The Locus of Looking - Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre
Bleeker, M.A.

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— Chapter 4 > Being Where? Walking the Landscape Stage
To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. [...] An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transforms him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and Gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more — (de Certeau 1984: 92).

In part three of The Practice of Everyday Life, "Spatial Practices," Michel de Certeau describes the difference between seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center and walking its streets. As he observes, this change in perspective does not only mean the walker will see different things. It involves a change as well in what it means to see and how the seer is involved in seeing.

After September 11, 2001, it is hard to read de Certeau's lines without seeing the images of these towers coming down. When I wrote this text, they were still standing. But what happened since then, does not change my reading.

Seen from the World Trade Center, the world could appear as an orderly text to a reader who was able to see it all in a single coup de l'oeil, or so it seemed. Detached from what is seen, the seer, like a voyeur, could see without being seen. He or she seemed to be just a viewpoint like the Cartesian disembodied eye that guarantees objectivity and knowledge independent of any particular knower. De Certeau points out the analogy between this position of the seer and that of "the totalizing eye imagined by the painters of earlier times" and with modern science, driven by a longing to be "a viewpoint and nothing more" (de Certeau 1984: 92). Equally well, his description seems to apply to the context of conventional theatre where the seer remains invisible, confined to his or her chair in the darkened auditorium, firmly distanced from the spectacle on stage: where de-theatricalizing strategies of beholding aim at turning seeing into 'just looking.'

De Certeau opposes the Icarian viewpoint once provided by the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, to the experience of walking the city, which he compares to writing:
The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (De Certeau 1984: 93).

Walking is an embodied activity that offers only partial perspective instead of overview. Walking, furthermore, implies involvement with the 'text' seen rather than observing it from a detached point of view. This involvement takes time, it has duration. Instead of observing from a distance, the walker has to find his or her way while meandering through the city. The walker produces his or her own 'text,' and what this text will be, can neither be understood from an analysis of the possibilities the walker is confronted with, nor from an analysis of the walker only. It is the product of their interaction.

The shift from voyeur to walker as described by De Certeau resonates in many ways with the changes brought about by the development from the dramatic theatre to the landscapes on the post-dramatic stage as described by Lehmann. Both reflect a profound change in the relation between seer and seen. Lehmann proposes Kristeva's concept of *chora* to describe the new theatre in terms of a choreo-graphical inscription, “a ‘space' defined by a “multiplicity of voices, a ‘polylogue,' a deconstruction of fixed meaning, a disobedience of the laws of unity and centered meaning” (Lehmann 1997: 57, and 1999: 262). Chora refers to the pre-logical space that gives room to the play of being and becoming. Kristeva inherits the term 'chora' from Plato's account of the creation of the universe in his dialogue the *Timaeus*. Chora is part of her conception of signification as a dialectical process in which the semiotic manifests itself in the lusty disturbance of meaning, position, and identity of subject and object as given in the symbolic structures that make up what is normally perceived as 'reality.' In the choral spaces of the new theatre processes of de-semantization result in a dissemination of voices analogous to Derrida's notion of *espacement*.

Lehmann also (re)introduces Gertrude Stein's notion of the landscape play to describe the ways in which the new theatre mediates in new relationships between seer and seen and, aims at evoking new kinds of perception. Conventional theatre, writes Stein, makes her nervous because it demands involvement with another time, which is the time of the drama characterized by accelerations and references back and forward. With her notion of landscape play, she argues for a theatre that simply happens here and now, and that can be perceived like a landscape or a park. According to Lehmann, on the post-dramatic stage such a landscape effect is achieved by means of strategies of defocusing that result from the deconstruction of fixed meaning and unity. The new theatre opens up a 'space' that calls upon the audience to synthesize the elements presented.
While the architecture tends towards aleatoric devices and decomposition, the subject tends away from the centered Ego towards the murmuring voice of the unconscious (from meaning towards voice), and the body-voice loses its orientation by sense and meaning (direction voice-sound). On the whole, a fading of the pole of meaning takes place as well as a certain musicalization of the human voice tending towards sound patterns (Gertrude Stein). The line of the subject is weakened (Lehmann 1997: 59).

As text turns into a textual landscape, unitary focus as it is given within dramatic narrative is deconstructed to give way to "an opsis which is without hierarchical dependence," which results in what seems to be a decrease in subjective control (Lehmann 1997: 59).

Elinor Fuchs (1996) also brings in Stein's notion of the landscape play to describe the developments that take place on the 20th-century stage. Like Stein, Fuchs relates these developments to strategies of defocusing and a 'weakening' of the subject on stage, the effect of which she terms 'the death of character,' the "de-authentication, the 'absencing' in some sense of the speaking subject" (Fuchs 1996: 72). On the postmodern stage, the death of character manifests itself in a process of undermining the logocentric assumptions at work in conventional notions of theatrical presence. The illusion of spontaneous speech has been shattered. Where text appears as such, it is often distorted or transformed by means of textual strategies that aim at the deconstruction of fixed meaning and structural interruption. Often these performances have non-linear structures and are no longer concerned with individual characters or with a temporal progression, but rather with a total state or condition. Correspondingly, the spectator's focus on this stage is no longer convergent: it is darting or diffuse, noting some configurations, missing others, or absorbing it all in a heterogeneous gaze (Fuchs 1996: 92).

Both Lehmann and Fuchs use Stein's metaphor of the landscape to describe a profound change in the architecture of the theatrical event. This change manifests itself in new types of involvement of the seer in the auditorium with what is seen on stage. The metaphor 'landscape,' as used by both Lehmann and Fuchs, seems to indicate a loss of overview, the disappearance of the structure that presents the audience with the position of the all seeing eye. Their use of the term landscape seems to reflect a growing awareness of the subjectivity involved in vision as it is part of a critique of unproblematic notions of vision of modernity.

