
Reflections on Happenings

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The great difference lies in man's knowing
what he is; only then is he truly that.

—Hegel, *Lectures on the History
of Philosophy*

1. TAXONOMY

There are at least four different types of Happenings: Events, Aleatoric scenes, Happenings proper, and Action Theatre (but see the reservation about the latter in 1.4, which reduces the number of types to three).

1.1 Events (or Pieces)

An Event is a scene containing one activity, either brief or repetitively drawn out; it is close to a children's game or an adult gag. An Event can range from an exercise in perception (Cage's *Silent Piece* or 4' 33") to the enactment of a basic metaphor which allegorizes the participants. A good example of the latter is Allan Kaprow's *Overtime* (outline quoted from Schechner,¹ 150):

Sundown. (flashlights) 200 straight feet of snow-fence erected in woods. Groundline drawn with powdered chalk. Posted with red flare and marked number 1.

Fence moved next 200 feet, maintaining direction. Groundline drawn. Flare and marker number 2.

Fence moved next 200 feet. Groundline. Flare. Marker 3. (portable radios, food deliveries.)

Process repeated every 200 feet for a mile. Lighted flares maintained along entire line throughout night. Fence removed. Line and markers remaining. Flares out. Sunup.

¹ Apart from the classical approaches of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Diderot's *De la poésie dramatique*, and some other writings, Lessing's *Laokoon*, and Brecht's *Schriften zum Theater*, the following secondary literature has been most useful in these "reflections" (and some of my conclusions and indeed terms are obviously indebted to them; whether I agreed or dis-

Any interpretation of this Event would have to start from Kaprow's "grounding" of the age-old metaphor of the wild dark wood, present in art from *Gilgamesh* through Dante's *selva oscura* to our time. Its menace in the wintery season is being tamed; it turns into a humanly-mapped grid, a surveyed space complete with food, light, and communication. The enactment thus "de-charges" the metaphor, and, by collective labor which unites man and nature, translates it from a horror into a domesticated piece of environment. Its nonurban character is due to Kaprow's personal propensity for the bucolic—most authors of Happenings work in an urban environment, where metaphors are less easily identifiable in terms of the cultural tradition though no less present or powerful.

Events are related to music and dance—primarily modern—since they deal with the rhythmic use of a *delimited time-duration*. In *Overtime* this is sundown to sunup; its title is, I take it, a pun on "overtime" work which is also victorious "over" a structured time (as well as space). Cage's Pieces indicate this relationship still more clearly, being largely unconcerned with space. Space, say a concert hall, is for Cage a neutral constant and not a dynamic variable—which is the aesthetic characteristic of music as the purest time art. Insofar as an Event is homologous to a basic "compartment" within Happenings proper, which ideally also enacts one basic metaphor, this Cage strain or orientation is significant for all Happenings.

1.2 Aleatoric Scenes

The provenance of aleatoric or chance scenes, such as Jackson Mac Low's *Marrying Maiden*,² is clearly musical. Their structure is based on a combination of authorial

agreed with them). When quoted, they will be indicated in parentheses by author's name with the pages following in Arabic numerals; otherwise they will as a rule not be acknowledged in the course of the essay:

Baxandall, Lee. "Beyond Brecht: the Happenings." *Studies on the Left*, January-February, 1966.

Eco, Umberto. *Opera aperta*. Milan: 1967.

Higgins, Dick. *FOEW&OMBWHNW*. New York-Barton-Cologne: 1969.

Kaplan, Donald M. "Character and Theatre." *TDR* 32(1966):93-108.

Kaprow, Allan. *Some Recent Happenings*. New York: 1966.

———. *Untitled Essay and other works*. New York: 1967.

Kirby, Michael, ed. *Happenings*. New York: 1965. With statements and scripts by Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, and others.

Lebel, Jean-Jacques. *Le happening*. Paris: 1967.

Manifestos. New York: 1966. By Ay-o and others.

Schechner, Richard. *Public Domain*. New York: 1969.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. New York: 1969.

Tarrab, Gilbert. "Le happening." *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*. Special issue, 1968.

TDR 30 (1965). Issue devoted to Happenings.

Let me also make it clear that, though I have seen some performances billed as Happenings in Europe and America, I have worked basically from scenarios and descriptions, just as if discussing the *commedia dell'arte*, since my chief interest is in this case not that of a chronicler but that of a "socio-formalist" theoretician of spectacle.

²See an account of it in Kirby, *TDR* 30, pp. 34-36, and of its direction by Judith Malina in Pierre Biner, *Le Living Theatre* (Lausanne: 1964), pp. 52-53.

choice (Mac Low chose the text—the *I Ching* and a list of five hundred adverbs indicating the manner of speaking fragments from it) and chance (in this case the order, duration, tempo, volume, and inflection of the verbal material). As Dick Higgins has pointed out, Cagean aleatoric technique in reality only places decisions at one remove from the composer, allowing the material to be determined by the artist-composer's system: "And the real innovation lies in the emphasis on the creation of a system" (Higgins, 55-57). Though permutations exist, any performance still will be a performance of Jackson Mac Low's *Marrying Maiden*—i.e., within a field of possibilities which, although larger than that of a univocal script, is in principle as closed a field as *Hamlet*. (Conversely, any theatre or concert performance is always one variation on an underlying score, libretto, or text.)

Unless aleatoric technique is used simply to modulate unit-Events (a rather primitive limit-case), its meaning lies basically in its commitment to a quantified view of the world as an assemblage of neutral molecular units, which obey the law of large numbers (the only way to escape utter boredom in permutations). I would imagine that aleatorics, as an exclusive principle of structuring, work only with fairly general texts which have low message significance and high entropy—texts of a general incantatory nature such as the *I Ching*, applicable to everything vaguely because (and therefore) applicable to no precise interpersonal situation at all, like a soothsayer's prediction or a horoscope. Aleatorics also would seem to work dramaturgically only with fairly neutral *dramatis personae*, which are neither individualistic characters nor allegorical in any clearly defined system.

1.3 Happenings Proper

Three examples are necessary to indicate the main outlines of this type.

