

The Discursive Formation of Theatricality as a Critical Concept¹

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Abstract

The metaphor of theatricality has, in recent years, been recuperated as a key term in the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies. This scholarly “re-valuing” of the term arises, in part, as a reaction to performativity, a term that has achieved a certain discursive dominance in the field. Rather than taking sides in favour of one or the other, in this essay I argue that theatricality is critically formed by this struggle. Historically, theatrical metaphors have been employed in anti-theatricalist discourses to suggest ideas of inauthenticity and deception; most famously, in art critic Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” (1998). Yet, for the European avantgarde, theatricality was the “essence” of theatre. What appears to be a contradiction seems less so when it is understood that “truth” in these instances lies not in what is claimed for theatricality, but in the juxtaposition of it and another term. This essay analyses how the metaphor of theatricality is flexibly applied in the service of particular arguments as either ally or foe. At stake is the assertion of interpretive authority that allows only one interpretation in the struggle for discursive dominance.

Die Theatralitätsmetapher hat in den vergangenen Jahren eine Schlüsselstellung innerhalb der Forschung zu Theater und Performance eingenommen. Der vorliegende Beitrag möchte den Theatralitätsbegriff wieder aufwerten - als Reaktion auf die Diskursdominanz des konkurrierenden Terminus ‚Performativität‘ (bzw. ‚Performanz‘). Ohne für die eine oder andere Position Partei zu ergreifen, zeige ich in diesem Artikel, dass die Semantik von ‚Theatralität‘ wesentlich durch diese Debatte geprägt wird. Theatralitätsmetaphern wurden in der Vergangenheit meist in theatralitätskritischen Diskursen verwendet, um fehlende Authentizität zu bezeichnen - am bekanntesten in der Kunstkritik von Michael Fried: “Art and Objecthood” (1998). Und doch stellte Theatralität für die europäische Avantgarde die “Essenz” des Theaters dar. Der scheinbare Widerspruch löst sich auf, wenn man versteht, dass die „Wahrheit“ hier nicht in dem liegt, was als ‚Theatralität‘ behauptet wird, sondern in der Gegenüberstellung von Theatralität und einem anderen Begriff. Dieser Essay beleuchtet, inwiefern die Theatralitätsmetapher für unterschiedliche Argumentationen sehr flexibel zu handhaben ist, ob als Verbündeter oder als Feind. Zur Debatte steht die Behauptung einer Deutungsautorität, die nur eine Interpretation im Kampf um diskursive Dominanz zulässt.

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0. The discursive formation of theatricality as a critical concept

In 1977, at the Sydney Sculpture centre, the Australian performance artist Mike Parr hacked off his left arm with a meat cleaver.

Nearly thirty years later he recalled in an interview with *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist, Angela Bennie: “everyone was all relaxed and they were all talking amongst themselves . . . I came out, sat down in front of them and began to hack away” (Bennie 2006:4). To those who are unfamiliar with Parr, and with this particular work, he was born with a deformed left arm and the arm being amputated was, in fact, a prosthetic arm which the artist had “stuffed with blood and guts [which] all went everywhere” (ibid). This illusion of self-mutilation was devastatingly effective and Parr claims that young artists still ask him if he had really chopped his arm off for Art; to which he replies: “Of course I did!” (ibid.).

Apart from being a great punch line, Parr’s claim to dismemberment in the cause of Art furthers the traditional narrative of the charismatic artist giving his (and generally the artist is male) all for Art. While Parr’s response could simply be that of an older artist gently satirising the dreams and aspirations of a neophyte; his next comments, reportedly delivered with “emotion in his voice and on his face”, suggests that a rigorous and somewhat masochistic commitment to Art is exactly what is required: performance art, he says, is taking a task to its limits.

“And that’s what I do. Performance in the theatre, that is simulation; performance art[,] that is performing a task to the end of one’s endurance, both mine and the audience’s . . . theatre is always simulation; performance art is always a drastic version of the real” (2006:5).