At the same time, however, it seems that the landscapes on the contemporary stage appeal to the desire to transcend precisely these subjective limitations, a desire to break free of subjective mediation, to end cultural mediation and to lose oneself while being absorbed in a larger order in a way comparable to Diderot's notion of absorption discussed in the previous chapter. Both Lehmann and Fuchs speak of a certain 'weakening' of the subject. Lehmann speaks of the "longing for a space beyond telos," a space that is "'placed' on the borderline of logic and reason, on the threshold of what is thinkable and what is beyond reasoning," “a pre-logical 'space' that gives room to the play of being and becoming of all reality and precedes every
possible distinction" (Lehmann 1997: 56). Fuchs associates the landscape stage with "the collapse of boundaries between human and world, inside and outside, foreground and background" (Fuchs 1996: 93). She goes so far as to state that the postmodern artist longs for a vanishing natural world, or a vanished natural world that existed before history, before culture (Fuchs 196: 107).

Lehmann and Fuchs’ choice for ‘landscape’ as a metaphor to describe the post-dramatic stage thus seems to express a longing that Petra Halke (2001) has described as “aspiring to the landscape.” This is the desire for an absolute end to difference as it is embedded in the modern history of science and art, a desire that finds its uncanny articulation in landscape painting.

As Halke points out, the history of landscape painting is enmeshed in a story of longing for these seemingly opposite ends: nature’s conquest and an affirmation of the self on the one hand, and on the other transcendence into nature and effacement of self. Both ends spring from a discontentment with the inadequacy of human embodied existence and a desire to overcome its limitations. The painted landscape objectifies nature by laying it before the viewer’s eyes as a mastered entity. At the same time, the painted landscape is a sign that alludes to an infinitely larger presence outside the frame, one that cannot be encompassed by the eye. This sign can become a site for contemplative absorption, allowing an imaginary loss of the self in a larger order (Halke 2001: 8).

Since the beginning of Western culture, this desire for the absolute has been framed by stories of Paradise and Arcadia, the image of the utopian ideal of the world as a garden in which we are one with nature. The fall from Eden signifies the beginning of a longing to return to a state of presumed original fullness. This meta narrative has a double, its ‘Other’ so to speak. Paradise is framed within the nothing that God created it from, and the desert that remained outside of its gates. Hence, within the history of landscape, beneath the meta narrative of ‘Reinventing Eden,’ the desire to avoid representation and reach a primitive, undefined chaos outside of the garden forms another meta narrative. The understanding that the garden is only a historical, time-bound consolation, and that oneness cannot be found within the garden walls, leads desire outside of the garden and into the frightful unknowable beyond (Halke 2001: 15–16). Both sides of this landscape notion can be seen at work in the use of landscape as a metaphor for the post-dramatic stage. Here, Elinor Fuchs’ postmodern artist longing for the ‘natural world’ seems to mark the idyllic end of the spectrum while Hans-Thies Lehmann’s notion of espacement marks the undefined unknowable beyond.

In what follows, I will explore the ambiguous relationship between the new born seer and what is seen as mediated by the landscapes on the post-dramatic stage starting from what might be called a postmodern variation on Diderot’s description of a picture of a landscape, namely Heiner Müller’s theatre text Bildbeschreibung (1984), translated in English as Explosion of a Memory/Description of a Picture.
Discovering the Spectator — As the title indicates, *Bildbeschreibung* consists of the description of a picture. From the description the reader is led to understand that this picture depicts a landscape. The description of the picture is a reading. It is an act of reception in which visual signs are processed into syntactical signs that resonate against the backdrop of a frame of reference. In *Bildbeschreibung*, the reception of the image is literally executed as the production of a text: reception is production, looking on is acting. For this reason, Erika Fischer-Lichte calls *Bildbeschreibung* “the most appropriate expression of the postmodern awareness that looking on is a creative act” (Fischer-Lichte 1999: 58). A creative act, furthermore, that gives birth to the identity of the onlooker (59).

Fischer-Lichte makes this remark in an article titled “Discovering the Spectator,” in which she describes a fundamental change taking place in the structure of theatrical communication. Since the end of the 18th century, focus had been centered on the characters on stage and the internal communication between them. In many avant-garde theatre experiments of the early 20th century, the focus of interest shifted to the external system of theatrical communication: the relations between stage and audience (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 41–60). Fischer-Lichte explains this shift in axis in terms of opening up new spaces and aiming at a new kind of involvement of the seer with what is seen.

The new spaces opened up by the avant-garde theatre no longer present the spectator with the perspectival, organized picture frame of the box-set stage. They no longer present the spectator with a unified picture that can only be seen from one point of view without distortion. Instead, the new spaces of the avant-garde theatre aim at recreating the unity of actors and spectators and transforming the spectators into ‘new’ beings:

to transport them into a state of ‘intoxication’ or ‘trance’ to liberate their creativity and develop it or simply to shock them. In either case, the powers of vision and hearing as practiced in the bourgeois theatre, and, moreover, in the whole of Western culture for more than three hundred years, were to be destroyed (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 51).

These stratagems, as developed by avant-garde theatre makers, were taken further and greatly radicalized on the postmodern stage. However, postmodern theatre also differs in important respects from its avant-garde ancestors. Carried out by the avant-gardists, stratagems to reach out to and transform the audience functioned solely as the instrument by means of which this goal could be reached: to bring art closer to life, to shock the spectators, or to liberate their creative potential and transform them into ‘new’ beings. However, in postmodern theatre spectators are not turned into ‘material’ for specific purposes from which, with all the means available to theatre, ‘actants’ may be produced. Spectators rather, are “given back their rights to *spectate*” (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 57). This right Fischer-Lichte understands in terms of increased freedom on the part of the spectator to attribute meaning at will.
Postmodern theatre elevates the spectators to absolute masters of the possible semiosis without, at the same time, pursuing any other ultimate goal. The spectators are free to associate everything with anything and to extract their own semiosis without restriction and at will, or even to refuse to attribute any meaning at all and simply experience the objects presented to them in their concrete being (Fischer-Lichte 1999: 57-58).