1.31 In Kaprow's *Eat* (see T30) there is a field of possibilities—physical materials and gestures—connected with food and the ritual situation of a communal meal-feast (the author calls it "a quasi-eucharistic ritual"). Its performance depends on the interaction of the participants and a rehearsed troupe. This Happening is situated halfway between a religious Mass and the cold buffet at a modern Individualistic party, and its rehearsed actors halfway between acolytes and hosts at the party. The participating audience is supposed to be reawakened to a sense of communion and the miraculousness of food. Yet it remains unclear what type of communion is desired and why food is miraculous: the only value-system implied is the basic biological solidarity of human beings.³ In view of the real complexity of human relations, this approach is a convenient jumping-off point but little more. Let us take for the moment a grisly real-life Happening, such as the My Lai massacre: it is surely true to say that the massacred Vietnamese were human beings, and that this (as against a comparably gratuitous killing of two or three hundred apes or boars) is the basis for

³ Cp. Schechner on Ann Halprin's dance-Happening *Esposizione*: "the similarity of one human being to another and the ineluctable unity which comes from a group doing roughly the same thing together" (Schechner, 149). Kaprow himself lucidly notes that his symbols "are so general and so archetypical that actually almost everyone knows vaguely about these things," since he tries to keep them "universal, simple, and basic" (Kirby, ed., *Happenings*, 50).

our feeling of outrage. But the deeper, significant, operative truth about My Lai is not that both Vietnamese peasants and American soldiers are biologically human: it is that the latter are killers and the former are their victims, at which point a political, economic, and ideological analysis of the reasons for that situation would have to set in. To stop at the first approach is simply liberal sentimentality. Analogously, Kaprow's refusal to make further distinctions which could adequately deal with the complexities of our civilization is simply a Rousseauist persuasion that a return to supposed fundamentals outside civilization will illumine present-day life. Pseudobiological values substituted for historical ones: a Eucharist without a Real Presence, a dumb Symposium.

Indeed, one whole aspect of Happenings reposes on what I have called the Rousseauist approach, either by escaping into nature (*Eat's* cave being in this respect prototypic, indeed a touch of genius), or trying to convert the urban American environment into a new naivety without physically changing it. This second wing is more original and sets itself a more difficult goal. Yet it too approaches its new environment in a very old way, by a yoga-type process of re-education from within. It supposes, or wants to achieve, a "*dérèglement systématique de tous les sens*" (as Rimbaud and the surrealists would have it) which would make out of the jungle of cities a wonder, and out of city-dwellers swains of an urbanized pastoral—"peasants of Paris," as Aragon once formulated it. Circuitously, we are back at a debased Rousseauism: Rousseau at least wanted *the whole society* to devolve back into natural nobility. (A tempting way to account for the debasement would be to note that Happenings are sociologically a product of the same class Rousseau hailed from—the petty-bourgeois artistic intelligentsia—but that this class in the meantime has been forced from the public into the private sphere.)

All these observations are, of course, not exorcisms, but merely attempts at understanding and judging. For any surer judgment, however, we would need far more sociological data. In the meantime we must make do with basically impressionistic hypotheses. It seems that nobody writing about Happenings has escaped such a proceeding.

1.32 Claes Oldenburg's *Fotodeath* (T30) is a developed urban Happening conventionally divided between actors and spectators. It can be compared to a *commedia dell'arte canovaccio* (scenario) without speech and the *lazzi* tradition, or to a multi-focus mime without a plot. It consists of three sets of five Events (scenes) each, forming a spectrum of situations from a crowded urban environment. The unit-events are contiguous in space (as in medieval mysteries), but the space is not coordinated along the axis of a firm value-system (e.g., from Heaven upstage left to Hell upstage right). Oldenburg himself, quite lucidly, calls his Happenings Events in an associational pseudo-plot and confesses to a preference for "a structure which is an object in itself," such as photographs or circus (*Happenings*, Kirby, ed., 201-202). Oldenburg's Events also have no temporal focus; they are done simultaneously on a neutral, geometrically-divided stage. This results in a multi-focus stage, with all five Events of the same set contiguous and simultaneous. They are coordinated like a family of parallel, coexisting time/space systems in a roughly synchronic cross-cut, i.e., like Einsteinian co-variant island universes each of which is autonomous but all

of which are deduced from the same basic formula by varying some parameter(s) in it.

Each of Oldenburg's three sets of five Events has a common theme; each set seems to have a "pilot-scene" explicating more clearly than the other scenes the common denominator of the set (see the script, T30, 87-93). The theme of the first set is the futile enacting of roles in a topsy-turvy world—by implication our world: (1) man posing before mirrors; (2) girl in jingoist poses; (3) man wrestling with a soft laundry bag; (4) transvestite confusion of sexes; (5) pilot-scene showing a family posing unsuccessfully for a photograph in front of landscape samples. There are marked similarities to the allegorizing painters from fourteenth-century Italy to sixteenth-century Flanders, say to Breughel's *Wedding* or *Proverbs*. The theme of the second set is futile search for partnership: (1) a narcissistic woman; (2) bygone times of a naive adolescent friendship; (3) man leaving invalid woman for a party; (4a) two drunks unsuccessfully helping each other up; (4b) man picking up spilled cans but not the fallen partner. The third set tops the futility of social posing and the breakdown of human friendliness with a final bogging down of all situations in a mechanical, reified denial of vitality, as in a nightmare of arrested or viscous time. It features: (1) a mechanical majorette; (2) a wounded man (a soldier in the performance) unable to sit down, like Clov in *Endgame*; (3) the pilot-scene of the U.S.A. as a collage of objects in a viscid paste; (4) dinner with a dead woman; and (5) men degraded to movers of a huge assemblage of black boxes.⁴ In the whole Happening (itself only one part of a tripartite Piece called *Circus*) there is a clear progression through the three sets from singular through dual (the girl in 2.1 is dual, faced with her own mirror-image; the family in 1.5 constitutes only one unit) to general, and from futility to death. This was effected by a series of brief snapshot situations (an idea developed in a more formalistic way by the Living Theatre's "snapshots" scene in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*), amounting to a kind of foreshortened, aerial survey of the American situation. *Fotodeath*'s title indicates the diagnosis.

1.33 In Dick Higgins' *The Tart, or Miss America* (T30), words acquire greater importance. There is an abundant use of chance techniques, but the material manipulated is, first of all, cliché phrases, written by the author, combined with physical action, optic or acoustic effects, and some scenery (this Happening was done in a boxing ring—an old dream of Brecht's). Secondly, these words and gestures are performed by "stock urban characters" (Higgins, T30, 133), what Diderot called "conditions." Their number is changeable, and the same stock character can be acted simultaneously by several actors, but at the very least a central triangle is always present, consisting of the Tart, the Young Man, and Mr. Miller, a suburban Babbitt-Everyman; further typical characters include a Prophet, a Steelworker, a Drinking Man, etc. Each performer had thirty-six different nonverbal situations in which he was assigned at random one sentence, one action, and one special (optic, acoustic, or kinetic) effect. Collage-scenes resulted, overlapping actions supplemented by the activity of a Special Performer, a coordinator responsible for cueing and flow, who

⁴Oldenburg himself mentions that in *Fotodeath* "events repeated themselves in superimposed lines of movement," which seems a brief painterly way of saying much the same thing I was trying to get at above.

had a collection of Americana ("the relevance to be determined by the social intent of the performance" [Higgins, T30, 135]), which he produced at random. There are only thirty-six lines in the whole play, and they were always explicitly quoted as said by one of the "roles"—regardless of who actually pronounced them. (I particularly liked sentence 13: "The steelworkers say no. No, say the steelworkers. (No. No.)") Higgins was clearly aiming at an estrangement-effect of the Brechtian type, which would prevent the audience from empathizing with the *persona*: "I wrote *The Tart* to express a sociological concept [about women] . . . my hope was that the audiences would sympathize with the performers (not the characters) in their social contexts and that the lines would be more tragic than funny" (Higgins, T30, 132).