Parr is apparently oblivious to the irony of this statement in the light of his early piece of *grand guignol* theatre that used theatrical “simulation” to shocking effect, and through his casual anti-theatricality buys into a metaphysical paradigm that, while ancient, has nonetheless been vigorously challenged in recent years.²

² Jonas Barish’s *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (1981) is the seminal work that provides a genealogy of anti-theatricality since ancient times. More recently Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner edited an issue of *Modern Drama*, on the twentieth anniversary of Barish’s book, that

Parr invokes theatre not because he is offering a critique of it as an art form, but because it provides a short hand metaphor that enables him to assert, in contrast, the ontological status of his own art which is: “a drastic version of the real” (ibid). It is not, however, my intention to challenge Parr’s assertions nor leap to the defence of theatre; rather, I want to use his statements as the starting point to explore this discourse that uses the metaphor of theatricality to further what are at times quite contradictory interpretive positions. The anti-theatricality of Parr’s interpretation of his work, which directly contradicts the deliberately staged nature of much of it, reinforces how metaphors of theatricality have a different economy of value to actual theatrical practices. Transformed into the realm of metaphor theatricality becomes a multivalent sign that is used to assert the truth value of something else. As such it carries the Platonic hostility to mimesis, a prejudice that was vigorously re-asserted within Modernist Art by Michael Fried in 1967 and, as a consequence, theatricality is equated with inauthenticity in certain artistic circles. Yet Fried, too, separated certain theatrical practices – those of European avantgardists such as Brecht and Artaud – from the metaphor of theatricality that he used to condemn “literalist” art in his essay “Art and Objecthood” (1967).

Within theatre and performance studies the term has a similar multivalency; yet, the interpretational convolutions involved in its use differ from the straight Platonic anti-theatricalism of the visual arts. The European avantgarde in the first decades of the twentieth century saw theatricality as a metaphor for life itself; this was particularly the case for Russian theatre artists such as Evreinov and Meyerhold. From the inheritance of the European avantgarde came Eugenio Barba’s theatre anthropology and the anthropology of performance advocated by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. Unlike the avantgarde, Schechner writes within a theoretical paradigm transformed by the discourses of postmodernism, European poststructuralism, Indian and South American post-colonialism. Essentialist ideas such as Evreinov’s notion of a “pre-aesthetic” theatrical instinct (1927:24), therefore, are viewed with suspicion. Nonetheless, Schechner still manages to construct an argument for

explored notions of theatricality and anti-theatricality in the context of modernism (Ackerman, 2001); (Puchner, 2001). See also Puchner’s book *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (2002).

performance based on a dichotomy of the illusory and the real that encompasses both postmodern contingency and modernist authenticity. Although Schechner avoids writing about performance in terms of essence, he nonetheless ascribes to it a set of qualities similar to those that European theatricalists identified as the essence of theatre. How then do we begin to understand the paradox of the same critical terms being employed in support of opposing arguments?

In the opening essay to *Institution and Interpretation* (1987), Samuel Weber re-reads Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1978) in which he deconstructs the process of interpretation in Western thought. Weber takes Derrida's idea of a division between "affirmative" interpretation oriented towards process, play and deferral of meaning, and "nostalgic" teleological interpretation that aims to uncover an ultimate Truth, and argues that Western discourse is characterised by a battle for supremacy between these two interpretive positions. Parr's positioning of theatricality, in the above anecdote, reflects this struggle of interpretations and a desire to establish one interpretation with the ultimate, "drastic", status of the Truth. Theatricality, formed through such discourses, becomes a cipher that, in nostalgic interpretation, comes to stand for inauthenticity, hence reinforcing the authenticity of something else; or else, when used for affirmative interpretation, stands for contingency, plurality, process and play. In the discussion that follows, I will illuminate some of the curious claims made in the name of, or against, the metaphor of theatricality in order to reveal how discourse has formed it as a critical term. I will argue that by positioning the term as ambiguous, various commentators attempt to "de-theatre" it so that it can serve other purposes.

1. Theatricality as an empty value

Parr's statements are the latest in a long discursive tradition in the visual arts that distinguishes between those art works that are deemed to approach an idealised Real and those judged to be less real, inauthentic, and tending towards simulation. Indeed, concern with the status of the Real has pre-occupied Western philosophy from Plato to Derrida. The art critic Michael Fried, in the frequently cited "Art and Objecthood" (1967), argued for the purity of modernist art against minimalism (what Fried termed "literalism").

Although Fried's argument was with a particular genre of painting and sculpture, the self-conscious and intersubjective effects he perceived in certain minimalist art works expressed an aesthetic consciousness, or value, that he described as theatrical. This re-framing of theatricality as a value, rather than simply describing stagecraft or things to do with the theatre, Martin Puchner argues has a genealogy in modernism that stretches back to Wagner for whom it was a value that "must be either rejected or embraced" (2002:31). Within the field of modern art, then, according to Fried, theatricality was a value that must be categorically rejected. What is important here is not to question Fried's choice of metaphor, but to notice how theatricality enabled him to establish the terms of his argument: "theater and theatricality are at war today; not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such" (Fried 1998:163).