Postmodern theatre turns the spectator into a “master of possible semiosis.” The spectator is granted freedom to give meaning at will, and this freedom turns looking into a creative act. Here, Fischer-Lichte refers to Bildbeschreibung as the most appropriate expression of this new approach. It is, however, as I will argue, precisely the spectator’s freedom to give meaning at will that is questioned in Bildbeschreibung.

Looking as Creative Act — In Bildbeschreibung, looking is indeed presented as a creative act, as a reading in the sense of producing meaning. However, to what extent this seer can be understood as master of possible semiosis seems to be the question. Bildbeschreibung presents its reader with precisely that: it consists of a description [Beschreibung] of a picture [Bild]. This description gives an account of how someone seeing actually makes sense, makes unity, or at least, tries to do so, by isolating and contemplating individual elements seen and linking them up to make a story. As much as this reading of what is there to be seen testifies to the freedom to connect and give meaning, it also expresses how cultural habits and conventional patterns mediate in practices of reading what (we think) we see.

The description starts with a landscape and clouds, and then begins to zoom into details in the landscape: a bird, a house, a woman, a man. The fate of the woman in this narrative seems to confirm the gendered-ness of such a reading. The woman is an object to be looked at and does not look back. She rises up from the earth and seems to be part of the land that is violently traversed by the man. She is part of the space that is turned into narrative.

At the same time, this reading is presented as a reading that does not hold together. The woman will not be destroyed. She reappears time and again, turning violation into a dazzling repetition. The thread of narrative becomes entangled, spread out like a spider’s web, stretched and shaken by a battle of all against all. It appears to be impossible to fit the woman into a coherent story with a beginning, a middle and – most importantly – an end. Getting the picture also appears to be impossible since Müller’s text presents its readers with an account of interaction between seer and seen in which the seer gets lost in the landscape represented by the picture.

Just as the reading of the picture does not express freedom and mastery over possible semiosis, getting lost does not appear to result in freedom and mastery either. Rather, the text testifies to obsessiveness, to getting stuck, and to the desire to escape. The verbalization does not and will not

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completely match the picture seen. The seer gets caught in obsessive loops and lost in partial descriptions that shift while he or she speaks on. Finally the speaking 'I' seems to lose all sense of distance between self and what is seen, and collapses into the picture seen, saying:

who OR WHAT inquires about the picture, TO LIVE IN A MIRROR, is the man doing the dance step: I, my grave his face, I: the woman with the wound at her throat, right and left in her hands the split bird, blood on the mouth, I: the bird who with the script of his beak shows the murderer the way into the night, I: the frozen storm (Müller 1989: 102).

At this point, as Fischer-Lichte puts it, “the oneness of the recipient, the ‘I,’ is dissolved in the very act of receiving, dissolved in the shattered mirror that the postmodern stage presents to its spectators” (Fischer-Lichte 1999: 58).

Müller’s text presents its reader with nothing more and nothing less than that which the title indicates: the description of a picture. This description testifies to a seer taking up positions in relation to what is there to be seen, as a result of which what is seen appears in a particular way. This reading is clearly not an objective description (provided that such a reading would be possible), but rather presents a vision implying a particular perspective, a point of view.

At the same time, this point of view, the position both in terms of space and the subjective identity of the onlooker, is exactly what remains the question in Müller’s text. The reading of the image is the only thing the reader of the text has to go on. The text gives no indication either of what is actually there to be seen, or of who the seer is. The only way to ‘see’ the landscape is to ‘walk along’ with the reading and take up the positions presented by it. The reader of the text is invited to take up the positions presented by the one speaking in the text, and to see the landscape as if from his or her point of view.

In this way, Bildbeschreibung not only presents an expression of the fact that both the identity of the seer and of that which is seen are the product of looking as a creative act. Bildbeschreibung also testifies to how this act, seeing as reading, is mediated by positions implied in the text and offered to reader to take up, or not, as well as by subjective drives at work in the seer. Bildbeschreibung presents a self-reflexive statement formulated in the artistic discourse of the theatre, concerning the way the theatre mediates in the relationship between audience and what is seen on stage.

Staging as Positioning — Müller wrote Bildbeschreibung for the theatre. Unlike Diderot’s descriptions of painted landscapes, Bildbeschreibung is intended to be staged. It is only when one starts thinking about staging this text that the full complexity of the relationship between seer and seen as represented by the text becomes evident.
Although Müller intended *Bildbeschreibung* for the stage, the text presents a riddle to anyone trying to stage it. To do so according to conventions of staging a text would involve making present on stage the world as given within the words on the page. Müller's text refuses such a notion of staging because the words on the page refuse to give any suggestion of being a transparent window to world a behind them. The speaking 'I' does not provide a description that matches the picture seen. The labyrinthine structure of the text with the repetitive returns 'in difference' undermines the illusion of this text as a transparent window to a world 'behind' it, a world that can be accessed through it. Instead, the text draws attention to how words never quite coincide with what they refer to, and how they always imply a deferral and consequently, difference.