This type of Happening explicates the specific allegorical quality of characters, and begins to utilize the suggestiveness of language. A similar approach is used in the first scene of *Mysteries* (a performance which is in a way an anthology of different types of Happenings). It featured a pantomime of militarism developed from a scene of *The Brig* and joined to fugal chanting of a poem by Jackson Mac Low consisting exclusively of the words found on the one-dollar bill ("One dollar.—In God we trust.—Douglas C. Dillon."—if memory serves). It ends with the gradual formation of a drilling platoon and a final incomprehensible harangue by the commander, saluted with a roar of "Yes, Sir!" Its effect is a powerful, foreshortened glimpse of the military-industrial complex operating in the flesh of men. Not much is needed to transform this type of Happening into Action Theatre—only to allegorize the performance space and thus conjure up the vague outline of a fable.

1.4 Action Theatre

When Happening techniques are elevated into a staged performance "matrixed" in space and plot—such as in Kenneth Brown's *The Brig*—one gets a play using repetitive and permutative techniques and a minimum of verbal information, yet clearly nearer to drama than to Happenings. Except in terms of influence and coexistence there seem to be no valid reasons for aesthetically grouping Action Theatre with Happenings.

1.5 Comment

This brief survey describes a *typological series* of ascending complexity, starting out from single nonverbal activities (Events) and longer aleatoric activities where text is treated mainly as sound and the allegorizing of participants is vague and very general. Kaprow seems to be the master of this approach, and he is out of his element as soon as he leaves it for what I have called Happenings proper, e.g., in *Eat* or *Courtyard*. It should be remembered that the Kaprow performance which gave a name to this genre was called *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, i.e., that he thinks of Happenings in terms of Events. The culmination of this typological series (excluding Action Theatre) are Happenings proper, which range from a nonverbal symbolic field of activities with the nuclear performing troupe used as seeders only, through mime containing *personae* demanding well-rehearsed actors and a clear compositional progression, to aleatoric use of a purposefully composed text with stock characters like

those in modern allegorizing plays (expressionist, surrealist, Brechtian, absurdist, etc.—the conception of *The Tart* seems rather akin to a play such as Pirandello's *To Clothe the Naked*).

There seems to be little reason to treat Happenings with less scholarly attention than, say, *Gorboduc* or the plays of Noel Coward. Their significance can be looked at from two aspects (which are blended in any particular Happening in very different proportions): it may be defined as an exercise in unclogging the perceptiveness of participants, in which case it is properly speaking pre-theatrical or propedeutical; or it may lie in their use of a meaningful semiotic structure with some kind of role-playing and an organized rhythm—even if the figures and the organization of events are difficult to recognize because they are of an unfamiliar type.

Many Happenings were simply Events or Aleatoric scenes; often they seem to have resembled unclear and underrehearsed mimic psychodramas. This is, however, not the fault of the form as such, but of the social and ideological situation in which they were performed. This situation also accounts for the frequent indifference or hostility toward the audience. Though this is sociologically very significant it seems aesthetically more important to note that Happenings can assign the audience the same ontological status as the performers: both can provide performance-events by action and provoked reaction; both can be, and often are, treated as objects.

2. AESTHETIC LOCATION AND AN ATTEMPT AT DEFINITION

2.1 Location

Are Happenings theatre or not? The answer is an exercise in semantics. If we define theatre as the performance of an action organized in a plot, which has been the dominant trend since the fifteenth-century Aristotelians, then they obviously are not. If we define it, say with Cage, much more broadly, as a performance which engages simultaneously the two public senses of eye and ear (see T30), then they are. It might be more useful to start by identifying Happenings as a form of *spectacle*, a wider aesthetic category embracing dramatic theatre, mime, ballet, and opera as well as the nonplotted genres such as pageants, fairs, jugglers and circus, and the intermediary genres of music-hall and cabaret, vaudeville, burlesque, etc. The common earmark of spectacles is the presence of *actions by human performers*; by the immediacy or reality of that presence theatrical spectacles are differentiated from movies, TV, etc. The nonplotted genres are sociologically, as a rule, lower-class forms.

In the 1920's, the Russian Formalists held a theory that literary and artistic genres evolve not in a straight but in a zig-zag line.⁵ The pioneering work of Viktor Shklov-

⁵ The main works dealing with this theory are:

Shklovsky, Viktor. *Rozanov*. Petrograd: 1921.
 ——. *Khod konya*. Berlin: 1923.

sky held that in each artistic period there are several schools in any one art; they exist simultaneously, with one school the most orthodox at any given time, and others coexisting with it, uncanonized and spurned by official aesthetics. In the early nineteenth century in Russia, for example, the courtly tradition in literature existed simultaneously with "low" vaudeville verse and adventure-novel prose which—on a despised, sub-literary level—were creating new forms. This creativity brings forth a "junior line" which grows up to replace the old: "Chekhov introduces the low farce and *feuilleton* into Russian literature; Dostoevsky raises to the dignity of a norm the devices of the dime story" (Shklovsky, *Roazanov*). The eighteenth-century Western European novel stems from imaginary voyages and travelogues (Defoe), diaries and manuals of letter-writing (Richardson), etc., *not* in a straight line from the major epic form of the preceding epoch, the verse epic. Pushkin's lyrics come from album verses and folk songs, Blok's from gypsy ballads, Mayakovsky's from comic periodicals. The "junior line" or "low" genre (which is as a rule also a "small" form) is then canonized by an artistic revolution which transforms it into the accepted "senior line" or "high" genre (and as a rule into a "large" form) of the new period.

The Formalists recognized that artistic evolution is never as pure as a critical model, but is contaminated by many inner and outer factors. Nevertheless, they asserted that there is a law in the history of art by which "the legacy is transmitted not from father to son but from uncle to nephew" (Shklovsky, *Literatura i kinematograf*). The admission of attitudes and genres of popular culture, existing on the periphery of official aesthetics, into the consecrated precincts of official art, runs parallel to social changes whereby the tastes of the "upper" classes are supplanted by "lower" popular tastes. Today, we might add to the Formalists' insights that artistic and social change are in certain complex ways causally connected. In France in the 1820's, for example, the assumption of devices from eighteenth-century bourgeois sentimental comedy into the ossified *ancien régime* tragedy resulted in the romantic tragedy of de Vigny, Dumas père, and Hugo. This was clearly related to the sharp conflict between the life styles and world views of the feudal reaction and those of the young democrats, a conflict representing antagonistic class interest. A history of literature or theatre should seek to explain the rise of any new genre by focusing on the "lower" artistic levels and forms from which it sprang. "Each period of creative flowering is preceded by a slow process of accumulating means of renewal in the lower, often unrecognized strata" (Tomashevsky). In spectacle too, the nonplotted genres which I am discussing are sociologically, as a rule, lower-class forms. In our century—just as in antiquity and in the Middle Ages—these forms are lifted into the realm of official aesthetics by the pressure of new social forces and tastes.

