ear-splitting sounds, on unusual, disturbing presences in penumbral darkness, both human and animal.

For Nicholas Ridout, the real horse onstage was ‘dragged into the world of signs’ (Ridout 2006, 105). He examines the production as part of a wider project to think about the ‘confusion of attraction and repulsion, compulsion and disappointment […] experienced in the modern theatre’ (3). In his analysis, the live horse contrasts with the other human and animal presences in the performance. Using Ridout’s terms, it can be argued that the horse’s ‘attraction’ derives from the degree to which it questions the idea of theatre as a safe space of mimetic representation; it is a *theoretically* fascinating presence, a critical *coup de théâtre*. Its ‘disappointment’ comes from the fact that it remains, simply, a horse, however much we drag it into our theorisations of what it is doing onstage.

As soon as an object or an animal is framed theatrically, it is contaminated by the theatrical, even if it occupies a purposefully liminal position in relation to the real (such as an object accidently incorporated into a performance). Yet in the case of Castellucci’s horse, mimesis is under attack as the horse is, obviously, physically, and unpredictably, real.⁶ As Daniel Mesguich argues ‘the real horse in theatre is both a horse and the metaphor of a horse...
(of a real horse)’ (Mesguich 2006, 18; my translation), i.e., simultaneously real and figurative, representative of itself, figurative in its connotations, and in Castellucci’s production, a violent attack on theatre’s representational aesthetics. In Giulio Cesare, the horse is out of place; it feels obscene to theatricalise and aestheticise it; one fears for the well-being of the animal. It brings an alternative modality of being into the frame of performance, and in fact, crystallises the contingency of performance, the possibility that things may go wrong, that material things will not follow their script. The horse, then, becomes the vehicle for theorising theatre’s liveness and a mechanism for destabilising its safe fictionality, what Anne Ubersfeld calls its ‘denegation’, or repudiation, of the real. It brings the outside of the theatre, the opposite of the human, and the antithesis of the aesthetic consciousness, into the framework of performance. It simultaneously operates as metaphor of a range of concepts, and of itself; indeed, it acts as the risk of the undoing of metaphor in the moment of performance.

In this case, the presence of the horse does not mean that the fictional has become real but that the theatre has made use of the real to expose its own fallacious categories of self-definition. The horse replaces the putative theatre object (Castellucci could have used a puppet horse, any other object standing in for a horse, or a mimed or choreographed horse), takes on the attributes of a theatre object (it cannot avoid this) and yet repudiates this aesthetic categorisation (one is always conscious of its presence as a real, live horse). Even though the horse is operating within a representational network - the frame of theatre - it risks disrupting that framework at any time, exposing its fragility, its usual maintenance through rehearsed control.

Crucially, Castellucci’s horse redirects our attention from the ontology of theatre to its epistemology. In destabilising categories of objecthood and fictionality, it prompts us instead to question how such concepts are defined. As Rayner suggests: ‘[b]oth real and alienated,
the status of the objects is not a matter of ontology but of perspectives and positions relative to the subject that are constantly in transition’ (191). The horse’s role is not to get closer to the real, but to help us rethink how we categorise it (real and/or representation of the real). It does this because the live animal cannot be contained by the frame of representation. Consequently, the horse draws attention to the frames themselves, questioning how the real and the aesthetic are defined, intersect and undo one another.

In Castellucci’s *coup de théâtre*, the horse is a negation of the aesthetics of representation. Since a real horse replaces a theatrical one, the *coup de théâtre* risks undermining theatre’s mimetic power. Yet a second stage of reflection negates this negation when we see that the *coup de théâtre* captures the affective pleasure of the disruption only because it occurs within the framework of performance. Without theatre’s propensity to represent the real, the horse returns to its non-theatrical presence. The *coup de théâtre*, then, is an embodied moment of thinking about theatre which oscillates between the theoretical and the non-theoretical, the horse-as-metaphor and horse-as-live-animal

**From negation to gesture**

The transformation in Castellucci’s *coup de théâtre* is a critical negation of the theatrical object. Yet this is not the only mechanism by which the *coup de théâtre* disrupts the ontology of the object in performance. In the analysis below, I trace the way in which the transformation of objects in performance is itself displaced onto a performative gesture to create a theoretical kinesis whereby a movement operates to unfix stable binaries between objects in transition.