To an art historian it may seem bizarre to find a common purpose in the statements of Parr, a performance/conceptual artist, and Fried who, as a champion of artistic modernism, is seemingly the antithesis to Parr. Nevertheless, if we compare Fried's writing in "Art and Objecthood" with Parr's statements nearly forty years later, we can see that both utilise metaphors of theatricality to reinforce the truth claims of something else (modernist art for the former, and performance art for the latter). Despite being on opposing sides in the art world, Parr and Fried both deploy an identical interpretive strategy in order to reinforce the truth claims each makes for the art he wishes to promote. Theatricality, here, signifies emptiness (in the sense of being morally void), deception, and superficiality – everything which the art promoted by Fried and Parr, is not.

However the putative emptiness of theatricality as Fried uses it in "Art and Objecthood" (1967) (and I suggest Parr's use is the same) has a greater role in defining the terms of the argument itself. As Rosalind Krauss suggests, for Fried theatricality functioned as

"A nonthing, an emptiness, a void. Theater is thus an empty term whose role it is to set up a system founded upon the opposition between itself and another term" (Krauss 1987:62-63).

The significance of this arrangement, Krauss argues, is that "Art and Objecthood" (1967) established a discourse wherein an asymmetrical, value-based opposition is created between theatricality and nontheatricality:

“Theater as the empty, unlocatable, amorphous member of the pair is bad, while the nontheatrical rises within the pair to be coded as good” (Krauss 1987:63). Theatricality, because it is usefully “empty”, “unlocatable” and “amorphous” can be deployed in Fried’s discourse as a negative value against which, in contrast, he is able to position modernist art as full, defined and situated.

If we use Krauss’s analysis of Fried, together with how Parr frames his own art, we notice that both discursively position theatricality in order to ontologically validate something else. This is a familiar anti-theatrical strategy the genealogy of which reaches back to Plato (Barish 1981); but it is also a common interpretational strategy in Western epistemology, as we shall see shortly. In the meantime, if we direct our attention to the *form* of such a discourse, and try to avoid taking sides in respect of it (which is an effect of the discourse itself), we notice that remarkably similar distinctions are also made between “good” and “bad” theatricality by one who, unlike Fried and Parr, is ostensibly its *advocate*. Theatricality, as the following example illustrates, is again deployed in a binary opposition of terms although this time, it is positively valued.

In an oft-quoted example from his essay “Baudelaire’s Theater”, Roland Barthes makes the definitive claim that theatricality is “theater-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument” (1972:26). Such a claim introduces the notion, promoted by the European avant-garde since the beginning of the twentieth century, that the “essence” of theatre was to be found not in the written text but in the non-textual elements of production. Once again, I am not about to dispute the “truth” or otherwise of this claim, but if we examine the argument of “Baudelaire’s Theater”, beyond the sound-bite of Barthes’s opening sentence, we begin to see that he, too, is utilising an interpretational strategy that shares the hallmarks of that deployed by Fried and Parr.

It becomes quickly apparent that Barthes does not intend to discuss live performance events nor even the texts for such. Instead Barthes uses theatricality as a critical trope in his analysis of Baudelaire’s writing that manifests in the following statements: “Baudelaire put his theater everywhere except, precisely, in his projects for plays” (1972:28); “Baudelaire’s theatricality evades his theater in order to spread through the rest of his work” (ibid); his

work “testif[ied] to the . . . horror of theater” (ibid:29) and, even more tellingly, “Baudelaire had to protect theatricality from theater” (ibid:30).³ These statements reveal that in his analysis of Baudelaire’s “theatre” Barthes juxtaposes what he sees as the essential nature of one version of theatricality against the “horror” of another. Despite the semantic reversal (“theatre” is the opposite of “essential” theatricality), the discourse produced by Barthes nevertheless mirrors that of Fried and Parr; and despite the anti-theatricalist bias of the latter, the form of their arguments is exactly the same.