It is not clear, moreover, who this speaking 'I' is, where he or she is, and how we are to understand the relation between what he or she is saying and the situation in which he or she appears. Except for the very last lines, the text is entirely lacking in personal pronouns and indeed, in these final lines, the ‘I’ appears to disintegrate and disappear into the landscape. The text mimics the strategy common in scientific writing of erasing traces of subjectivity and the viewer's position in order to produce a 'view from nowhere.' Yet, obviously, this is not an objective description. In this text, the absence of point of view draws attention to focalization rather than obscuring it. The text prevents automatic identification with a scientific meta-subject that would provide a suggestive 'view from nowhere.' Instead, positioning is turned into a problem for the reader. Into a problem for the one staging this text as well.

*Bildbeschreibung* lacks any indication of character or situation. Is this text a monologue? Or is it a description of what is to be seen on stage? Or something else? It is not clear. The director must decide whether he or she is going to stage the *Beschreibung*, or the *Bild*, or whatever possibility in between. The director must literally produce a vision of the text, deciding what the audience will see by taking a position and deciding on the relations between words and images, the verbal and the visual. He or she does so by deciding upon a point of view. Staging this text, therefore, means producing a reading of the description of the picture and this reading, in its turn, will imply a vision, a point of view, for the audience to take up. Seen in this way, *Bildbeschreibung* does not present an expression of the freedom of the spectator as master of possible semiosis but of staging as constructing a position for the audience as subject of vision.

′Wo ist der Mensch?′ — In 1997, Stefan Kunzmann presented a 'staging' of Bildbeschreibung in which he not only offered a brilliant answer to the question how to stage this difficult text, but also a critical reflection on the way the theatrical apparatus produces a position for the seer as subject of vision. Kunzmann presented this staging not in a theatre but rather in a room.
of the Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna, as a final examination project for stage design. His staging was titled Picture Description/ Explosion of a Memory. This title mirrors the title of the English translation of Müller's text: it is the same, yet showing it in reverse. The concept of mirroring was a recurring motive: through reflecting in reverse, Kunzmann's staging of Müller's text played with oppositions of text and performance, words and images, absence and presence (Fig. 3, inside cover flap right: Artist's impression of the installation).

While Kunzmann presented his 'staging' of Bildbeschreibung in a room of the art academy, the architectural features of the room, as well as the way he made use of these features, were reminiscent of a theatre. The room was rectangular and half the floor was raised like a stage. The division between the levels of the floor was emphasized by a protrusion of the wall, reminding one of the proscenium arch in a traditional theatre. Visitors entered the room through a door that opened on to the lower half. Looking towards the 'stage,' they saw two video monitors, each playing a short loop of film. One showed a bird that appeared to be flying backwards and the other a barren landscape. On the wall behind the monitors was a text that was difficult to make out. As members of the audience came closer, they discovered that it was in fact a mirror image of a text. On the black reflecting surface of the wall in front of them, the audience saw the reflection of Müller's text printed on the wall behind them in white on black. Within the mirror image of the text, the spectator saw his or her shadow projected onto the text. Like the videotapes, the lights in the room were programmed to perform a loop: they slowly brightened and then faded out in six-minute cycles. As a result, the mirror image of the text appeared and disappeared – the staging began and ended – in an ongoing repetition of the same.

"Wo ist der Mensch?," asked Kunzmann's supervisor, surprised that a student graduating in theatre design, would present a piece of work that did not include a place for actors and was not intended to be used by actors. This was indeed surprising, since the presence of actors is usually understood to be one of the essential characteristics of theatre performance. Ordinarily, actors establish a relationship between the language of the play and their embodied presence on stage. The actor's presence offers the audience a kind of 'entry' into the process of theatrical meaning production. The actor stands in for the character; he or she takes his or her place in the visual representation on stage. This composite figure, in its turn, invites the audience to step into its shoes and to imagine what it would be like to see the world from this point of view.

Usually, the stage design creates a space actors. Stage design then, is a means of positioning the actor within a particular frame of reference. This may be done by means of illustrating and confirming the situation as given within a dramatic text, by referring loosely to the text, or even by contradicting or negating what is represented in the text. Kunzmann did none of these, nor did he create a space for actors. Instead, he literally presented a staging of the text.
His strategy of making present the written text on stage brings to mind descriptions by Fuchs (1996) of strategies used in the theatre of the 70s and 80s to undermine the positivism involved in theatrical representation, through the infiltration of what has traditionally been the banished ‘other’ of dramatic performance: the written text. This happened, for example, by having actors open books and read them on stage, or through the use of written text as part of the setting, or by the performance of writing as part of the staging. In these examples, reading and writing are used as signs (or emblems) for the failure of ‘presence’ not only on the stage but also in the world, where barriers ‘always already’ exist between text and meaning, intention and reception, and between individuals.

Fuchs explains these strategies as part of a deconstruction of presence in the theatre, analogous to Derrida’s critique of presence as it functions in the Western metaphysical tradition. Drama, she points out, has evolved as a form of writing that strives to create the illusion that it is composed of spontaneous speech. “It is a form writing that paradoxically asserts the claim of speech to be a direct conduct to being” (Fuchs 1996: 74). This illusion is supported by a tradition of staging that suppresses writing. Conventional theatre, therefore, can be said to reflect the opposition of speech and writing that is central to Derrida’s attack on phono-centrism which he sees as being the focus of the Western metaphysical tradition since its Greek beginnings.

Derrida’s deconstruction of presence has been important in rethinking key concepts of theatre and, more importantly, to criticizing the notion of presence in the theatre. However, the problem with many of these critiques of theatrical presence is that they tend to focus too narrowly on Derrida’s critique of phono-centrism and here, Fuchs is no exception. This is not to say that theatre has not changed in ways that reflect the insights of Derrida and Fuchs is absolutely right to observe this. However, as Roger Copeland in a response to Fuchs remarks, presence in the theatre has less to do with the distinction between speaking and writing than with the way in which the architectural and technological components of the performance space promote or inhibit a sense of ‘reciprocity’ between actors and spectators (Copeland 1990: 30).