———. *Literatura i kinematograf*. Berlin: 1923.

Tinyanov, Yury. *Arkhaisty i novatory*. Leningrad: 1929.

Tomashevsky, Boris. *Teoriya literatury: Poetika*. Moscow-Leningrad: 1925.

Most quotations have been taken from the excellent study by Professor Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague: 1955); see also René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: 1956), chapter 17. Another English-language book, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated and edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: 1965), has gaps and terminological difficulties.

2.2 Elements for a Definition

As soon as there are human performers—implying a real or imaginary audience—it is inevitable that they adopt implied or explicated, shifting or stable *roles* of some kind, e.g., “young intellectual Everyman,” “the artist as sufferer” (or more rarely “as celebrator”), etc. Robert Whitman, for example, wanted “clean-cut American teenagers” for two girl-performers in *Water*, and dressed them accordingly.⁶ As Kaplan (T32, 95-98) pointed out against Kirby,⁷ misunderstandings arise primarily from the fact that these roles are matrixed unclearly (usually in very vague allegorical frameworks) so that they do not amount to individualistic characters. I called them types of Diderotian “conditions”; Higgins called them stock characters, and possibly a better name may be found: but surely this *different* matrixing should not be taken as representing nonmatrixed acting. Whatever their seeming unorthodoxy to our conditioned eyes, they are aesthetically nearer to a Shakespearean or Sophoclean character than to a man walking down the street. Furthermore, it is clearly not necessary that Happenings be based on improvisation, or on aleatorics, or on the absence of a division of labor between troupe and audience; the testimony of *Fotodeath* could be multiplied. However, Kirby’s identification of Happenings as nonmatrixed in regard to *time and space* seems valid, fundamental, and never seriously transgressed. A forest/room/street/city or whatever the space of a Happening may be does not pretend to any other imaginary localization; the time duration likewise. Space and time revert to an empirical status identical to the epistemological level of the audience’s direct experience before and after the performance. Space becomes, in principle at least, the sum of all objects (including people) and the dimension of their displacement; time is not the space of causal sequences but the measure of qualitative change (very slow or—more rarely, alas—very fast). Both space and time are no longer conventions but problematic materials whose extent and character, structured through object-relations, largely *are* a Happening. The structuring will necessarily be compartmentalized, carrying to its ultimate conclusion the tendency of modern theatre toward episodic autonomy (cf. Chekhov, Brecht, Beckett).

If a theatre’s time and space do not pretend to a different epistemological or even ontological status (which is what I take matrixing means), its situations cannot be organized into an imaginary universe which impinges on our universe only on the privileged “holy circle” of the stage. This imaginary scenic universe with its own laws and constellations of forces is formed by a causal *plot*. Borrowing a term from film theoreticians and aestheticians like Souriau,⁸ one can call this universe of the

⁶ Whitman was quoted to that effect in *Happenings*, 180.

⁷ Michael Kirby developed the hypothesis of Happenings being defined by a performance nonmatrixed by time, place, or character in the introduction to his anthology *Happenings* (see note 1); Donald M. Kaplan was referring to the restatement in Kirby’s article “The New Theatre” in the TDR special issue on Happenings which Kirby co-edited. I would like to stress that though I disagree with Kirby in some basic aspects, I found his notion and term of matrixing a really useful contribution to a not merely impressionistic discussion of the genre.

⁸ Etienne Souriau, *Les grands problèmes de l'esthétique théâtrale* (Paris: 1962), p. 11.

theatrical plot a *diegetic* one (from the Greek *diegesis*, a story told). The unfolding of a Happening does not give rise to another imaginary but vivid and coherent space/time universe overlapping with our own: *a Happening is nondiegetic*. Paradoxically, any diegetic theatre genre, such as mime or indeed drama, can thus be seen aesthetically as a limit-case of a nondiegetic genre (such as the Happening) whose time and space had become fixed into a constant. In mathematical notation, if a Happening is a function of time, space, dramaturgic figures, and dramaturgic situation:

$$(1) H = f(t, s, \text{fig}, \text{sit})$$

then for (2) $t/s = k$, which is the situation for drama:

$$(3) Dr = k \cdot f(\text{fig}, \text{sit})$$

The constant k is then the time/space relation or form characteristic for each major epoch of drama (and diegetic theatre).

Historically, Happenings have used various materials grouped around stylized human activities, as dramatic and diegetic theatre also does (dance and mime, music and noises, light and scenery, film, literature, etc.). But Happenings have used these materials in new and sometimes startling ways. Persons are treated as objects, enclosed in shrouds or sacks, wrapped in paper or tin foil, painted, or used as surfaces for movie projection, etc.; indeed, many Happeners seem uncomfortable with normally clad or normally nude figures. Only the best escape this syndrome, an aspect of the Happenings style which Susan Sontag explains by the experience and pressures of New York painters, preoccupied with urban junk and highly aggressive not only against the audience but above all against their medium and materials—a style based on the artifacts and human relations of the modern American city: “the brutal disharmony of buildings in size and style, the wild juxtaposition of store signs, the clamorous layout of the modern newspaper” (Sontag, 271-272).

2.3 A Tentative Definition

Happenings are a genre of theatre spectacle, using various types of signs and media organized around the action of human performers in a homogeneous and thematically unified way, and a nondiegetic structuring of time and space.

Happenings are differentiated from dramatic (opera, ballet, mime) theatre by the absence of a coherent diegetic universe. They are differentiated from fairs, pageants, and other similar nondiegetic spectacle genres by their dramaturgic homogeneity, and from circus (a genre to which they appear to be aesthetically closest) by their more unified themes or fields.

A definition of drama adapted from Aristotle's *Poetics* (part 6) by updating the language—leaving out the parts specific for the Greek conception of theatre and for tragedy, as well as the dubious, contested and structurally unnecessary reference to

Souriau has enlarged on this score in several other works, e.g., in his presentation of the anthology *L'Univers filmique*, and in the well-known *Les Deux cent mille situations dramatiques*, both Paris, n.d.

catharsis—might be: Drama is the presentation (*mimesis*)⁹ (1) of a complete action; (2) which is of a determined magnitude; (3) in differentiated and heightened language; (4) in the form of events, not of narrative. Compared to the above definition of Happenings—and leaving aside for the moment the moot factor of language—we note the universal hallmark of spectacle common to both in (4) and the differentiating factor of plot in time in (2), which latter is a hallmark of diegetic genres only. We are then left with an open question about factor (1)—are Happenings simply “free form” or are they thematically unified, possessing a complete action (*praxis*) or indeed fable (*mythos*)? I would argue that there is no free form in art: a form called free is either inoperative or new. In that sense, any successful Happening has a limited thematic field, and its action, though oscillating, is complete unto itself. Further, I would argue that—as different from plot, which is based on univocal causality—Aristotle’s notion of *fable* could and should be salvaged for any modern theory of theatre and spectacles: *The fable (mythos) is the presentation of action; for by fable I mean the arrangement (composition) of incidents.* This is elastic enough to encompass both univocally causal relations and any number of transformational or associational arrangements of incidents, just as in contemporary poetry and other arts: e.g., isomorphic, isogenic, isothematic (by formal, providential, or thematic resonances).