Barthes, like Fried and Parr, assigns a value to theatricality and theatre that allows him to produce a discourse founded on an asymmetrical logic based on the opposition of two ideas: an essential theatricality versus a “horrifying” theatre. However, if we consider these statements about theatricality in terms of the discourses being produced, we can evade what Krauss calls the “ethical vector” of terms used to describe “one’s own position [as] good” and “someone else’s” as bad (1987:63), and begin to see that behind the statements of Parr, Fried, and Barthes is a struggle for interpretive domination, the logic of which sets the terms within which such arguments can occur.

2. A struggle for interpretive domination

Samuel Weber (1987) in his re-reading of Derrida’s (1978) interpretation of interpretation through Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* describes what he sees as the contest or battle between “affirmative” and “nostalgic” interpretation (Derrida 1978:292 and cited in Weber 1987:3). “Beyond the ‘irreducible difference’ of nostalgic and affirmative interpretations,” writes Weber,

“there is a third version, interpreting interpretation as a struggle to overwhelm and dislodge an already existing dominant interpretation and thus to establish its own authority” (1987:5).

This establishment of interpretive authority is what Foucault terms a “specific [effect] of power attached to the true” (1980:132); it allows Parr to refer to his work as expressing a “drastic version of the real” (Bennie 2006:5), and it enables Fried to claim in support of modernist art that “presentness is grace”

³ Such protection was apparently required because of what Fried sees as “theater’s profound hostility to the arts” and the “survival” of the latter “has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater” (1998:160,163).

(1998:168). Against such authority, theatricality is cast as interpretively subordinate and, lacking the truth value of its opposing term, is assigned qualities that include emptiness, deceit, insincerity, moribund tradition, or meretricious-ness. However, when someone such as Barthes assigns interpretive authority to theatricality, its qualities of process, plurality, artifice, and playfulness are re-valued to reinforce its particular truth status. Why this is so and how such disparate values can coalesce in the same term is a function of the interpretive struggle identified by Weber. It is the logic of the struggle, the battle to dominate and avoid domination, which underpins the discursive uses of theatricality discussed so far and which produces some of the curious effects discussed below.

In the epigraph to “Art and Objecthood” Fried quotes from Perry Miller’s biography of the eighteenth century puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards:

“The abiding assurance is that ‘we every moment see the same proof of a god as we should have seen if we had seen him create the world at first’” (1998:148).

Here the nostalgic fantasy of origin expressed transcendentally through Art that forms the foundation to Fried’s essay is made explicit. Fried’s sad and nostalgic yearning for a transcendent truth appears in the binary opposition he seeks to establish between theatrical and self-conscious “presence”, and immanent “presentness” in which “*at every moment*”, he writes, “*the work itself is wholly manifest*” (1998:167). Such interpretation Derrida describes as “saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rosseauistic”, interpretation that seeks “to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or origin which escapes play and the order of the sign” (1978:292).

A similar yearning for an ultimate truth or origin suffused, also, the early theatrical avant-garde’s new, positively valued, interpretation of theatricality, here elevated by Evreinov in *The Theatre in Life* (1927) to the status of a “pre-aesthetic” instinct:

“The art of the theatre is pre-aesthetic, and not aesthetic, for the simple reason that *transformation*, which is after all the essence of all theatrical art, is more primitive and more easily attainable than *formation*, which is the essence of aesthetic arts. And I believe that in the early history of human culture theatricality served a sort of pre-art. It is exactly in the feeling of theatricality, and not in the

utilitarianism, of the primitive man that one must look for the beginning of all arts” (1927:24).

What is constructed in Evreinov’s interpretation is a metaphysics in which The Theatre appears as an ahistorical Form, that manifests in specific cultural contexts, with shifting degrees of verisimilitude to the *ur*-Theatre, to which all theatres must aspire. The particular claims being made here are for a pure theatricality the moral worth of which rests on its status as an expression of origin.

Yet, the efforts of Eugenio Barba’s theatre anthropology notwithstanding, contemporary scholarship, post-Derrida, rejects the onto-theological yearning for an origin. To desire to do so is to align oneself with a reactionary interpretive position; so, contemporary theorists have adopted an opposing interpretational strategy to nostalgia: affirmative interpretation. This strategy rejects the search for an origin or ultimate Truth and instead interprets reality as composed, contingent and intersubjective; reality is, therefore, recalling the qualities mentioned above, theatrical. Although lacking the nostalgia of Fried or Evreinov, a metaphysics of the Real just as surely underpins interpretation that valorises the illusory and contingent.