Presence in the theatre is a complicated issue that cannot be reduced to an effect of the tendency to privilege speech over writing. This one-sided focus of phono-centrism actually runs the risk of reiterating, rather than deconstructing, the binary oppositions of verbal and visual, text and performance that can be seen to support many accounts of presence in the theatre, including Fuchs’.

Text versus Performance — In her account of the death of character, Fuchs is careful to distinguish between stage and play, between actor and character, and not to confuse text and performance. Theatre studies as an independent discipline emerged as a result of emancipation from the study of drama.
as literature. This emancipation helped to redirect attention to aspects of theatre performance formerly neglected in the study of drama as literature. At the same time, however, it helped to install the conceptual opposition of text and performance at the very foundations of theatre studies.

More recent notions of text and textuality—such as, for example, Roland Barthes’ ‘epistemological slide’ in the conception of written texts from the traditional notion of the work to the more relativized text—suggest a continuum between texts and the textuality of performance, rather than a binary opposition. They suggest a continuum that enables us to read performances as texts, analyze how performances signify, and to interrogate the subsequent rewriting of those performances, the ‘fixation’ of their meaning in texts. Yet, at the same time, as W.B. Worthen observes, there appears to be a surprisingly romantic sentimentality at work in the opposition of performance as transgressive, multiform, and revisionary, versus the dominant, repressive, conventional, and canonical domain of the text. Worthen remarks:

Stage vs. page, literature vs. theatre, text vs. performance: these simple oppositions have less to do with the relationship between writing and enactment than with power, with the ways that we authorize performance, ground its significance (Worthen 1995: 15).

It seems that texts are not what is really at issue, but rather how they are constructed as vessels of authority, of canonical values and of hegemonic consensus.

On the post-dramatic stage, the status of the text as vessel of authority comes under attack and is undermined through a wide variety of practices. Nevertheless, there appears to be a persistent tendency to oppose text—shown to be marked by absence rather than presence—to the visual, to bodies or performance as being more directly present. This ends up actually supporting binary thinking rather than deconstructing it. Lehmann, for example, with his account of development of 20th-century theatre, argues against the persistent idea that these new developments on stage are the result of resistance to text, words per se.

Contemporary theatre, leaving behind the absolute dominance of the text, does not by any means abandon poetry, thoughtfulness or the glamour of speech, but brings back into focus the de-semanticizing power of body and visuality as such (Lehmann 1997: 60).

It is not text that is at issue but rather logocentric implications of dramatic theatre. Logocentrism is about structure, order, and telos, and not simply about the word. “Only to the degree to which the text is considered as the privileged place of a certain architecture is it assigned the highest place in theatre” (Lehmann 1997: 56, italics in the text). However, in opposing text to the “body and visuality as such,” Lehmann implicitly repeats the opposition of text as the domain of subjective mediation versus the visual and the body ‘as such.’
A similar mechanism can be seen at work in Fuchs account of the developments on the 20th-century stage, in terms of an opposition of theatre that aims at presence versus theatre that recognizes absence. Fuchs acknowledges that the deconstruction of character in dramatic narrative contributes to a process of relocation of theatrical meaning production to the stage in a situation shared with the audience. This process allows for an emancipation of performance from the text, in order to make room for the unique power of live performance. She observes that this can take the form of resistance to text per se and the rejection of drama text as oppressive. Fuchs reminds us of how in the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of theatre makers – she mentions Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, Joseph Chaikin and Richard Schechner, as well as the theorists who followed in their wake – extolled theatrical presence as no previous generation had, giving it almost religious significance. Fuchs quotes Michael Goldman stating that in the theatre we find a present beyond the limitations of the present, a selfhood beyond the limitations of the self: “We identify with actors because the self longs for clarification, because it longs to possess the present in a way that ordinary space, time and selfhood do not allow” (Goldman quoted in Fuchs 1997: 70). The exalted goal served by the actor, breaking free of the repressive forces of text, plot, and character, was nothing less than a recuperation of full reality, the true presence of divinity.

In her explanation of the ‘death of character,’ however, Fuchs focuses one-sidedly on the growing awareness of absence as the motor behind the transition of modernist to postmodern theater practices. According to Fuchs, what is reflected in new staging and writing practices is an increasing awareness of absence, not a desire for presence. After Derrida, the avant-garde theater of presence tended to give way to a theatre of absence, which rejected “the theatrical enterprise of spontaneous speech, with its logocentric claims of origination, authority, authenticity – in short, presence – to seek instead performance that “disperses the center, displaces the subject, destabilizes meaning” (Fuchs 1985: 165, 172). The celebration of presence in the work of the theater makers mentioned above is, merely “the cry of an endangered species” (Fuchs 1996: 70).

What gets obscured in Fuchs’ opposition of theatre of presence versus theatre of absence, is how the development that she describes as the death of character, is intertwined with what might be called its other: the birth into presence of the actor. Actually, here the theatrical practice of staging texts presents a useful model, and Bildbeschreibung a helpful example.

The Birth into Presence of the Actor — Bildbeschreibung presents an example of a ‘death of character’ in process. Right from the start, the subject speaking is marked by a certain absence and by the end, the subject has disintegrated altogether. The ‘I’ collapses into the landscape and starts to identify with various things at the same time. In reading the text on the page, the reader is invited to experience this disintegration as if through the eyes
of the character who invites the reader to step into his or her shoes. What happens however once an actor stands in for this speaking ‘I’? The actor, like the ‘I’ on the page, invites the audience to step into his or her shoes and to see it from his or her point of view. Yet, at the same time, this actor is part of the visible world on stage as seen from the point of view of the external focalizor, through whose eyes the world seen on stage appears as it does.

