

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 08 – General

Cécile Guédon

Abstract Shadows: An Aesthetics of the General

<http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue08>

© Cécile Guédon / Static / London Consortium / February 2009

STATIC is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Tate. Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The London Consortium – <http://www.londonconsortium.com>
Architectural Association – <http://www.aaschool.ac.uk>
Birkbeck College (University of London) – <http://www.bbk.ac.uk>
Institute of Contemporary Arts – <http://www.bbk.ac.uk>
Science Museum – <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk>
Tate – <http://www.tate.org.uk>

This paper intends to reflect upon the polarity general-particular in terms of aesthetics. It seems at first glance that the propensity towards particularisation lies at the heart of the narrating technique. Leaning towards the particular mirrors the principle of world-making inherent to the story-telling process: being particular means proceeding successfully to the individuation of characters, carving ideas or impressions into distinct antagonising agents, gradually sketching *personae* by giving those forces a name, a face, a voice, a tone and a cohesive plot. The narration only takes an intelligible, actualized shape by means of an accumulation of details, particularizations, localisations and temporalisations into a sequence of events whose unfolding constitutes the very dynamics of the narrative. Besides, not only is particularisation the condition of possibility for the narrative to be told and coherently designed, it is also the corollary possibility for the reader, listener or viewer's identification with the protagonists in the outlined or laid-out situation. In other words, mimesis relies on the successful rendering of a series of particulars; it governs narration at both ends, from demiurgic conception to the receiver's engagement with the fiction or her identification with the protagonist, relying heavily on the degree of specification of the distinctive elements of the plot.

Early Modernism disturbs this pattern familiar to mimetic trends, whether programmatically labelled under the name of Naturalism or *Verismo* for the novel, or Realism for the visual arts and the theatre at the end of the nineteenth century. *Fin-de-siècle* Symbolism anticipated the shift, leaving aside any desire of seeking truth-like accuracy, striving instead to represent elusive material, perceived as captive of traditional moulds, in non-conventional forms. The aggravation of the Symbolist tendency into the ever-spreading phenomenon of abstraction at the beginning of the twentieth century does converge, I will argue, with a common aspiration to the suggestive possibilities of the un-specific. By means of stylisation of form, or what will be later seen as utter depersonalisation, the Modernist discourse bends itself to the arch of the universal. It no longer requires of its readers to experience a subjective identification with the fictional traits they are presented with by means of particularisation – identification is from then on designed to be triggered and sustained through rigorous generalisation.

On the one hand, abstraction means economy of fictional devices, sparseness of details and directness of representation, inasmuch as the narrator does away with the fictional figure which traditionally supports the depicted emotions, filtering the narrator's voice; on the other, the narrator himself or herself recedes to the background, claiming a straightforward presentation of raw, lived material and a subsequent dissolution of the notion of authorship. Simplicity of apparatus or poverty of means entails an obfuscation of the author's presence: abstraction is another way of depersonalizing aesthetics and thereby endowing art with the defining qualities of the general. This form of destitution from the earthy, tangible richness of the particular has another consequence. Modernist's strategy of deprivation can be seen most clearly in its extensive use of the non-verbal or the non-articulate in modernist theatre – voices, gestures, silence are used against their grain, that is not to convey characterisations or to portray plotted

emotions any longer, but rather, to register depersonalised possibilities of expression, representing conceptual notions with a greater force.

My proposition is as follows: abstraction concretely stands for an aesthetic of the general; its defining feature is the stylised abstract shadow, implicit and generative model for theatrical experimentations at the turn of the twentieth century. I suggest tracing the stylisation of the human figure into its abstract shadow in Loie Fuller's silent performances, Maurice Maeterlinck's speechless theatre, and William Butler Yeats' abstract dancers: from veiled silhouettes, human reflections or puppets, to masked marionettes.

Veiled Silhouettes

For the first time depersonalisation appeared in Stéphane Mallarmé's writings as a crucial necessity in order to achieve a modernist poetics. Mallarmé was enraptured by the poetic manifestation of dance, at the occasion of the performances of modern dance's first pioneer, Loie Fuller, in 1892.