2.4 Genetics

This is not to deny that Happenings evolved by theatricalization and spectacularization of music and the plastic arts, and only secondarily from older scenic genres such as dance. Historically, *plastic arts evolved into temporality* through mobiles, collages, and kindred developments; Calder, Duchamp, Gabo, Rauschenberg, Tinguely, and many other experimental artists and groups attempted to make an art form out of the environment. At a later stage, human beings used as objects were brought into the environment¹⁰—which then immediately tended toward theatre. Traces of that procedure are frequent in painters’ Happenings, e.g., in Kaprow’s *Eat* or Oldenburg’s *Washes*, and have infiltrated the style of the whole genre. Simultaneously, *concert music evolved into spatiality*, directly from performance (Cage) or still more easily through scenic dances to music (Cunningham, Halprin).

3. SOME HISTORICAL ANALOGIES

Happenings have some curious and instructive analogies with a number of other nondramatic scenic genres, which should be discussed within a proper theory of theatre based on a sociology of spectacle forms. I shall mention a few, centering on

⁹ For a reading of *mimesis* as (re)presentation or performing preferably to copying or simple imitating, see my brief argumentation in “The Mirror and the Dynamo,” *TDR* 38 (1967), pp. 58-59.

¹⁰ An excellent formulation of that process can be found in Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: 1967), pp. 165-166.

the English Masque,¹¹ in an attempt to bring out some features of Happenings' unique sociological profile.

3.1 The Masque

The Masque has been defined as "an evening entertainment in which the chief performers were masked courtiers, accompanied by torchbearers, all in costumes appropriate to the device presented: the elements of song and dialogue were developed later, the original nucleus being dances and conversations with spectators selected by the masquers" (Cunliffe, 146). It developed when a variety of medieval folk-customs—chiefly the "mumming," a procession of disguised people, but also the "king-game," election of a mock Saturnalian ruler, and the sword-dance, a mimic combat—were appropriated by the upper class for an evening entertainment leading up to a banquet. The entertainment absorbed, in the sixteenth century, influences from Italy (directly or by way of France), where Renaissance revels had reached unprecedented splendor in theatricalizing public living and translating it into a scene in which all the known arts were used to express a world of ideal loveliness. This led to many modifications of the original simple procession with dance, chief of which is the introduction, first, of conversations and set speeches, and, at the apogee of the Jacobean Masque, of elaborate singing and plotted, diegetic dialogue. The nucleus of the Masque is thus nondiegetic, simply a potlatch-type procession-cum-dance organized within a certain field of possibilities (the "device," e.g., of the Green Men or similar) to which costumes, masks, and dances were related. Its primal character as communal fertility rite was modified into aristocratic convivial conventions promoting Tudor upper-class unity and, increasingly, the splendor and magical position of the court itself.

¹¹ This section of the essay uses, besides Masque texts and the accounts of E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage I-IV* (Oxford: 1923), insights from:

- Cunliffe, John W. "Italian Prototype of the Masque and Dumb Show." *PMLA* XXII (1907).
 Evans, Herbert Arthur. *English Masques*. London: 1897.
 Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. New York: 1966.
 Furniss, W. Todd. "Ben Jonson's Masques." In *Three Studies in the Renaissance*. New Haven: 1958.
 Gilbert, Allan H. *The Symbolic Persons in the Masques of Ben Jonson*. Durham, N.C.: 1948.
 Honig, Edwin. *Dark Conceit*. New York: 1966.
 Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *The Breaking of the Circle*. New York: 1960.
 Orgel, Stephen. *The Jonsonian Masque*. Cambridge, Mass.: 1965.
 Prunières, Henri. *Le ballet de cour en France avant Benzerade et Lully*. Paris, n.d.
 Reyher, Paul. *Les masques anglais*. Paris: 1909.
 Rossiter, A. P. *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans*. London: 1950.
 Schoenbaum, Samuel, ed. *Essays Principally on Masques and Entertainments*. Chicago: 1968.
 Talbert, Ernst W. "The Interpretation of Jonson's Courtly Spectacles." *PMLA* LXI (1946).
 Taylor, R. A. *Aspects of the Italian Renaissance*. London: 1923.
 Welsford, Enid. *The Court Masque*. Cambridge: 1927.

These books will be quoted by author's name and page in parenthesis. See also R. B. Parker's parallel of "Dramaturgy in Shakespeare and Brecht," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, No. 3, 1963.

3.2 Parallels and Oppositions

Some obvious parallels include the one-shot or two-shot nature of any particular Masque performance and its division into open-air and "palace" forms. Further, it was based on a close-knit, numerically small social group, which resulted in the use of allegorized themes and figures played by members of the audience (also using a few resource persons such as the author and the choreographer). Though disguised as symbolic stage figures for the duration of the performance, they returned into the audience for the final celebratory dance (as is often the case in Action Theatre today, e.g., *Mysteries* and *Dionysus in 69*). The Masque took over from Italian public entertainments a new method of combining all known types of semiotic signs on the scene. Happenings, though more hesitant (perhaps because they have not—yet?—had the evolutionary span of the Masque), and more suspicious of the celebratory media of speaking and singing, similarly pillage new music, plastic arts, and, in some indirect and incomplete ways, even drama and poetry. The Masques' fascination with theatrical machinery has no full parallel in Happenings, but it has cropped up in projects such as E.A.T. and Joan Littlewood's planned electronic fun palace—not to mention the modern gadgetry often present in Happenings themselves. Most important perhaps, the Masque also attempted to allegorize the audience, and its appeal, as that of any coterie "myth-play," was "a curious mixture of the popular and the esoteric; it is popular for its immediate audience, but those outside its circle have to make a conscious effort to appreciate it" (Frye, 282). Finally, the Masque "even at its best was an attempt rather than an achievement, but although it never quite gained in intrinsic and permanent value, it had a deep, fruitful, and lasting influence" (Welsford, 243-44)—not only on poetry but also on theatre, which enriched itself by incorporating many of its elements and ways of using space, music (i.e., time), and actors.