Although the character disintegrates, the actor does not. On the contrary, many accounts of the landscapes on the contemporary stage testify to how the deconstruction of drama seems to open up to a more direct visibility of the actor or performer, understood to be present somehow ‘behind’ the character. The physical presence of the actor is understood in opposition to the character as part of representational structures. The undoing of the representational structures is thought to bring about the actor’s body in all its glorious visibility.

All of this supports the suspicion that presence and absence are not binarily opposed terms after all. Rather, presence and absence appear to depend on the way the theatre mediates in the relation between see and seen, as a result of which absence and presence appear as effect.

**Plato’s Theatre — Bildbeschreibung** also helps to understand how within the theatrical apparatus deconstruction can function as a strategy of de-theatricalization aiming at radical absorption in which the see dissolves into what is seen. That is, how the deconstruction of the subject of speech can be seen to support the metaphysics of presence in the field of vision, analogous to the way perspective works, by presenting the see with a position marked by absence. The de-authentication of the subject of speech can be seen to support the authentication of another subject, namely the subject of vision. This subject of vision is not the character suffering severe deconstruction, which finally leads to its death on the post-dramatic stage. The subject of vision is the addressee, the agent through whose eyes we, as audience, see the performance ‘as it is.’

In Fuchs’ text, the transition from theatre of presence to the theatre of absence is marked by a description of a performance of Beckett’s *Come and Go* by the American group Mabou Mines in the early 1970s. Beckett’s text experiments with coming and going, on stage and off stage, presence and absence. On stage, there are three women who leave in turn. Each time one leaves, the other two start to whisper about a secret, which concerns the one who has just left. There seems to be something frightening about her condition. These secrets are the only elements of Beckett’s text that could have given the figures on stage meaning in the sense of psychological depth, yet this absent background to their behavior is not made present on stage. The audience cannot hear what is being whispered. Finally, when all three are back on stage, one of them proposes to “hold hands in the old way” (Beckett 1990: 355), which they do in silence. Again, the text refers to an absent
meaning, a history that is somehow 'behind' the situation on stage and again this origin remains absent, unknown to the spectator. Instead of making this origin present on stage, the text exposes its absence to the audience.

The staging by Mabou Mines paralleled this strategy at work in the text in its visual representation on stage. Instead of seeing the three actors physically present, the audience gradually realized that it was only seeing their ghostly reflections. A mirror, which was nearly the width of the stage, and was sunk slightly below platform level, angled back and upwards, reflected the images of performers who were actually located in a balcony above and behind the spectators (Fuchs 1996: 71).

The Mabou Mines piece presents a visualization of the common understanding of staging as the making present of something as given in the text. In that case, what was performed on stage was literally a mere reflection, emphasizing that what we as audience see is absent rather than present. What is seen on stage derives its meaning from making present something else, something that is in fact absent but represented on stage.

Ironically, Fuchs' own account of this particular staging provides a striking example of how this conception of staging is at work in what she thinks she sees. After she has explained how this performance undermines staging practices and exposes the assumptions underlying them, she praises the performance for making present a meaning she understands as originating in the authorial intention of Beckett. She concludes her description with the remark that:

Lee Breurer's staging frustrated traditional audience expectations of bodily presence and actor-audience contact, yet achieved through this bold stroke the spirit of the mystery and abstraction Beckett calls for in his notes to the play (Fuchs 1996: 71, my italics).

Hence, Fuchs' reading of the staging is precisely an example of the logocentrism at work in the traditional theatre, where the stage has been treated (like text in philosophy) as a transparent medium, that provides access to truth, logos, or a grounding concept inscribed by an author-creator.

A closer look at the Mabou Mines production, described by Fuchs, can help us to understand why exposing what is seen on stage as 'mere reflection' is in itself not enough to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence in the theatre. The spatial set-up of the Mabou Mines staging is similar to Plato's cave, one of the founding myths of Western metaphysics. In the Mabou Mines staging, the audience is tied to its place like the people in Plato's parable, and like them, they mistake the reflection seen on stage for the real thing, while the real thing is actually located above and behind their heads. As in Plato's cave, the staging exposes what is seen on stage as mere shadow, a Derridean absence of presence.

Plato's story of the cave however, does not undermine the metaphysics of presence. On the contrary, it supports this metaphysics. For there is a promise implied in Plato's story, this promise being that once we learn to look
in the right way, in the right direction, we will be able to distinguish the real from mere shadows. In Plato’s story, the unmasking of the shadows as shadows serves to teach the innocent viewer where to find the real thing. In the myth, the viewers learn to see things in (the right) perspective through the unmasking of another perspective as false. This unmasking then is a first step towards being led outside into full light of the sun.

Get the Picture! — Like the Beckett staging by Mabou Mines, the spatial set up of Kunzmann’s staging of Bildbeschreibung recalls Plato’s cave. In his staging, however, Kunzmann radicalizes the absence observed by Fuchs by leaving out the actor as well. At the same time, his staging made present someone else. Someone who usually remains in the dark both in Plato’s scenario and in the theatre, and this is the spectator. In Kunzmann’s installation, the spectator saw him or herself literally reflected in the mirror presented back to the spectator by the ‘performance.’

Kunzmann’s performance does not show some imaginary world given in the text, but literally a reflection of the text. His staging adds yet another layer to the description of a picture of a landscape, and turns the description of the picture into an image of a description. In this way, Kunzmann draws attention to the level of focalization usually overlooked in analyses of verbal texts: focalization as it is given in the visual display of the graphic signs on the page.