In 2001, at St Stephen’s Church as part of the Aurora Nova collective at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Russian company Formalny Theatre performed their production *School for Fools*. Reviewing the show in 2002 at the Barbican, Lyn Gardner noted that ‘the
schoolroom and [a] flat’s living room are full of fallen leaves’ (Gardner, 2002) and that this ‘magical piece of theatre takes you into a theatrical world where naturalism and expressionism, realism and surrealism sit side by side’ (ibid.). The coup de théâtre occurred when, at one point, an actor was sweeping dead leaves scattered across the stage that gradually formed into a pile. Suddenly, as the pile of leaves accumulated, the scene shifted, and it became apparent that the character was now at someone’s graveside, and the pile of leaves represented a fresh grave in a cemetery. Describing the transition from scattered autumn leaves to the graveside scene in such simple terms cannot capture the sudden perceptual shift from an everyday moment and gesture to a powerfully emotive encounter with grief.

The sequence led to self-questioning about perception, a double take during which scattered leaves suddenly, inexplicably, become a grave. As one’s reflections moved along the plane of language, one reflected on the nature of the theatrical effect and its power to enchant: whether it is because leaves on the ground connoting autumn and decay are linked metaphorically to the dead body, or that the fragile objects suddenly becoming so substantial and evocative of loss is a powerful moment of conceptual vertigo. Yet these attempts at understanding the force of the moment can only be verbally expressed sequentially and retrospectively, though they may have been felt instantaneously at the time of viewing. Therefore, one might conclude that another element in what is enchanting about the coup de théâtre is the convergence of different poetic, visual and other connotations in a theatrical sequence.

In the case of Formalny Theatre, once again, at the centre of the moment of enchantment is the shifting state of an object, here from scattered multiples (autumn leaves) to a singular other object (the fresh grave), different in density and signification, suddenly precipitating what were vague associations generated by the first objects into a more direct
embodiment of grief. What the transformation signals is the absent body of death and the forcefulness of the grief behind the unanticipated intrusion of the site of the grave, effected by a human gesture that sweeps us into a scene of mourning. A gesture of the everyday living and moving body switches us into a contemplation of the still, inanimate body of the dead. Here, the gesture itself becomes the focus of attention. It is an everyday action that captures the ephemerality of theatre and the way the full force of loss returns to memory in minor, unforeseeable ways. The sequence disrupts linear temporality as the fleeting human gesture ushers in the permanence of death. When the coup de théâtre recurs, in memory, it does so as the gesture itself.

As with Castellucci’s horse, the leaves in this sequence enter into a symbolic system. In Castellucci’s case, this results in bathos, whereby a live horse short-circuits the interpretive process and displaces theatrical aesthetics by the sheer physicality of its animal presence. Not enmeshed in the theoretical itself, remaining outside, it exposes the very potential facticity of any act of critical, verbal theory that tries to capture theatre’s power. For Formalny, the leaves activate a chain of association from liveness to decay and then death that the gesture of the sweeping human body erases, substituting a traceless kinetic memory for those tangible objects. Both the leaves and the grave are replaced by the gesture, which disappears without trace except as a memory of performance, a kink in time figuring the permanent immobilisation of death and its uncanny return as a mnemonic movement.

Thus the gesture, in its painful insubstantiality and its afterlife as (performance) memory, captures something specific about the mnemonics of grief. The gesture, here, captures that element of mourning that is the untraceable but devastating memory of death’s insistence: the reappearance of grief not as theatrical image, poetic text or object, but through the unpredictable kinesis of loss.
Complicite: unveiling the real

The examples so far have shown how the coup de théâtre challenges what we think we know about theatre, enchanting us into engaging with performance beyond the desire to explain and theorise its mechanisms. The coup de théâtre calls into question our desire for a certain form of definitive knowledge and, at the same time, asks us to think poetically about the in-between, about the evocative power of the gesture and about the subjective affinities that we bring to our readings of moments of performance. In Complicite’s The Caucasian Chalk Circle from 1997, the coup de théâtre similarly confuses the distinction between live body and theatrical object, between perception and the hidden. Instead, it opens up a conceptual space in which to explore the limitations of explanatory theory and asks us to bring new perspectives to our engagement with the force and resonance of acts of theatre.