The principle of Loie Fuller's dance was to put on stage her own body wrapped up in white veils, displaying alternately slow and rapid gestures, with a complex electric-lighting system, in complete silence. Her radical breakthrough consisted in restricting dance to the mere representation of arabesque, sign-curved movements, leaving the audience in the uncertainty of their illustrative purpose – she persistently claimed to be uniquely concerned with suggestion. In 1891, she created this new form of performance by chance, as she tripped over an oversized costume of a nurse upon her entrance on the stage in the comedy *Quack Medical Doctor*. This gesture, born unintentionally, cut out from of any context of enunciation, could be seen as a stammering step; and yet surprisingly, according to Fuller, it created reactions of enormous interest mixed with bewilderment in the audience. Was the wavering form described by the white sheets a butterfly? Or a snake? Or some fragile volutes of smoke? (Fuller 1913: 28; 31). Fuller decided to master this new dancing technique and to call her sinusoidal evolutions "Serpentine Dance", and within a year became internationally known for this typically *Jugendstil* or *Art Nouveau* aesthetic statement. The S-shape her arms described was an endless variation on the motif of the thyrsus, a play on forms following the lines of the arabesque. More importantly, her dance relied on an exaggeration of her contours, or an aggrandizement of the human silhouette thanks to an astute and illusionistic combination of veils and wooden sticks. At the core of Loie Fuller's performing apparatus lies the successful dissolution of the human figure into its stylized form: the dancer becomes a veiled silhouette.

It is therefore with awe and wonder that Mallarmé set out to define the aesthetic stakes in Fuller's choreography, as she seemed to embody miraculously on the stage of Les Folies Bergères the foundations of his own 'modern' poetics: Fuller provided Mallarmé with the full realization of his desire for abstract and impersonal composition.

Specifically, the dancer is *not a woman who dances* for these combined reasons: *she is not a woman*, but a metaphor summing up one of the elementary aspects of our form – sword, cup, flower, etc.; and *she does not dance*, suggesting, through the miracle of shortcuts and bounds,

with a corporal writing what it would take paragraphs of prose, in dialogue and description, to express. She is a poem set free of any scribe's apparatus (Mallarmé 2001: 108-113).

This passage marks a milestone in dance criticism: Mallarmé is himself a pioneer in the analytical effort to seize dance's specificity. His interest in dance is nonetheless limited to its capacity for abstract representation – and his admiration for the dancer, restricted to her self-effacing technique. Stéphane Mallarmé delights in Loie Fuller's depersonalisation. Abstracting herself from her particulars – 'a woman who dances' – to become an emblem, a pure sign and an abstract symbol, not only is she a metaphor *in absentia*, standing for 'elementary aspects' she geometrically synthesises ('summing up') by means of the shapes she takes on, she is also a metaphor that is being construed *in her own absence*: her 'corporal writing' is only enabled by her disappearance as a first-person subject. Hints of eroticism, brought about by the oblique technique of veiling and suggesting the body's presence, are subdued by Loie Fuller's destitution of her sense of her own self whilst exhibiting arms or legs in a stylized fashion. Though Fuller scandalously claimed to dance naked apart for the veils wrapped around her, Mallarmé describes her legs as bearing a meaning anything but specific or 'personal'. They are to be reckoned with as 'a direct instrument for ideas', a straightforward means to access knowledge and concepts: 'La presque nudité montre, pour tout, les jambes – sous quelque signification autre que personnelle, comme un instrument direct d'idée'. ('The almost complete nudity, altogether, only shows the legs – under a different sort of meaning than one which would be personal, rather, one that is comparable to a direct instrument for ideas') (Mallarmé 1945: 308; my translation). Frank Kermode understands the phenomenon of depersonalisation that is at work in Mallarmé's analysis of Loie Fuller's veiled silhouette in terms of mechanisation, suggesting that 'dancers are always striving to become, like poems, machines for producing poetic states' (Kermode 1983: 159).¹ We will see how this strand of thought is then accentuated with Maeterlinck's conception of the actors as marionettes and Yeats' exploitation of the masked figure.