On the other hand, the late Jonsonian Masque added a danced scene which showed disruptive powers at work against the advocated harmony and which was often more striking than the celebratory scene. The basic aim of this "anti-Masque" was to enact a deadly threat to or sickness of the contemporary way of life, identified with the monarchist state, and its final triumphant recovery in the symbolic harmony of banquet and dance. The Masque often relied in both its general form and its dance patterns on a quasi-Pythagorean or Neoplatonic numerology, representing an arithmetical, geometrical and musical harmony of spheres which symbolized the political microcosm and guaranteed its harmony. "The masque writers were bound to represent both marriage and monarchy, not as faulty human institutions, but as joyful mysteries. . . . This enforced orthodoxy led, as it was bound to do, to a stiff insincerity, very alien from the true spirit of romance" (Welsford, 290-291). Unlike the more sophisticated and mediated medieval approach from which it ultimately derived, the late Masque idealized the pragmatic values held by its audience, the ruling social class. Compared to medieval dramaturgy—which was based on an Augustinian theory of salvational history—the Masque had no institutionally or mythically intrinsic *telos*. The Elizabethan history play still had the ideologically powerful, though secularized, "Tudor myth" to inform its structure, which therefore emphasized the deadly threat of civil war with only a perfunctory final communion (e.g., at the end

of *Richard III*): but the Masque had to fall back on a stock morality plot and a narrow cast of types, usually from classical mythology. "The dramatist might depict life as sorrowful or ridiculous or contemptible, but in the masque absurd or malevolent beings appeared only to be put to flight by the entry of the noble, joyous and joy-bringing masquers" (Welsford, 366).

Reacting against new Individualist myths which celebrated a false civil community, late nineteenth-century drama began to search for more mature allegorical forms. Much of modern drama from Jarry on is an anti-Masque-like recognition of the "absurd and malevolent" as the new normality, or indeed—with Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, or Strindberg—of bourgeois reality as a horrifying and haunted space and time. For example, Mallarmé envisaged the future work of dramatic art as a sacramental participation in mystery, presenting the *mise-en-scène* of state religion.¹²

As opposed to all attempts at sacramental yea-saying comedies, the nay-saying Happenings want either to escape from capitalist society or to pull it down; they emphasize either the necessity of a nonexistent communion or the alienation of life without it (sides of the same coin, in fact). For the authors of most Happenings there is both a crying need for and a total absence of any supraindividualistic social entity in which one could believe sufficiently to celebrate its order. That is why—unlike the Masque or the early French *mascarade* and ballet—Happenings have steadfastly refused to take their cue and devices from the prevalent dramatic form, even to the point of being somewhat hysterically suspicious of its dominant medium, words, regardless of its uses. Again, numerology is very evident in Happenings, but it is based on nineteenth-century thermodynamics, implying that humanity and its affairs exist as aggregates in a mechanical, valueless universe subject to the laws of chance and large numbers (that "Welfare State of the mind"—Kaplan, 96). Though Happenings often revert to ritual attitudes, their ritual is subjective and almost myth-less. The "anti-Masque" stage has completely taken over. If one looked at them from a world of clear and constant values it would not be too difficult to see the world presented in the Happenings as a demonic chaos rampant with secularized monsters of ultimate neo-capitalist alienation.

4. HAPPENINGS AND THEIR TIMES—COGNITIVE AND NIHILIST ESTRANGEMENT

4.1 Effect

Most Happenings seem to have been rather unsatisfactory in their own terms—primitive or muddled, often through lack of time and money, but also through lack of clear aims. One has to insist that in Happenings, as in all spectacles, the effect depends on clarity of gestural and verbal actions, on their social meaning (different fields of possibility are not aesthetically equivalent), on the skillful performance of

¹² Haskell Block, *Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama* (Detroit: 1963), p. 86. I already mentioned affinities with expressionist, surrealist, and futurist drama, and Kirby has gone much further in following *one* tradition behind the Happenings (the so-called dadaist one) in the introduction to *Happenings*.

a coordinated series of situations, and on the overall consistency of purpose embodied in the material's selection and space/time spread: i.e., on the author's artistic point of view. The audience's possible reactions often have to be included as a margin of co-authorship in the author's point of view; this will be touched on later.

However, theoretically, if and when the above demands are met, a Happening should have a specific effect on participants. By getting drawn into a "real" event—i.e., one not taking place in a diegetic universe—the participants should experience a shock of poetic cognition directed at the performance's thematic field, and beginning with themselves and their environment. A Happening "is designed to stir the modern audience from its cozy emotional anesthesia" (Sontag, 275); "some specific frustrations, caused by cybernated life, required accordingly cybernated shock and catharsis" (Nam June Paik, *Manifestos*, 24); "the highest priority must be given to the re-education of its perceptions" (Baxandall, 29). A Happening is, according to Richard Schechner, "(1) an attempt to bring into celebratory focus the full message-complexity of a downtown street and (2) a playing with modes of perception" (Schechner, 148); it isolates events or images in order to revitalize them: "Deadened habits, routine images, unused sensibilities, and even places (Kaprow's highways and supermarkets) are reinfused with meaning," he concludes optimistically (Schechner, 154). Fossilized views of reality should, when juxtaposed to "unpackaged" events, reveal themselves "as grotesque, inadequate and dangerous."

In a performance by the Once Theatre, bureaucratic dossiers on young people were monotonously read, while technicians encased the individuals, upright and nearly nude, in a box one by one between layers of plastic sheeting. They looked like frozen fish on ice, bugs in an ice tray, people in an apartment house. The banal, aggressive or grotesque may also be aestheticized before one's eyes. In *Meat Joy* by Carolee Schneemann, the lovers, having undressed one another, paint the flesh of the other. In Ken Dewey's *Without and Within* a rough tug-of-war with audience participation is transformed into a deliberate ritual, then into dancing which ends with rock-and-roll. Hostility into beauty into joy. [Baxandall, 32-33]

4.2 Baxandall's "Alienation Antidote" Hypothesis

Even if one does not share the millenarism of Dick Higgins, who programmatically states that we are "approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant" (Higgins, 11-13), Happenings at their best may prefigure possible new modes of human relations and living. Hopefully, these can be construed as fragments or elements of a new aesthetics (and ethics), "the outlines of everyday life for the post-compulsive, post-manipulated man" (Baxandall, 33). Upon such elements, some left-wing or radical critics such as Baxandall and Schechner have based their defense of Happenings, claiming for them the hypothetical status of an antidote to existing forms of alienation (reification, desensualization) in the mass society of corporate capitalism. They argue that Happenings use special devices to overcome communication barriers in a manipulated consumer society, in an age of TV-addiction, public-relations credibility gap mass propaganda techniques marketing everything from pollutants to genocidal imperialist wars such as in Vietnam. In such a context, a re-education of audience perceptions, a de-pollution of senses, is most urgent; mimetic recognition (*anagnorisis*)

in Happenings functions as therapy counteracting the brain-washing effects of profit-oriented life and demystifying ruling relationships both in life and on stage. They envisage Happenings exclaiming with Yvonne Rainer: "NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamor and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectators by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved" (T30, 178).

