

And All Was Cold As Any Stone: Death and the Critique of Representation

Donnalee Dox

If, as a limit, death really is what escapes and is deferred and as a result what thought has to deal with, right from the beginning—this death is still only the life of our minds. But the death of the sun is a death of the mind, because it is the death of death and the life of the mind. There's no relief or deferral if nothing survives.

—Jean Jacques Lyotard, “Can Thought Go on Without a Body?”

In order for representation to be really bereft of origin and exceed its geometrical nature without ceasing to be representation, the price that must be paid is enormous, *no less than death*.

—Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein”

In contemporary criticism the critique of the individuated subject, the suspicion of transcendent knowledge, and a focus on signification have opened representation to the free-play of meanings based on material culture. The materialist and secular grounding of academic criticism leaves little space for more ephemeral responses of mind and emotion to theatrical representation. As currently constructed, statements of subjective responses fall into suspect domains of untheorized interiority. To connect emotional responses, such as grief, to criticism is to be seemingly seduced by the spectre of an essential self and a fantasy of universalism, or to fall into a chasm of anti-intellectualism. The connection between death and the representation of death, however, is in the domain of subjective experience and response as well as in material constructions.

Death is at the heart of contemporary criticism. Within the logics of deconstruction and the fascination with alterity is a profound sense of *loss* and

Donnalee Dox is an assistant professor in the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Arizona, where she teaches text analysis, dramaturgy, theatre history and acting. Her essays have appeared in *Frontiers*, *Theatre Survey*, and *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. She has presented papers on contemporary and medieval theatre at numerous national and international conferences.

lack. The language of death is pervasive in the critique of representation: the death of the author, the death of modernism, the death of the subject, and the death of language have marked the crisis of Western thought since modernism (Schleifer 3).¹ Loss is now spoken of as inherent in performance. That is, what is represented is recognized as only seemingly present, and so understood as absent, deferred, and ultimately inaccessible. But even as current critical thought seems to emerge from this sense of irretrievable loss, critical vocabularies function without emotion, without feeling, and without grief or mourning.

Samuel Hazo calls this phenomenon a “twentieth century flight from feeling.” Hazo goes as far as to suggest that simulacra of emotion now pass for the ephemeral and subtle condition of *being moved* by an event, a memory, a performance, or a metaphor. Hazo suggests that professional critics habitually

appear to be above what they are considering—as if letting themselves become involved in the work from within would somehow deprive them of the objectivity needed to criticize. They resist letting themselves become touched emotionally. Such a fear of feeling does a basic injustice to the work being considered because it prevents it from being experienced [. . .] Such critics suffer from spiritual anemia; they do not possess what every genuine critic must have—largeness of soul. (28)

The pervasive metaphors of death, loss and endings within a devaluation of emotion and subjective experience suggests a lacuna in contemporary thought. Indeed, Peter Stearns has observed a distinct chill, a cultural “coolness” in American culture which constructs emotional expression as a sign of excess and a lack of intellectual sophistication. Stearn’s analysis suggests that this chill pervades American institutions and conventions (230). Thus, historicized constructions of emotional responses have credibility in contemporary thought, but writing *from* an emotional response—such as grief in response to a representation of death—has little critical value. Materialist criticism is more likely to read a representation of death as a failure of representation to supply real death. At the same time, following Stearns, considerations of emotion response must acknowledge that “cultural materials have real-life impact” (Stearns 229).

Saturated as it is with metaphors of death, how can criticism speak of death and “real-life” responses to death? How can current critical thought—committed as it is to deferred meanings, difference, unstable selves, material culture, surface juxtapositions and critique of representation—deal with the immediacy and complexity of death and grief? Can concepts of death as “negative materiality” caught in power relationships which define its meaning

account for poetic, dramatic, and personal reflections on death (Schleifer 7)? What place does the representation of death have when death, and the response to death, is not “a legitimate subject for public discourse” (Gavin 29)? If, as Hazo would suggest, a simulacrum of death can produce only a simulacrum of grief, what resonance does a response to death or its representation have in a “cool” culture which assumes but does not speak of grief (*WATD* 92)?