At first sight, the ‘performance,’ the mirror image of the text, looked like a printed text, inviting one to read it, and that is exactly what most visitors tried to do. They tried to read the mirrored text and moved closer to it, but the closer they got and the more they tried to focus on the text in front of them, the more their own shadow got in their way. Deciding it was impossible to read the text, they adopted different viewing attitudes, including different positions in the room. They attempted to see the ‘performance text’ as a visual composition and to find a place where their shadow would not interfere with it. The only way to do so was to avoid looking at the staging of the text altogether, and to turn around and face the text that was written on the wall behind them. This text, printed in white on black, was quite readable. At least, here one was not troubled by one’s own shadow.

But here too, positioning turned out to be a problem, albeit in a different way. Müller’s text consists of the description of an image. The point of view from which the image is seen, seems constantly to shift, which makes it difficult to imagine oneself in a particular viewing position in relation to the image. This is further complicated by the structure of the text. Müller’s five-page text is one long sentence, without full stops or capitals, which requires that the reader constantly relocate. The way Kunzmann presented the text, widely spaced on the wall, reinforced this characteristic of Müller’s text. The words were so spread out that it was difficult to keep track to the linear narrative they represented. As a result, the linearity of the text seemed to expand into a visual composition.
The installation evoked a constant tension between seeing from a detached and stable point of view marked by absence, and reading as a temporal and always partial interaction. This way, Kunzmann managed to stage the tension given in Müller's text between the Bild and the Beschreibung, yet without falling back into the all too familiar word-image opposition. By showing text and performance as both visual and verbal, he exposes the verbal and the visual as mutually intertwined in the verbal and visual behavior of an audience.

In Kunzmann's installation, the onlooker literally is the actor performing a choreo-graphical inscription in 'choral space' (Lehmann 1997). Seeing what this installation means, means literally to move through it and performing a choreo-graphical inscription mediated by the positions offered by the text. In the process, the spectator becomes the performer engaged in a process of (re)positioning him or herself. Seen in this way, the question "Wo ist der Mensch?" touched the very core of Kunzmann's staging, be it in ways perhaps not anticipated by the dramaturge who asked the question.

Furthermore, Kunzmann's staging shows reading not to be a passive following of something already given in the text, but as something driven (at least partially) by the spectator. His installation exposes telos as part of the intentional involvement of the spectator with what is seen. The behavior of the spectators as they try to avoid their own shadows, serves as a meaningful pointer and draws attention to the longing that drives them to seek a position marked by absence.

With their reading behavior, the spectators-as-actors performed precisely the choreography that Müller's text speaks of, namely the interaction between visual texts and seers. This account is a reading of an image seen, in which a seer actively tries to make sense of what he or she sees. The account can be read as an attempt to make sense of the image through interpretative procedures that aim at constructing a unitary point of view from where the image can be seen 'as it is,' that is, as an attempt to actively construct the tableau that the Bild does not automatically present. In Bildbeschreibung, trying to 'get the picture' means actively producing the duality of tableau and unitary point of view that is the foundation of representational thinking. The text testifies as to how this is done by means of interpreting what is seen in terms of telos and how the presuppositions, expectations and desires that are part of discourse are involved in this attempt at unification.

Bildbeschreibung also testifies to the failure of this attempt. Instead of a fulfillment of this Gnostic drive "the lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (de Certeau), the text ends with an Icarean fall into the landscape as the seer begins to recognize him or herself in various elements of the seen landscape. This Icarean fall results in a case of absorption more radical that that described by Diderot, for here absorption does not manifest itself in 'stepping inside' and taking up a position within the landscape represented, in order to see it from there. Rather, the 'death of character' here results in
the collapse of distance between seer and seen as the seer recognizes him or herself in various elements simultaneously.

**The Stage as Mirror** — Fischer-Lichte calls *Bildbeschreibung* an example of the shattered mirror that postmodern theatre presents to its spectators.

It consists of numerous disparate elements which, even as a whole, render no meaningful unit, can reveal no unifying image. The image reflected by postmodern theatre is one of many ‘Others:' “TO LIVE INSIDE A MIRROR, is the man dancing the step, I, my grave his face, I the woman with the wounded neck, right and left in the hands the split bird, blood on the mouth, I the bird, the one who shows the murderer the way into the night writing with my beak, I the frozen storm” (Fischer-Lichte 1985: 58).

Fischer-Lichte reminds us of Lacan’s account of subject formation through identification with an image seen. Lacan describes how a child identifies with an image in the mirror, an image that provides the child with a self-image as a coherent and unitary, rather than the confusing, fragmented experience of the self from inside (Lacan 1977: 1–7). In the Lacanian story, this identification results in a mixing up of ‘self,’ as experienced over here, and the image outside taken in as ‘self.’ This, then, gives rise to a jubilant moment of (mis)recognition of the self in the mirror image.

To identify with an image in a mirror is to identify the image seen in the mirror as ‘me,’ this ‘me’ being over here and seeing it. This image seen over there is then ‘taken in’ and becomes part of the self. However, this mistaking the image seen for the self does not mean that I imagine myself to be over there. Rather, I understand the image in the mirror as a reflection and confirmation of myself being over here. That is, identification with an image seen over there means taking up a position of a seer over here, the position from where the image is seen as unity.

In *Bildbeschreibung*, identification with the landscape seen does not result in a jubilant moment. The image of the landscape seen here does not present a tableau as Diderot requires, a tableau: “in which the parts work together to one end and form by their mutual correspondence a unity as real as that of the members of the body of an animal” (Diderot quoted Barthes 1977: 7). Instead, *Bildbeschreibung* testifies to the failure to bring all together as unity in correspondence to a unitary point of view. Instead of taking in the image in a way that would confirm a sense of self as unitary point of view, the ‘I’ seems to lose itself in the landscape seen, an experience that is perhaps better described by the Barthesian notion of *jouissance*.