This rhetorical sleight-of-hand emerges in a series of statements made by performance and theatre scholars over the last twenty-five years. In a 1982 essay examining performance art from a theatre studies perspective, Josette Féral, who has written extensively on theatricality, explicitly adopted an affirmative interpretational strategy:

“Theatricality is made of this endless play and of these continuous displacements of the position of desire, in other words, of the position of the subject in process with an imaginary constructive space” (1982:177).

Many of the buzz-words that signal affirmative interpretation are contained in this statement: “displacement”, “desire”, “endless play”, “process”, “imaginary constructive space”. Although Féral’s use of theatricality here did not express a foundational state of being, unlike Evreinov’s, nonetheless her use of the term was just as ontological.

In this she was not alone. Richard Schechner, in his seminal *Performance Theory*, used a similar rhetoric and even managed to claim for performance a truth status that was both contingent *and* essentialist. “Performances”, wrote

Schechner, “are make-believe, in play for fun. Or, as Victor Turner said, in the subjunctive mood, the famous ‘as if’” (1988 [1977]: xiv). Having established the contingency of “performances”, Schechner was now in a position to make his ontological truth claim. Within such discourses, truth claims are given weight by invoking an ancient authority; thus, Schechner invoked the interpretive authority of “Sanskrit aesthetics” for which performances are “*lilas* – sports, play – and *maya*, illusory” as is life itself (ibid). This led him to triumphantly reason, in a mode worthy of Evreinov, that “performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more ‘truthful’, more ‘real’ than ordinary experience” (ibid). Peggy Phelan, Schechner’s colleague at New York University, returns to this theme when she rhetorically asks “if the diversity of human culture continually showed a *persistent theatricality*, could performance be a universal expression of human signification, akin to language?” (1998:3) [emphasis added]. Suddenly, the gap between “a universal expression of human signification, akin to language” (ibid) and Evreinov’s pre-aesthetic instinct seems very small indeed.

3. The revaluation of theatricality

These interpretations of theatricality ostensibly reject the nostalgia of the avantgarde (although in their universalism they are demonstrably inflected by it) and instead express an interpretational strategy that Derrida posits as an alternative “no longer oriented toward the origin” but which “affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism” (1978:292). This latter interpretive distinction, Weber suggests, appears to be celebrated in Derrida’s text; it is revolutionary or at least evolutionary and it moves us towards emancipation, unlike nostalgic interpretation, which seeks to return us to a prelapsarian state of grace. This binary logic offers a clear set of political affiliations: on the one hand, the forces of vivacious animated progress pitted against those of hoary conservatism on the other. Against this logic we can map the competing claims made for theatre and theatricality.

If, following Weber and Derrida, theatricality is caught up in a struggle of interpretations, and enlisted to fight on both sides, how can it be deployed in opposing positions? In this case, defining theatricality as empty, amorphous, unlocatable, and useful only in juxtaposition with something else, is a common strategy. As Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis observe in their

introduction to their collection *Theatricality*: “apparently the concept [theatricality] is comprehensive of all meanings yet empty of all specific sense” (2003:1). Strategically positioned as ambiguous, theatricality can be nostalgic when it refers to theatre as an originary Form *and* it can be affirmative when interpreted as semiotically playful and not concerned with producing ultimate meaning. Theatricality functions, as Shannon Jackson observes in the same volume, “ubiquitously and contradictorily” because of its “flexible essentialism” (2003:189). Theatricality, thus, provides a free pass through the discursive battle ground by offering itself as a cipher upon which a range of, often conflicting, interpretations are inscribed.

Theatricality’s flexible essentialism creates some curious effects; for example, in the 2002 collection “The Rise and Fall of Theatricality”, published in the journal *SubStance*, the editor, Josette Féral again, claims that

“The notion of theatricality is indeed not only a *tricky one* but also one that replays the whole history of theatre. It is precisely because the notion of theatre has changed that we must constantly redefine the notion of theatricality” (2002:4) [emphasis added].

In her introduction, Féral lays out the framework within which the essays in the collection are to be read – her use of “tricky” provides a clue to her interpretive strategy. Yet, despite the putative “trickiness” of theatricality, it nonetheless remains a value that Féral associates with a historically changing notion of theatre. The apparent indeterminacy of the concept of theatricality is, paradoxically, counterpointed by Féral’s assumption that, notwithstanding the lack of an explicit consensus, everybody in the collection is in fact writing about the same thing. That “same thing”, whilst remaining indeterminate and unstated, can still be written about by Féral’s community of interpreters because they share a common understanding of “it” (whatever “it” is).