This leads to a fundamental question: Are Happenings really all that demystifying, or do they bear in themselves a new mystification? Do they shock for therapeutic or terroristic ends? Do they celebrate a forward-looking defiance of the ruling myth or a black mass of their own? Have they, in Schechner's terms, the cruelty of childish gratification or of adult perception? This may be a variant on the general question facing critics of the establishment or state power machines—namely, how much destruction is necessary for a reconstruction—but the answer has to be found in each separate instance. Artaud's and Camus' ambiguous plague imagery is clearly unable to help us here. It seems therefore most useful to approach an answer in terms of the other main figure and tradition in modern theatre, Brecht.

4.3 Brecht, and Happenings, and Their Times

Brecht's work is the major example in this century of assimilating a plebeian spectacle tradition into drama. Logically, its substratum of popular fairs, cabaret, burlesque, and other spectacles—what I have called¹³ the Azdak-Schweik "look from underneath" of lower-class demystification—has some affinities with Happenings. He also passed through a phase of writing for a closed and homogeneous group, during which his aim, in the "plays for learning," was to make the participants more active and critical, with the audience being secondary or unnecessary. More generally, he felt that routine actions and situations representing the anthropological commonplaces of our way of life should be estranged in order to expose their alienated quality. Happenings estrange basic conventions of spectacle such as entering by an aisle or sitting in front of the performance area. They also lift everyday commonplaces—"the visit to the supermarket, eating TV dinner, TV, the preliminaries of sex" (Baxandall, 32)—out of the "ordinary" aura and into the focus of attentive scrutiny. They very rarely—and this is a clear weakness—focus their attention on political or economic relationships of any kind: Happenings are more than a little socially inbred. Nonetheless, they theatricalize the audience and its relationships: the audience becomes to a certain extent its own spectacle. This may be in a way a logical extension of Brecht's approach; yet the methodology of Brechtian dramaturgy and of Happenings differs considerably, and for good reason.

The comparison is crucial because Brecht started out (1916-28) as a Villonesque or

¹³ See the essay in note 8. This part of the essay owes much to Lee Baxandall's article (see note 1); though I am dubious about his basic stance, he had the perspicacity of first posing and problematizing the crucial comparison of the two estrangements—Brecht's and the Happenings'. It also owes much to discussions with Richard Schechner, before and after his quoted book.

Rimbaudesque nihilist. The post-World War I upheavals in Europe, the exemplary experience of the Leninist phase of the Bolshevik revolution, proved to him that human relations—i.e., man's "nature"—could be changed by intelligent and organized, though painful, intervention. After *The Threepenny Opera* he ceased writing for bourgeois audiences, however liberal or dissident they might be, and turned to an audience of workers and school-children (1929-34). At that point, he began functioning as a partisan or guerrilla in the Lukácsian sense of a creator, who coordinates his actions with a disciplined revolutionary "main body," but proceeds on his own responsibility, autonomous yet not independent. (This epicyclic way of operating makes nonsense out of the division between inner-directed and outer-directed action, which has befuddled so many liberal critics of Brecht before and after Esslin.) These experiences fused the nihilist clean sweep of the artists—the familiar which is systematically rendered incomprehensible to the senses—with Marx's gnoseology and dialectics which used the resulting view of alienation not as an object of subjective empathy but of cognition. Even after 1933, Brecht never forsook this synthesis. Indeed, his path through the "didactic" phase, and, in particular, the critically much undervalued impact of his new audiences, made it possible for Brecht to return in his mature phase to a new concreteness enriched by insight into the inner model of empirical existence, the "events behind the events."

The Happenings' authors' critical dates were not 1917 and 1933 but 1945-47 and the period from the mid-1950's to the mid-1960's. The first period is the time when many of them had their first conscious experiences of social relations. They grew up in a U.S. turning from contradiction-filled Rooseveltian antifascism to the cold war outside, and McCarthyite repressions and stagnation inside. The second period is the breakdown of that stagnation in an inconclusive flurry of shocked recognitions of America's papered-over contradictions. Happenings were created in this period and shared its inconclusiveness. The New York *bohème* lacked available or persuasive foreign models, lacked strong native workers' or Socialist movements, and was subjected to new and more pervasive methods of mass persuasion based on the lure of prosperity. For these and other reasons the Happenings' authors did not emerge out of nihilism into a universe of man enmeshed into political economy and into a theatre interested in civic responsibility. Instead, they emerged as an isolated little group catering mainly to each other: their lack of interest in audience was formally analogous but sociologically poles apart from Brecht's second phase. Rejecting American capitalism but disbelieving in the possibility of a humanizing social change, their Happenings were as a rule more pessimistic than Brecht's plays. Together with much contemporary European drama, they postulated an absurd, meaningless reality: "there is the traffic jam, the construction job, the bus that gets four flat tires all at once for no readily explainable reason, the train that stops mysteriously in the middle of the tunnel under the East River. To the average person, these might be minor tragedies; a happening person would exult that the normal, mundane order of things had been suspended or changed vividly."¹⁴ Faced with such attitudes, one recalls the witty definition of the absurd as "a dialectical situation seen by a masochist" (Eco, 237).

¹⁴ Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings & Time/Space Art* (New York-Paris-Cologne: 1965), p. 34.

4.4 Cognitive and Nihilist Estrangement

Comparing the above quote from Hansen to, say, Brecht's stance toward a traffic accident in his essay *The Street Scene*, it becomes evident what Happenings assume: that the techniques of mass persuasion have badly weakened the normative powers of reason, and the only approach left is to subject people to a nonexplicit, more primitive and aggressive kind of experience, which will reorient them through "direct perception." The premises of such a proceeding are strictly magical: Professor Schechner calls it the infantile celebratory myth of "social reconstruction through sensory awakening" (Schechner, 155). In other words, the Happenings' authors expanded their magic nihilism in the only other direction available when one rejects the Brechtian horizon: toward a religious, noncognitive estrangement. Taking a ritual and mystical rather than a cognitive approach, Happenings therefore opposed *nihilist estrangement* to Brecht's cognitive dialectics. Of course, it might sometimes be useful to think of these oppositions as polar possibilities present in each significant Happening, and reduced to the nihilist pole only in the less significant ones. It would then be the task of a sensitive critic to characterize each particular performance on its own merits, differentiating anew for each singular case (certainly *Fotodeath*, for example, is not predominantly absurd or nihilist: it shows absurdity up).¹⁵

Brecht himself did the spade work in defining a noncognitive estrangement by pointing to Asian and generally pre-Individualistic theatre techniques. Such estrangement "from the right" is nihilist in a religious rather than a political sense—a very American form of nativistic movement (Schechner, 155). The most sophisticated nihilist religion is, of course, Zen Buddhism, and a quote from the Zen precept of Gautama Buddha in his fundamental text on contemplation and meditation, *Satti-patthana-sutti*, immediately calls to mind the technique of primitive Happenings:

How does the anachorete carry out the exercise of contemplating the body in the body? Having gone into a wood, at the foot of a tree . . . the anachorete sits with feet crossed, holding his body in a vertical position, with fixed attention. He breathes in with full attention, and breathes out with full attention. Drawing in a long breath, he knows: "I am drawing in a long breath," drawing in a short breath, he knows: "I am drawing in a short breath." Drawing out a long breath, he knows: "I am drawing out a long breath," drawing out a short breath, he knows: "I am drawing out a short breath"; that is the way to exercise. "I will breathe conscious of my whole body"; that is the way to exercise.