As Paul Taylor says in his review of the original production at the National Theatre: ‘Complicite once again create theatrical magic with the simplest of means […]’ (Taylor, 1997). In the production, Grusha’s child is performed by a puppet. It has been animated by actor-puppeteers throughout the performance, and we are invited to admire its mimetic realism – it looks like a real child, creating that uncanny sense we experience when we see puppets acting convincingly as humans. Freud explains that uncanniness when he says that ‘we have particularly favourable conditions for generating feelings of the uncanny if intellectual uncertainty is aroused as to whether something is animate or inanimate, and whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living’ (Freud 2003, 140-1). By extension, the manipulated puppet becomes a metaphor for the fictional child in Brecht’s play who is subjected to adult conflict and violence. At a key moment, as the puppet is being fought over, suddenly a live child is unwrapped from inside the puppet and walks around on its own. The point at which the object becomes animate, where the puppet-child becomes a
real child, is an enchanting coup de théâtre; the object has become a non-object and we as audience members have been pleasurably deceived all along.

How do we reconstruct the affective impact of this coup de théâtre? In the first instance, there is the feeling of duplicity at not knowing when the substitution was made and how it went unnoticed. This is accompanied by the retrospective concern about the live child being subjected to the vigorous manipulations of the adult actors, that it could have come to harm; the ‘puppet’ has been thrown about, fought over and pulled physically in different directions. The coup de théâtre brings with it a sense of delusion (recall the OED definition of enchantment and its link to delusion earlier) in which the spectator becomes complicit in the driving desire for mimetic performance, and, allied to it, is both disappointment and attraction, to echo Ridout’s terms. Disappointment occurs when the puppet is substituted for a truer, less virtuosic real, but is accompanied by attraction to the exposure of our investment in the skill of the puppet’s manipulations. Thus, this double attack on theatricality plunges us into a moment of fundamental doubt about theatre’s relation to the real.

The unveiling of the real child within the puppet enchantingly reproduces what we already felt about the uncanny mimetic realism of the puppeteering: how lifelike it was. Substituting the real child runs the risk of a certain theatrical redundancy: how like a real child was this real child! Within the frame of Complicite’s physical theatre and choreography, the child operates as a vector for the company’s transformative use of objects, in which body and object are exchanged or prosthetically linked. As Tomasz Wisniewski points out, Complicite often use fragments to form bigger pictures (Wisniewski, 2016). Here, the introduction of the real child undoes this tendency towards coherence by disrupting the virtuosic mimesis with the presence of the real. Thus, in a similar way to Castellucci, the referent collapses back into the object of representation and radically destabilises the mimetic process.
For Freud, such a moment is uncanny not primarily because of the puppet’s sudden animacy, but because it creates a sense of doubleness. The real child is a double of the puppet child, and vice versa. In Freud’s account, the existence of the double goes from being a denial of death, ‘an assurance of immortality’ (Freud 2003, 142) in early religions or the primary narcissism of childhood, to becoming ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’ (142). When added to the uncertainty about the animacy of the puppet, and the way the coup de théâtre recurs as a repetitive memory - enchanting, asking to be theorised but resistant to explanation, then we can see this scene, as with the preceding ones discussed, fulfilling the conditions for Freud’s uncanny. I situate the desire to return to the coup de théâtre, its fascination, in relation to Freud’s discovery ‘that anything that can remind us of this inner compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny’ (145).

However, the transformation in Complicite’s Caucasian Chalk Circle is both evocative of death, in Freudian psychoanalytical terms, but also produces a feeling of theatrical pleasure, or enchantment. As with the bathos of Castellucci’s horse, Complicite’s bathos comes from the way the real child threatens the virtuosity of the puppet performance by asking what purpose the realistically-operated puppet serves beyond theatrical enchantment. The coup de théâtre provokes a sense of bathos when it undermines our wonder at the theatrical virtuosity of the puppet. However, this feeling is soon replaced by a further sense of enchantment when we realise that the use of the live child is a theoretical act that highlights the preceding virtuosity, while still questioning its theatrical purpose. The pleasure we feel at the uncanny substitution seems to give the coup de théâtre a (reparative) logic of its own.