Fuller, by devising performances thoroughly emptied out of narrative specificity, brought radical novelty to the fore. Modern dance was to expand in the directions of her 'Serpentine Dances': it was to become more and more abstract, combining an aesthetics of light with an aesthetics of silence. Firstly, Loie Fuller's experimentations with on stage-lighting effects remarkably anticipate Edward Gordon Craig's and Adolphe Appia's theories for the new theatre. From the inception of her 'Serpentine Dance' she resolutely did away with the realist or illusionist setting and stripped the stage bare of any contextualizing decoration: instead she used the reflections of numerous mirrors and complex lightings coming from back-stage sources; and then went further in that direction in 1922 with a performance titled 'The Gigantic Witches' ('Les Sorcières gigantesques'), which consisted exclusively in

¹ Frank Kermode has underlined the emblematic function of Loie Fuller for Mallarmé's approach to modernism in a well-known essay 'The Poet and the Dancer before Diaghilev' (Kermode 1983), clearly indicating the mechanistic and depersonalized conception of abstract dance and poetry alike.

choreographing the discrepancies in shape and size between a few dancers and their shadows, further complicating the pattern with the replication of their shadows on a screen at the forefront of the proscenium arch, following the principle of the magic lantern. The costumes' cloths were also utilized for their gauzy texture, along with the proprieties of the tissue to either reflect or absorb the light projected unto its surface. There is a great congruence between Loie Fuller's innovations and the developments of stage design in European modernist theatre. Lee Simonson, in his account of Adolphe Appia's theories on 'light as the scene-painter', 'light as interpreter', 'light orchestrated', and 'light as scene-builder', defines Appia's contribution to the renewal of the dramatic art, 'Appia's original methods and effects', in these terms: 'the [...] use of shadows to dignify and to envelop form, to translate emotion into atmospheric moods, to define by suggesting' (Simonson 2008: 39). The main principle of modernist theatre, used or not in conjunction with veils, is to render the human form as elusive and versatile as a stylized silhouette. Lee Simonson gives, in Appia's words, a succinct definition which encapsulates the central aspiration underlying this new interest in light-design: 'The difference in intensity between the two kinds of light must be great enough in order to *make shadows* perceptible; above this minimum an infinite variety of relationship is possible' (Simonson 2008: 43). Appia's insight echoes Fuller's conceptions, her performances being structured around a playful contrast between invisible forms and their potential for visibility. Secondly, the sobriety of a stage-setting that has been stripped bare of decorative intent or realistic purpose matches Fuller's 'white' gestures: devoid of narrative function, but also destitute of straightforward propriety. They are mere shadows, because they are performed without proper focal source or identifiable claim of authorship. The dancer, as origin and creator of the projected shadow, has fully receded in the perceptual background, leaving the shapes that are produced to be experienced for their own sake. Strikingly, this extreme abstraction is then corroborated by the sheer absence of music. 'Le sortilège qu'opère la Loïe Fuller, par instinct, avec l'exagération, les retraits de jupe ou d'aile, instituant un lieu. L'enchanteuse fait l'ambiance, la tire de soi et l'y rentre, par un silence palpitant de crêpes de Chine.' ('The charm operated by Loie Fuller, instinctively, with exaggeration, withdrawals of skirt or wings, institutes a place. The enchantress creates the atmosphere, drawing it in and out of herself, by means of a silence bristling with Chinese crepe') (Mallarmé 1945: 309; my translation). In complete silence, the sound is produced by the cloth, as the absent music becomes a mobile piece of tissue; and this reversal makes audible the movement itself, Fuller's circling gestures, through the displacement of air caused by the shifting veils. Abstraction of shape, setting, and sound gives a fully legible representation of the movement, wiped out of any specific contingency: it is made integrally general.

Speechless Theatre

In Mallarmé's wake, many Symbolist writers set out to transpose the new aesthetics on stage, most notoriously the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, who, in order to maintain the poetic qualities of his plays, eventually opted for marionettes as an appropriate model for acting. Patrick

McGuinness explains the incompatibility between the goals and the means of the Symbolist theatre in these terms:

Maeterlinck, in common with many of his Symbolist contemporaries, asks himself if, in the light of Symbolist poetics, theatre is in fact *at all possible*. (...) Maeterlinck goes on to argue for stylized acting to *veil* the human body with *un grand nombre de conventions synthétiques*. His final proposal, growing logically out of these, is couched as a practical solution: marionettes (McGuinness 2001: 94-95).