The *SubStance* collection suffers from the same strengths and weaknesses as does Postlewait and Davis’s *Theatricality* (2003). While individual works within the collections deal thoughtfully with differing ideas of theatricality (and others simply deploy it as the metaphor *du jour*) it is in the editors’ attempts to frame each collection that they start to run into the kinds of problems described in the previous paragraph. And, as is typical, they seek to have a bet each way, as Postlewait and Davis write:

“For better or worse, the idea of theatricality is quite evocative in its descriptive power yet often open-ended and even contradictory in its associative implications. It is not, however, meaningless, and it offers, at least potentially, a protean flexibility that lends richness to both historical study and theoretical analysis. Of course, as we noted initially, it can mean too many things, and thus nothing. If it serves too many agendas, it is in danger of losing its hold on both the world of theatre and the world as theatre” (2003:4).

If we apply Weber’s analysis of interpretation to Féral’s introduction, however, we discover that she is attempting to carve out a position for the writers who are engaged, whether explicitly or not, in a struggle for domination between opposing interpretations. In asking: “is theatricality . . . still a pertinent concept compared to performativity, which has overshadowed it in the last 15 years” (2002:3) we reach the heart of the matter, at least as far as Féral is concerned. The recent struggles over the term “performativity” had, in a real sense, prevailed and succeeded in consigning theatricality to the position of the negative against which “performativity” was now juxtaposed as a positive term. In a field of disciplinary contest this created, as Shannon Jackson notes, a certain disciplinary anxiety arising from the struggle: “For theatre scholars, the relation between theatricality and performativity is more pressing, and a cause for defensiveness, in a theoretical context where the latter term has intellectual currency” (2003:33). In the logic of this struggle, to be affiliated with theatre was to be associated with a conservative position (and also the trivial, the feminised and the irrelevant).⁴

By deploying theatricality as a critical concept, the discourse of theatre is reconfigured and reclaimed. No longer referring to hoary old theatre, instead, by drawing on certain anthropological and sociological texts, the term is elevated or, rather, *re-valued*, particularly in Féral’s writings, to stand as a foundational concept; one which, affirmatively, “is only graspable as a process” and within which the “permanent movement between meaning and

⁴ Stephen J. Bottoms perceptively argues the gendered bias that allows theatricality to be repositioned as the Other to performance: “To act, to play a part, to dress up in tights is not properly manly, entailing as it does the ‘unnatural’ construction of a presentational artifice (such ostentation being traditionally assumed to be more ‘naturally’ the preserve of women). To be involved with theatre is – ergo – to be feminized, if not downright effeminate” (2003:176).

its displacement, between the same and the different, alterity arises from the heart of sameness, and theatricality is born” (2002:12).

How Féral has framed the 2002 *SubStance* collection re-positions an idea of theatre, through the metaphor of theatricality, as a foundational concept in order to assert its primacy in an interpretive struggle with the notion of performativity. Each resists nostalgic interpretation and claims its place on the cutting edge of affirmative interpretation while, at the same time, hinting at a prior claim to authenticity (theatricality, for Féral is “born”). Weber shows that the logic of such interpretations owes less to the truth claims of either interpretation but, rather, reflects a struggle to impose a set of ideas and, also, a battle to impose a logic that determines the possibility of thinking certain ideas and not others.

These interpretational strategies are not, of course, confined to discussions of theatricality only. Yet in the discursive formation of the term as a critical concept, the tension between both interpretational strategies emerges and this accounts for these somewhat schizophrenic definitions of theatricality. The logic of the discourse will demand that we adopt a position either for or against theatricality, but we must resist doing so in order to interrogate the terms in which particular arguments are couched. Rather than enter into debates concerning art versus theatre, theatricality versus performativity, or reality versus (theatrical) simulation, and attempt to assert a “truth” — contingent or otherwise — for the ideas clustered under the umbrella of theatricality; it is better that we critically appraise just how metaphors of theatre and theatricality are used in a particular argument and for what ends. Ultimately, such appraisal will lead us to discover, like Nietzsche did with the Judeo-Christian and Platonic tradition, that genealogies of interpretation, concealed as Truth, Being or Subject, succeed in establishing their “own authority and driving all competitors from the field” (Weber 1987:5).

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