It is striking that the reappearance of the live human child out of the representational form of the puppet evokes an association with death when, as I mentioned above, it should ostensibly be about revival and reanimation. But as Freud suggests, uncertainty about
animacy signals a return of the repressed anxiety about the stability and permanence of the dead. In theatrical terms, the appearance of the live child demonstrates the idea that theatre is conventionally premised on the absence of the object. Drawing our attention to the theatricality of the (apparent) puppet replaces that absence with the actual presence of the live child. However, this gesture is in fact a double encounter with the absence of the object of representation, an absence made all the more acute because it is enacted through an excessive and enchanting performance of presence and liveness. This substitution, instead of reversing the sense of absence, duplicates it: the live child is now imitating the live child that was pretending to be a puppet imitating a live child, and therefore the coup de théâtre ends up expressing all the more eloquently an impossible attempt to recapture the lost object.

Theatricality and enchantment

In Castellucci’s case, the live horse might be read as a general critique of theatre: we are asked to contemplate it and potentially conclude that theatre seems fake compared to the horse’s powerful beauty and presence, its existence outside the denegated, safe realm of theatre aesthetics. All of our theoretical projections onto it dissolve in the materiality of its existence. In the case of Complicite’s puppet-replacement, critical analysis of the moment risks turning enchantment into a sense of theatre’s superfluity: why represent the child with a puppet when a real child represents itself so much more effectively? Yet it is the playful staging of the possibility of superfluity that in fact reinforces the moment of enchantment. The puppet as object is replaced with a non-object in the form of the child, but the child retroactively confirms the puppet’s mimetic realism while at the same time defamiliarising it in a double gesture.

The recurrence in memory of the coup de théâtre as an obsessive, unresolved scene of performance acts out its originary uncanniness via a compulsion to repeat, a drive to theorise
and rationalise the moment of enchantment. Coupled with that is the recognition that theorising will never be able to exhaust this moment of uncanniness, because it relies on non-rational foundations (the possibility of reanimating the dead).

**The resistance to understanding, or, the murder of enchantment**

Throughout this essay, I have been pointing out how moments of enchantment operate through object transformations. Beyond this, we have seen that objects can be doubled, disappearing and reappearing, acting out processes of grief and the failure of theatre to bring the dead back to life in anything but a pleasurably ephemeral way.

Returning to these *coup de théâtre* brings with it anxiety that writing will verbally contaminate the complex sensorium which has situated these performative moments as visual memory, affective sensation and enchantment. Can theatrical enchantment be analysed? Can the *coup de théâtre* be explained without being destroyed? Discussing an image from Pina Bausch’s work, Rayner notes the way the company ‘created an image-object in motion […] repeated it long enough to be perceived and reperceived and still not “understood” or signified (and hence murdered)’ (Rayner 2006, 190). It seems that these moments continue to resonate precisely because they temporarily suspend the analytical frameworks we apply to theatre, and call for different categories of perception to replace them. At the same time, what remains is the desire to verbalise the memory, to undo the epistemological knot they represent. Working out their impact is an attempt to recapture that sense of disorientation, of vertiginous falling outside analytical categories and the substitution by another mode of perception. This is bound up with the fact that the moment is over - its ephemerality - and that it operated visually, through objects and their afterimage, in ways which intersect with language but also resist translation into the verbal. Attempts to communicate the moment to
others run the risk of bathos, while theoretical attempts cannot capture the synchronic convergence of affect and perceptual disruption that they bring about.

Yet at the same time, what prompts these *coup de théâtre* to endure in memory is the degree to which they persistently ask us to make sense of them. As Rayner suggests, to understand such moments of theatrical enchantment may be to murder them. But these uncanny scenes, thematically and structurally haunted by the dynamics of death, also mimic the grieving process; as the dead resurface in memory, so the inexplicable but enchanting moments of performance come back as ghosts from our theatrical memory.

**Conclusion: the coup de théâtre and the logic of mourning**

Theatre and performance, in ways exemplified by the *coup de théâtre* discussed above, serve to undo strict binaries such as those between material and the apparitional, the living and the dead, the body and the object. In doing so, they allow us to explore unconscious processes and anxieties around death and grief, the coming to terms with loss, and death’s painful transition from animate to inanimate.