He faced a disturbing paradox: to remain faithful to the subtle elusiveness of his style implied venturing on the borders of the “anti-theatre”, as claimed by some critics, or at the very least devising plays that can be perceived as a very unusual form of “static theatre” (Maeterlinck 1999: 14). The mode of communication is no longer the paradigm of the exposition of a narrative: it has been replaced effectively by the suggestion of a mood or an impression. Calling for a dramatic technique that would consist of obliquity and ellipsis only seems to be precisely at the opposite of the logics of the dramatic genre, whose main purpose is to put on display the enacted force of a narrative, represented on stage by means of the specific effects of acting, staging, light, props, costumes, music and setting, grounding the action and the set of characters in a definite relation to time and space. As McGuinness puts it, ‘the causes of the Symbolists’ collective theatrical malaise’ is that the ‘core principles’ of their aesthetics ‘are put at risk in theatre’ (McGuinness 2001: 96). The very fact of performing on stage obscures the poetic content of the written text, because, by giving a material form to what was only hinted at in this elliptic fashion of writing, it flattens, distorts and reduces the whole spectrum of subtleness and generality encompassed by the Symbolist discourse. The search for “inner dialogue” comprising the use of silence or the ellipsis along with a scarce interest for the plot as a dramatic component seem to represent altogether very strong denials of drama itself. It is as if the distinctive aspects of Maeterlinck’s plays suggested a reversed definition of theatre, or, as it were, a “negative one”.

The paradox of this abstract, anti-theatre is made more acute when one considers the speechless dimension of Maeterlinck’s technique. The resort to silence is in line with the obliquity of Maeterlinck’s spare style, and thus with the refusal to yield to any explanatory mode. He resists the discursive exposition by being as economical as possible with explicit characterisation and leaves the rest either to one’s imagination or to the director’s staging effects. In *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the plot is reduced to its very minimum, the characterisation of the protagonists or the setting strikingly spare (a fairy-tale-like anonymous castle and its surroundings) and the general pace of the dramatic action extremely slow. The characters are remarkably silent and inarticulate in their use of language. Katherine Worth makes a direct connection with Maeterlinck’s use of this paradoxical dramatic resource and the moment of the solo dance in William Butler Yeats’s *Dance Play* ‘At The Hawk’s Well’:

The silence of the dancer is one of the play's most thrilling effects. It is with the hopeless attempt of the Old Man to wrest words from her that the action begins. Yeats has wonderfully arrived here, in his own distinctive fashion, at the Maeterlinckian position where silence is an active and troubling theatrical force. (Worth 1978: 62).

On a marginal note, Katherine Worth also stresses that turning the attention to the unspoken did lay a new emphasis on non-verbal forms of dramatic expression but also led to further approximations of total art work: 'in the course of tracing the evolution of Yeats's total theatre technique, [...] Maeterlinck did devise a new stage art, a language of sight and sound, pictures and music' (Worth 1978: 39). As suggested above, if we conclude from the theory and practice of a negative theatre that prevalence is given to performance upon speech or written text, then the playwright is to come to terms with the precariousness and fragility of the play as fully existing solely in the moment of its enactment. Because of the reduction of the figure of the actors and their interpretation of the characters as silent shadows and speechless puppets, the overall impact of the play upon the audience is entirely dependent upon non-verbal devices, and most acutely upon the way in which the text will be treated, as it were, as a score for a piece of music in its own right. Significantly, Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* has aroused a great deal attention from later composers, eager to make audible the silent music one hears in the bare interstices of the half-developed, tentative fragments of dialogue, enforcing with delicacy a subtle awareness of the characters' inward mood: Claude Debussy (opera in five acts, 1902), Arnold Schoenberg (symphonic poem for orchestra, 1903), Jean Sibelius (orchestral suite, 1905) and Gabriel Fauré, who composed and conducted the incidental music for the London production of Maeterlinck's play in 1898.

As McGuinness argues, the role played by Maeterlinck in the context of Symbolist performance theory and his seminal reflections upon theatrical abstraction are to be understood in more subtle terms than a literal interpretation of the marionette device:

Although Maeterlinck called his plays "*dramas pour marionnette*", the effect of his own preference for puppets is rather to enable the actor to aspire to the puppet's properties, to depersonalize, to formalize, and to conceptualize his movement, vocal tone, and gestural range. Many of Maeterlinck's alternatives to the actor – shadows, reflections, "symbolic forms", marionettes – occur less as practical solutions to be applied literally than as possible paradigms from which real actors can learn their art (McGuinness 2001: 113-4).

I would like to demonstrate that Henrik Ibsen had already indicated this path by centring his play *A Doll's House* around Nora's tarantella dance scene in Act II; in that case it is dance that becomes the privileged medium to display the protagonist's inwardness, through the problematic identification of the main female character with an animated doll deprived of consciousness.