(Compare Kaprow's *Calling*, T30, 203-210.) Buddhist contemplation paradoxically uses estrangement and a perverted form of cognition to advance to Nirvana; the beatific vision of the discontinuous flux of things is related to a consciousness of the

¹⁵ See on the other hand Oldenburg's remarks on his *Gayety*, a very interesting manifestation of the tension which went into the making of that "civic spectacle": "In *Gayety* I want to create Chicago, in the way I see it. . . . I think of O'Henry's or anyone else's municipal report, sociological studies, etc., but that mine is poetic/satiric/symbolic. The enigmatic portions may be taken to be the situation of the spirit in the community, often these have a violent turn. The relation of the incidents is fortuitous as is the case in real life. . . . Unfortunately I am limited to typicalities, but the spectator may imagine the numbers. The piece closes with a Finale, an apotheosis, in the form of a destruction which always seems appropriate in which the forces of the community are released functionlessly in relieving chaos" (*Happenings*, 234-235).

limits of philosophical humanism and of the positive meaning of alienation. As such it is the horizon of all consistent nihilist estrangement—it may be unnecessary to mention how strong an attraction Zen Buddhism has provided for the social group from which Happenings too have sprung.

Even if one assumes that Happenings are not predominantly a new mystification of the Zen type but a necessary forerunner of cognitive estrangement, “a greater art emerges from the dramatization of historical reason, than from theatre historically condemned to prepare the ground for reason’s resurgence” (Baxandall, 35).

5. SOME WORDS AT THE END, BUT NOT IN CONCLUSION

Happenings have forced us to rethink a number of basic spectacle concepts. Their nondiegetic organization leads us to re-examine a concept of dramaturgic fable as an integrated use of nonverbal materials and nonnarrative relationships. The very concept of theatre has to be redefined in order to include a number of genres hitherto neglected as too vulgar (*vulgus* meaning people) for official aesthetics. This can only lead to a more precise definition and delimitation of drama and other canonic genres, and have a quite salutary effect. However, when the impact of Happenings works toward a simple-minded denial of the relevance of drama, fable, etc., in our times, sterility ensues. The struggle between cognitive and nihilist attitudes is at its clearest in the theoretical domain, which by nature does not tolerate much vagueness. Nevertheless, such sterility is not a consequence of the rise of Happenings, but of their context. Happenings are in part a sociocultural document: but above all they show the potentiality of new forms and materials for theatrical communication and challenge our aesthetic.

Yet the uncertain status of Happenings in theatrical theory and practice is to a large extent due to intrinsic problems of their development. As I tried to point out in this essay, their point of view or principle of allegorical stylization is unclear. In the allegorical mode an antecedent situation is juxtaposed to the present fable, the two being connected by a belief, purpose, or ideal, which provides the point of view. In order for an allegorical work of art to succeed, the artist derives his authority both from personally creating a new structure and a new meaning, and from an antecedent ideal which is in some way classical. That ideal is as a rule absent from Happenings, which are concerned primarily (in a way that is perhaps understandable but nonetheless crippling) with nay-saying—or with a vague and general yea-saying which is equivalent to an absence (see 1.31).

Furthermore, to their contact-magic premise of human reorientation through “direct perception,” I want to oppose two questions: (1) does this counter-magic mean playing the game of the opinion-manipulators, albeit in the contrary direction? (2) does this mean playing the game on the terrain of the establishment brain-washers, where they are much more powerful? One may discount the first question as liberal relativism. But the second one surely implies that Happening techniques can be antidotal only if and when TV programming, newspaper and film financing and distribution, town planning, and so on are controlled by their producers and consumers—and that in the meantime the alienating powers of the system are such that “live” performances can do little to influence it.

I believe the greatest possibilities for Happening techniques do in fact lie in a diffusion through media such as film and TV, which are already using some of them, e.g., in *Laugh-In*. Obviously, the exploration of such possibilities even now is at worst a worthwhile pursuit in avant-garde finger-exercises, and, at best, it might be of great influence as a laboratory experiment in new perception.

The foregoing discussion of Happenings may make clearer why they did not outlast their socio-political moment. A magico-religious stance is not able to cope with the world (or the U.S.) of today, and it cannot create a major spectacle form. Such a form can, I believe, arise only if it is steeped in and adopts the ideal of philosophical humanism. As Lukács, Merleau-Ponty, and many others have noted, present-day humanism no longer takes the side of man against his body, of his spirit against his language, of values against facts; man is not given, he *becomes* in the process by which the body becomes a gesture, the language a deed, and the facts a point of view.¹⁶ Adopting a humanist point of view, a new theatre coming after Happenings would have to face some basic dichotomies they left as legacy: between emotion and reason, facts and values, objects and persons, estrangement and cognition, wit and language. The new theatre would have to acknowledge openly that the nexus of the sensorium is, after all, the brain.¹⁷ This means above all that Happenings have not faced the use of language as verbal poetry and not as noise. As Lukačs pointed out, the spoken word, the conceptualized sound, is of paramount importance in establishing a continuity between past and present: "The loss of word means a loss of memory."¹⁸ Loss of contact with the past leads to a perpetual point-consciousness shifting with but never dilating beyond the fleeting point of the present: it is thus equivalent to the loss of contact with *future* too. An allegorical genre without memory of antecedent and without anticipation of posteriority must flounder in pure naturalism and phenomenology: the meaningful word seems to make the difference between nihilism and cognition. Its use would probably entail structural principles more sophisticated than simple permutation or quasi-circular repetition. In fact, this seems to be where we've been in the last few years.

Richard Schechner believed that the delicate balance "between revitalization and fantasy, control and freedom, reflection and participation, complexity and simplification . . . can be maintained" (Schechner, 155). Unfortunately, I think we must recognize that Happenings have achieved this balance only in exceptional cases. The failure to achieve it, because of subjectivity, imprecision, and dogmatic blindness to history, has prevented them from becoming more than a possibly fertile footnote in the history of theatrical spectacle. But then, as I remarked earlier, books and professional periodicals have been and are being devoted to less significant footnotes. And the dossier is not quite closed: the implications of this genre may hold some surprises yet.

¹⁶ See Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Neuwied: 1969), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: 1960), *passim*.

¹⁷ I am indebted for this observation, as well as for stimulating my interest in a possible parallel between Masque and Happening, to Professor Donald F. Theall of McGill University, and to his unpublished manuscript of an address to McGill alumni from fall 1968 which he kindly allowed me to refer to.

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, "Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des Kinos," in *Schriften zur Literatursoziologie* (Neuwied, 1968), p. 78.