Roland Barthes uses the term *jouissance* to describe the pleasure derived from what he called the writerly text, a text that presents an appeal to a reader to engage with it and to actively produce the text as what it is. Barthes opposes the writerly text to the readerly text, the type of text that does support the illusion of the text as a unity which is given rather than of actively produced by a reader. The readerly text keeps intact the duality of
the work as object versus the reader as subject. This duality is undermined by the writerly text, which results in the experience of *jouissance*.

In Barthes, *jouissance* and pleasure are opposed terms. Pleasure is linked to the cultural enjoyment of identity, to a homogenizing movement of the ego. *Jouissance* on the other hand, describes a radically violent pleasure that shatters cultural identity and evokes an experience of loss of self.\(^7\)

However, although the concept of *jouissance* as disintegration or loss of self might seem to suggest otherwise, writerly texts do not inaugurate the end of subjectivity or subjective mediation. The loss of subjectivity as experienced here is itself the effect of the text, mediated by the text, something a reader might experience through engagement with the text. Hence, the loss of self is an experience of a subject, not an end to subjectivity. Likewise, this experience is mediated by a text, and does not mean the end or absence of mediation. It is an effect or an experience that results from the interaction between text and reader, a reader who has gone through the mirror stage. This stage inaugurates a sense of self as unity, as well as a longing to overcome the individuation that is the result of this constitution of self. It is this subject to whom the writerly text appeals, a subject who, as Barthes describes it, is a "living contradiction": "a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall" (Barthes 1977: 21). The text that is *Bildbeschreibung* can be read as the expression of precisely such a living contradiction.

*Bildbeschreibung* testifies to the drive to construct a position where everything appears independent from the seer, a world objectively outstretched for the all-seeing disembodied floating eye, represented in the text by repeated references to the sun. "THE SUN is always there and TO ETERNITY" (Müller 1989: 97). The sun represents the point of view of the all seeing eye, the detached observer, who can see everything as it is from afar as the Cartesian disembodied subject. In metaphysical thinking from Plato to Descartes, and beyond, the sun appears as the giver of natural light, which is, as Derrida observes, understood to be the source of "the very opposition of appearing and disappearing [...], of day and night, of the visible and the invisible, of the present and the absent – all this was possible only under the sun" (Derrida quoted in Jay 1993: 509).

In his critique of vision in modern French thought, Martin Jay refers to Derrida's remarks on the metaphor of the sun in order to point out the way conceptions of vision and visibility are intertwined with notions of stability, sameness, and circularity for which the daily appearance of the sun stands as a symbol. However, as Derrida (and Jay) also point out, the metaphor of the sun is an ambiguous one, for the sun can appear as a source of illumination as well as blindness; blindness to difference, to otherness and to temporality as they are excluded in the Gnostic drive to be a viewpoint and nothing more.\(^8\)

Kunzmann's staging of *Bildbeschreibung* shows this blindness as a blindness of the self as the locus of looking. The mirror that is his 'performance' does not reflect an 'other,' but the self. Or perhaps better,
the performance shows the seer self as an other, as the other of 'just looking.' In this way, the installation undermines the duality of seer and seen as it underlies representational thinking, and does so by retheatricalizing the relationship between seer and seen. The installation exposes the close relationship between representational thinking, the theatrical apparatus, and the Lacanian psychoanalytical account of the relationship between vision, subjectivity, and embodiment. Kunzmann's installation, the 'performance' of Müller's text, literally presents a mirror to the spectator. In this mirror, the spectator appears as the blind spot in every reading. The seer him or herself is shown to be the blind spot that prohibits the type of view promised by perspectival painting, a total view from nowhere where the spectator is marked by absence. Only as long as we remain blind to the ways this blind spot is involved in what seems to be 'just there to be seen,' what is seen can appear as 'just there' independent of a seer.


3 — Lehmann (1997) makes a similar observation with respect to the post-dramatic theatre:

The new textuality of the theatre (or the textuality of the new theatre) produces a peculiar shift of axis: it does not probe the traditional centre of theatre-discourse, the dialogue with its implications of dialectic order and intersubjectivity. However, the dialogue does not simply vanish. [...] while the dialogue on stage is fading, dialogue returns with a new emphasis between stage and audience (Lehmann 1997: 58).
4 — In this tradition, the human voice — as Christopher Norris explicating Derrida explains — "becomes a metaphor of truth [...] a source of self-present 'living' speech as opposed to the secondary, lifeless emanations of writing" (Norris quoted in Fuchs 1996: 73). In speech, there is (supposedly) an intimate link between sound and sense, an inward and immediate realization of meaning, "which yields itself up without reserve to perfect, transparent understanding. Writing, on the contrary, destroys this ideal of self-presence" (Norris, quoted in Fuchs 1996: 73). According to Derrida, however, writing has 'always already' intruded on speech. This means that there can be no assurance of the bond between thought and speech, no single point of origin, and no such thing as a self-same presence.


6 — It is interesting in this respect that artist Stefan Kunzmann started the work on his 'staging' of Müller's text with an attempt at reconstructing the image from the text, but found it impossible to do so.

7 — For the distinction between readerly and writerly texts, see Roland Barthes, S/Z, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974. For the notion of jouissance, see Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text. Trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill & Wang, 1975. This edition contains a foreword by Richard Howard in which he discusses the notions of pleasure and jouissance. Susan Foster (1986) uses Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly, or between works and texts, as a starting point for a model for the analysis of contemporary dance as texts that afford the reader the opportunity to participate in the creation of meaning.