Nora's dance is arguably at the core of the meaning of the play as it is the hinge scene where the figure of the doll is reinterpreted under a multiplicity of angles. As Toril Moi points out: 'the tarantella scene is revolutionary both in its handling of theatre and theatricality and in its understanding of different ways of looking at a performing woman's body' (Moi 2006: 226). With the striking metaphor of the doll Ibsen has already tackled problems of theatricality and suggested throughout the play that his characters were performers of their own social roles, trapped in society's preconception of marriage - such as the earthy and dependable husband protecting his absent-minded, shallow and child-like wife. Yet in this scene, for the first time the protagonist Nora manipulates in full consciousness the male crossed-gazes at her dancing (her husband's and the doctor's) and the misinterpretation it engenders, in order to distract and prevent her husband from getting the mail and reading Krogstad's threatening letter. In some ways, the paradigm is reversed because this time she willingly lends herself to her "dollification" for the sake of a higher purpose. This brings about a change of regime in the logics of the dramatic narrative: the play's climax in semantic intensity is reached through dance, and not through verbalisation. If the final dialogue between husband and wife will reflect the semantic turn in Nora's conception of her own identity and her demands that her full sense of self and desire for expression be taken into account, this irreversible twist actually occurs as a dramatic event in the play at the moment when the dance is performed. It follows that the dancing episode takes on the dimension of a revelation. Toril Moi calls it 'Nora's bodily cogito performance' (Moi 2006: 236). Her analysis suggests that at the very moment when Nora appears to acquiesce in her own status as a doll, reduced to a body under the grip of a mechanical madness, it is the time when her humanity shows through most truthfully for the one who is cognizant of her secret tragedy - her friend Kristine also witnesses the scene - and is therefore able to read her trance-like dance through and beyond: as a sign, and not as it is or actually seems. Helmer's words: 'You are dancing as though your life depended on it' resonate deeply with the spectator's knowledge of Nora's decision to commit suicide to spare her husband from, she imagines, his imminent sacrifice (Ibsen 1981: 15). Her answer: 'It does' can only be understood by the audience and the female characters of the play; it further asserts that what seems a performance or a childish game is conversely the exact reflection of her inner torment. Not only does the tarantella rehearsal further the action as it entails irreversible consequences for the plot development, it also signals that the interiority of the main female character in a masculine, doll-house-like context could only be revealed through a meaningful but silent bodily expression. Dance imposes itself as the best way to convey such depths of inwardness whereas language appears as not sufficiently functional.

We are confronted with yet another paradox. The materiality of performance emphasises concrete, tangible forms of expressions: actions, gestures, corporeality. If Maeterlinck made up his mind for a negative, silent, static theatre, he opened up possibilities for the performance to prevail over the written text of the play - and by doing so, he might have come across a second difficulty just as important as the first one that we underlined above, namely that the very bodily presence of the actor is likely to obstruct the

oblique elusiveness of the poetry intended to be conveyed on stage. Ibsen's dance scene very clearly echoes this ambivalence; Nora truly expresses her innermost desire to save her family from looming destitution while presenting her desperate dance as a fit of madness or eroticism before the eyes of her male beholders. To go back to Maeterlinck, one could summarise the dilemma in this manner: in the project of raising theatre to the status of a poem, it is not enough to achieve silence as an efficient dialogue and stillness as consistent plot. The actor is a major obstacle and nevertheless an indispensable requirement. Maeterlinck turns to the ideal configuration of reading: instead of concretely representing it preserves the expressive force of the concepts by remaining abstract and emblematic. The playwright seeks to apply these categories to the principle of acting and comes to the conclusion that abstraction can be obtained by alternatives to the actor – or at the very least alternative ways of acting. The 'practical solution' of stylized acting modelled upon marionettes, android or puppets links our threads and connects Ibsen's embodiment of the doll by a fully acquiescing Nora to Yeats's extensive use of masks in his dance plays, via Maeterlinck's deep wish to see *Pelléas et Mélisande* interpreted by impersonal marionette-like actors. In a nutshell, the desire for abstraction, sought after because it seemed the best path towards representing a de-individualized poetic dimension on-stage, led the playwrights to put forward a "negative" strategy, dismissing human expressivity and formalising as much as possible their theatrical language. Once again the authority of Mallarmé is patently the overall framework to carry on this renewal of the art of performance. Mallarmé's dancer belongs to a sign system and she has to be read as such – our attention has to be drawn to her function, not to her individual expression, as well as to the complete transparency of her dancing. The achievement of a high degree of generality is the pre-requisite to successfully delivering the conditions for the audience to read what she abstractedly stands for. To draw a parallel with Maeterlinck's formalised and stylized definition of a performance, the embodied, particularised signifying system of the representation, from actors, props, setting, costumes to light and sound, is reduced to a functional and abstract sign, which is then able to effectively take on the dimension of the universal. The doll, the marionette, and the masks partake directly in this tendency.