The theatrical enchantment and theoretical pleasure of these *coup de théâtre* relate to the insistence of loss and the obsessive return of the dead to memory, which they activate. Underpinning each of these scenes is the banality, the hidden familiarity of loss, which are hallmarks of the experience of grief and mourning. This insists itself into performance via self-consciousness, bathos, absence, the return of the same (the lost object; the pre-loss self) which the ‘grieving self’ perceives as totally different, as impossibly transformed from before and after the blow of death. The dramaturgy of these *coup de théâtre* shows us the same object becoming different to itself, gaining a double ontology caught between animacy and inanimacy, sometimes embodying both states at once. These theatrical objects can even be displaced along signifying chains by ephemeral performance events: the simple human
gesture of sweeping a leaf along the ground. That sweeping gesture might be seen as the epitome of the coup de théâtre in what it says about loss, death and grief: it is something that disappears, tracelessly, but reappears with such profound, grief-inducing force in memory that its emotional toll cannot be reckoned. For, in the end, these coups de théâtre enchant us with a theatricality that helps us think through the sudden transformations and contradictory emotions associated with death, but also powerfully capture the sense of cognitive and perceptual disorientation that accompanies the experience of loss and grief.

Notes

1 The idea of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ was developed by Paul Ricoeur in his book Freud and Philosophy where he observes that Freud, Marx and Nietzsche ‘dominate the school of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 1970, 32). For Ricoeur, ‘[w]hat all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their “conscious” methods of deciphering coincide with the “unconscious” work of ciphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychology’ (34). Felski glosses ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ as ‘the name usually bestowed on [a] technique of reading texts against the grain and between the lines, of cataloguing their omissions and laying bare their contradictions, of rubbing in what they fail to know and cannot represent.’ (Felski 2011, 574).

2 Aristotle first mentions ‘reversals and recognitions’ in Ch. 6 of The Poetics (Halliwell 1987, 38). He goes on to explain that complex plots include a complex action, ‘one whose transformation involves recognition or reversal, or both’ (42). In Ch. 11, Aristotle explains that reversal is ‘a complete swing in the direction of the action’ (42) while recognition ‘is a change from ignorance to knowledge’ (43).

3 As Aristotle says, ‘[R]eversal and recognition should arise from the intrinsic structure of the plot, so that what results follows by either necessity or probability from the preceding events […]’ (Halliwell 1987, 42).

4 ‘The end of the fourth act is, however, truly pathetic, and the beginning of the fifth is peculiarly well adapted to representation, and produces what the French call a happy coup de theatre.’ (Smollett 1769, 80).

5 Diderot’s dialoguist Dorval says he prefers tableaux to ‘[…] ces coups de théâtre qu’on amène d’une manière si forcée, et qui sont fondés sur tant de suppositions singulières, que, pour une de ces combinaisons d’événements qui soit heureuse et naturelle, il y en a mille qui doivent déplaire à un homme de goût’ (Diderot 1875, 94).

6 As one of my critical readers, Louise Sheffield, points out, the horse remains on the ‘outside’ of this theoretical reflection on the boundary between the fictional and the real, which in itself is a fascinating observation.

7 See Ubersfeld’s excellent discussion of denegation in L’école du spectateur (Ubersfeld 1981, 311-318). Pavis translates ‘dénégation’ as ‘denial’ and calls it a ‘term from psychoanalysis that refers to the process which brings to consciousness repressed elements that are denied at the same time’ (Pavis 1998, 93) before explaining that denial is ‘[t]he experience of theatrical illusion, accompanied by the feeling that what one is observing does not really exist’ (93).

8 Freud here is discussing E. Jentsch’s beliefs in ‘Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen’ about uncanniness, which he endorses.

9 As Freud notes, ‘[t]o most people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts.’ (Freud 2003, 148).

10 Freud in ‘The Uncanny’ suggests that ‘[i]t may be that the uncanny [‘the unhomely’] is something familiar [‘homely’, ‘homey’] that has been repressed and then reappears, and that everything uncanny satisfies this condition’ (Freud 2003, 153).

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References