Masked Marionettes

The alternatives for the actors put forward by Maeterlinck and exploited by Yeats in its wake comprise the use of masks insofar as they straightforwardly lead to the spectator's perception of the actors as puppets or automata, lending themselves with docility to their manipulation from afar by an invisible stage-director. One could argue that masked marionettes are, metaphorically, shadowing devices, inasmuch as they are symbolised forms of human presence. In Yeats' dramatic aesthetics, marionettes are conjured at the same time for 'their self-imposing strangeness as well as their self-effacement' (McGuinness 2001: 110):

The players must move a little stiffly and gravely like
marionettes and, I think, to the accompaniment of drum taps.
The dancing will give most trouble, for I know but vaguely

what I want. I do not want any existing form of stage dancing, but something with a smaller gamut of expression, something more reserved, more self-controlled, as befits performers within arm's reach of their audience (Yeats 1927: 206).

In the preface to his *Dance Plays*, Yeats expresses serious concerns with regards to conventional, academic forms of dance, or 'existing forms of stage dancing', which would not comply to the overall aesthetic design to achieve quiet but disturbing intimacy with the members of the audience. His purpose to create uncanny identification between the spectator and somnambular shadows is yet another way to embrace the general under the form of the abstracted sign and to strip bare the performers of the acting resources their particular identity would provide (face's features, voice's intonation, idiosyncratic bearing and gestures). The silent, masked marionette is the expansion of the Symbolist appreciation of Loie Fuller's depersonalised movements and conceptualised gestures, her willingness to erase the corporal and physical specificity of her swirling body.

Stylization reinforces the spectator's awareness of theatricality: to make full use of the marionette paradigm entails a wealth of successful distancing effects. In that sense, abstract theatre could be defined as the literal application of the metaphor of a doll's house. Through an arresting *mise en abyme*, we, as spectators, are represented on stage by watcher protagonists, themselves witnesses to the core dramatic scene. The plays are illustrations of the theatrical process itself and the stages are very often frames of the proscenium arch, reminiscent of the original *theatron*. Nora dances both for a male public and her female friend – and the audience is given through this crossed-perspective the complete ambivalence of the situation. Maeterlinck's *The Intruder*, *Blindsight*, and *Interior* give a privileged position to the audience that alone is able to see the dead corpse among the blind people (*Blindsight*), or the Death that waits for its time among the protagonists (*The Intruder*), and the Old Man accompanied by the Stranger that contemplates a happy household before bringing the news of the tragic event (*Interior*). In Yeats' dance plays, the characters do wear masks, as we will see in more details; in addition to that they also bear a striking resemblance to passive dolls. In the dramatic system, they are shown as marionette-like figures. The presentation of the drama by the musicians, that stage-manage and call up the actors from off stage, the solemn unfolding of the cloth that signals the beginning of the performance, the actors waiting for their part to begin, first standing still, and then moved like marionettes by the musicians' words and music – all these devices invite the public into the mechanism of the theatrical process. It seems that the actors are caught up, unbeknownst to them, in a fated ritual whose very mechanism will not be stopped until the drama comes to an end. The artificiality of the theatrical situation is emphasised with clarity.

The major importance given to the marionette as a superior model for acting and dancing alike echoes later experimentations in the century. For both Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, who opened up new possibilities in the wake of Symbolist stage experimentations, Heinrich von Kleist's essay 'On the Marionette Theatre' is a major reference. Inscribed in this general shift towards abstraction in terms of theatrical means, another

fruitful exploration of the marionette can be found in the historical and cultural context of the Bauhaus, Oskar Schlemmer's 'Triadic Ballet' (1922). However, Yeats uses the marionette device with the specific purpose to create a subtle effect of estrangement mixed with hues of familiarity – producing in the spectator a feeling of strange and dissonant empathy with the 'anonymous figures' on stage (Worth 1978: 4). This purpose is most satisfactorily fulfilled with what Bradbury and McFarlane call 'the imaginative use of mask':

The over-riding concern was to achieve a distanced intimacy: to counterbalance this new intimacy of setting with a new and organic separating strangeness. This strangeness [...] was to be achieved by "human means", by ritual, stylization, the formalization of the dance, by abstractive transposition into music, by the de-personalizations of the mask [...] and the consequent diminution in the importance of "character" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976: 565).

The masked actor, called 'Ubermarionette' by Craig, is the most distinctive feature of the *Dance Plays*: the protagonists wear 'full masks' and the musicians appear 'in a mask-like make-up'. The palette of the acting resources is reduced to a minimum 'of skilful poses of the head and the neck'; encased in the heavy costume, the actor himself is severed from the particular context of the *hic et nunc* performing situation (Qamber 1974: 49). It is the most efficient way to accomplish, to the desired degree of generality, the metamorphosis of the actor into an archetypal figure. In the same manner indeed, the effort towards the formalisation of acting and the *mise en scène*, culminating in the exploitation of the mask for its anonymising properties, is reflected in the way the characters are depicted from the outset as archetypes. Yeats shares with Maeterlinck the modern utilisation of fairy and folk-tale material to sketch situations which are strongly a-historical and non-specific. By no means are Pelléas, Mélisande or Golaud too categorically characterised; the plot is loosely reminiscent of any fairy tale with the mixed use of Celtic symbols such as the episode near the fountain, the deep forest, the high tower, the dark castle, and then the black flag to see from the ocean that recalls the Ancient Greek Aegean's misfortune. As Katherine Worth suggests:

The dance plays are, in Yeats's phrase, "remote, spiritual, and ideal"; they take us into a kind of no-place inhabited by figures who are often anonymous [...]: archetypal beings, essentially free of period and nationality (Worth 1978: 4).

The plot of the 'Hawk's Well' merely involves two antagonists and their arbitrator: two pursuers of the eternal life, the Young Man and the Old Man, surrounding the well containing the precious water, represented by a mere blue cloth, and the Guardian of the Well, a hawk-like figure, producing a few occasional guttural sounds and standing motionless except for the execution of her ominous dance that is central to the piece. E. T. Kirby connects the disorientating, 'hallucinatory' effects of the mask with its essential role in conveying the general scope of the archetypal forces at play, actively immersing the audience in a concrete situation of 'non-reality'. He proposes:

In this prototype of abstract theatre, imitation is not of life but of fragments of life supernaturally present. The illusionary or delusionary, the nonreal, is concretized to the point of hallucination. As Goll proposed, the law of the theatre to be found in the mask is that “Nonreality becomes a fact” (Kirby 1972: 15).

A similar ‘mask’ phenomenon is to be found at the level of the plot: stylisation operates on the remainders of a narrative-like structure and reduces the intrigue to a very concise form. The *Dance Plays* stage an instant of an epic narrative, condensating its original content (Irish myths for the most part). The subject of the play ‘At the Hawk’s Well’ may be defined as the mere enactment of the spell of the Guardian of the Well, which effectively occurs when the hawk-woman figure dances the young hero Cuchulain and his old contender away from the source of eternal youth. Daniel Albright, underlining the debt to Japanese Noh Theatre in Yeats’s theatrical technique, invites us to read the *Dance Plays* as an attempt to seize the most significant moment of folkloric Irish myths and to transfigure the narrative experience of the tale into a full immersion of the viewer and the performers in a kind of highly hieratic theatrical ritual (Albright 2000: 68).

A Noh, according to [Yeats and Pound]’s unusual theory, is a *magnified version of a single aesthetic particle*. It is a huge ideogram, expanded to the size of the stage, strung out to an evening’s entertainment, read through the motions of actors (Albright 2000: 73).

This conception of the theatrical condensation is reminiscent of Loie Fuller’s ‘Serpentine Dance’: her gestures, prolonged and aggrandized by the long white veils she wrapped herself in, describe ideogrammatic figures, serpentine shapes or infinite helicoidal arabesques; the minimalism of her performances warrants the consistency of the semiotic system of the *mise-en-scène* and her complete control over every single aspect, insuring maximum efficacy towards the recreation of a single mood – perceived as being fraught with unreal poetic density miraculously sustained for the complete duration of her show. In Frank Kermode’s analysis, Fuller is a luminous shadow, an outstanding emblem which triggers an epiphany of the general: ‘abstract, clear of the human mess, dead and yet perfect being; entirely independent of normal action, out of time’. She is a curved motif transposed to the dimension of the stage and to the duration of the performance, ‘a kind of Ideogram, *l’incorporation visuelle de l’idée*, a spectacle defying all definition, radiant, *homogeneous*’ (Kermode 1983: 159). In the last instance, it can be seen that the most salient feature of the general status endorsed by the abstract sign – embodied, carried in the flesh as it were by the de-particularised, veiled, masked, marionette-like body of the performer – is its problematic claim for transparent homogeneity called upon for its very legibility by playwrights whose implicit model for the theatre is reading, and whose declared model for the experience of poetry is the inner performance.

Veiled silhouettes, silent marionettes and masked dancers transfigure the performing actor into an abstract shadow of human presence, and thereby into functional sign: this mutation from the particular to the general makes possible a direct representation of images, concepts, or ideas with the same density and concision as figurative and discursive ideograms, by means of the stylisation of the human shape. In the realm of performance, depersonalisation is paradoxically responsible for a wider and more subtle range of possibilities for inward, subjective sensations; it demands emotional investment from its spectators, enforcing identification through patterns of familiarisation and estrangement; last, it calls for intimacy of execution, bridging fluidly the audience's inner perceptions and the suggested inward introspection of the protagonists, while at the same time bringing into sharp focus the artificiality of the theatrical conditions. Bradbury and McFarlane are once again helpful to formulate a definition of Yeats' *ars poetica* which gathers the threads unravelled by the ambition to achieve a truly abstract theatre: a play on the borders of theatricality, with the structural use of silence, speechlessness and geometrical forms, to the point of the disappearance of the human presence altogether, visible only under the guise of its trace or remainder, the abstract shadow. 'Drama's way was to move us "by setting us to reverie by allowing us almost to the intensity of trance"; the spectator must feel his mind expand convulsively, or "spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976: 563): Yeats' desire to attain to the economy of means of a single pictogram that is set into motion on stage (by ways of a 'trance', a convulsive expansion, or a slow spreading out) is revelatory of the effects he seeks to achieve for his audience - an 'expanded' sensibility, a thoughtful 'reverie', or a full accomplishment of one's possibilities to explore his or her interior shadows.

Works Cited

- Albright Daniel (2000). *Untwisting the Serpent, Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bradbury, Malcolm and McFarlane, James, eds. (1976). *Modernism, A Guide to European Literature (1890-1930)*. London: Penguin.
- Ellis C., Sylvia (1995). *The Plays of W. B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Fuller, Loie (1913). *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life*. Boston: Small, Maynard.
- Ibsen, Henrik (1988). *Four Major Plays – A Doll's House, Hedda Gabbler, Ghosts, The Master Builder*. Ed. by McFarlane. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kermode, Frank (1983). 'The Poet and the Dancer before Diaghilev'. In Copeland, Roger and Cohen, Marshall (eds.), *What is Dance?*. Toronto, Oxford University Press.
- Kirby E. T. (1972). 'The Mask: Abstract Theatre, Primitive and Modern'. In *The Drama Review: TDR*, 16: 3. The "Puppet" Issue, 5-21.
- Maeterlinck, Maurice (1999). *Pelléas et Mélisande, Les Aveugles, L'Intruse, Intérieur*. Ed. by Leighton Hodson. Bristol: Classical Press.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. 'Ballets'. In Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Mallarmé in prose*, by Caws, Mary Ann (ed), (New York, 2001) pp. 108-113
- Mallarmé, Stéphane (1956). 'Crayonné au théâtre, Autre étude de danse'. In *Œuvres Complètes*. Ed by Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry. Paris : Gallimard, La Pléiade.
- McGuinness, Patrick (2001). *Maurice Maeterlinck and The Making of Modern Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Moil, Tori (2006). *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism, Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simonson, Lee (2008). 'The Ideas of Adolphe Appia'. In Eric Bentley (ed.), *The Theory of the Modern Stage*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, pp. 26 -54.
- Qamber, Akhtar (1974). *Yeats and the Nob*. New York: Weatherhill.
- Yeats, W. B. (1961). 'The Tragic Theatre'. In *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan.
- Yeats, W. B. (1927). 'A People's Theatre', 'Four Plays For Dancers'. In *Plays and Controversies*. London: Macmillan.
- Worth, Katharine (1978). *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*. London: Athlone Press.