For dramatic criticism, the cultural bias against emotion, which Hazo observes and Stearn historicizes, manifests as incompatibility between logical thought and subjective experience. In theatre and performance the presentation of death, dying bodies, or grief prompts discourse on the construction of experiences, but rarely opens up a reciprocal relationship between the subjective response to watching a death and the integration of that knowledge into a representation of death. Acknowledging a reciprocity between experience and thought as integral to the critique of representations of death seems especially appropriate. The question what does it mean to represent death in the late twentieth century asks what lack a representation of death replaces, or what is displaced by a represented death. Rather, the question asks how interpretations of experience inform an intellectual and emotional response to represented death, and what value an emotional response might have for criticism.

This reciprocity emerges even in a “cool” culture. When Philippe Aries historicizes death in modern medical institutions, he finds an effort to “reconcile an accidental, sometimes inevitable phenomenon with the psychological security” of hospitals and hospices. That is, the technologies of death separate death from grief by sanitizing and prolonging the process of dying (Aries, *Hour* 587). Following Aries, the mechanization of death by technology marks a failure to indefinitely sustain life, not unlike the failure of representation to reproduce life. Yet while institutionalization dehumanizes death, the fundamental juxtaposition of a living body with a dead body cannot erase the intellectual problem of trying to access what has been lost—another person—or trying to know what cannot be known or documented by the one who has died.

An encounter with institutional death throws this problem back to the mechanics of representation. Jan Kott translates an institutionalized death into the irony of knowing death through observation and representation, but never as one’s own experience. Kott’s articulation represents the fundamental representational problem death poses:

[. . .] what is death? At the level of discourse, we all know that we will die. I am a man and therefore I must die. Each death, even the most painful, is someone else’s, not our own. If we think about death, then it is as discourse, as an

abstraction, or visually as a movie or video. And it is then that our own death is seen as someone else's. (115)

Death is always that which cannot be represented because it cannot be known, but can only be known by its representation. Beyond the *taleaux vivants* of funeral rites, the rhetoric of beautiful deaths, and the *ars moriendi* which deal with absence, performing death presents a perpetual paradox. The live body always contradicts the dead body it tries to show, distinguishing by its very occurrence what can be known (representation) from what cannot be known (death). So Tadeusz Kantor connected theatre with the limits of imagination:

let us establish the limits of that boundary, which has the name
 THE CONDITION OF DEATH,
 for it represents the most extreme point of reference,
 no longer threatened by any conformity,
 FOR THE CONDITION OF THE ARTIST AND ART. . .
 this specific relationship
 terrifying
 but at the same time compelling,
 the relationship of *the living to the dead*,
 who not long ago, while still alive, gave not the slightest
 reason for the unforeseen spectacle,
 for creating unnecessary separation and confusion . . . (114).

That theatre should show death as the alterity to known experience throws experience itself into relief. The articulation of death can only make that difference more acute, and the contrast more intense. Though there may be no intrinsic grounds for authority in the discourse on death (Goodwin and Brofen, 4), what can be known, documented, translated and repeated are the effects of death.

The effects of death—grief, mourning, a sense of loss—take their authority from subjective experience. The articulation of these effects relies on representation. Rilke's third stanza of *Todeserfahrung*, literally *The Experience of Death*, was written for the anniversary of the death of Countess Louise Schwerin. The poem represents neither death or illusion of death, grief or a simulacrum of grief, but an effect of death. As its words dance around a juxtaposition of life as illusion and death as reality, what is made present in this poem is an irretrievable absence. That absence, not even accessible at the limits of imagination, must still be represented:

But when you left, there fell into the scene

A ray of realness through the very gap
 By which you left us: greenness of true green,
 Natural sunshine, forest real with sap. (Rilke 79)²

This poem represents not Schleifer's "negative materiality" of death but the interstices between "a being now remote and quite/Translated from our daily play" and the impossibility of articulating that loss. A sense of loss passes through a speaking subject to disappear into words and images. Yet the image of a light more real illuminating green more real, sunshine more real and a forest more real brings a death into the "play of life" (*das Leben spielen*). As a formation of knowledge, this poem suggests a critical intersection of subjective experience and the technology of language in an articulation of death's effects. A "single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty," writes Phillippe Aries in the midst of a cultural analysis of Western death practices (*WATD* 92).

Any representation of death encodes cultural beliefs, values, customs and practices which determine not only the form of the articulation but the very conception of death and dying (Gavin 79). As such, represented deaths can be read as ideologically coded "texts for studying the ways art answers threats to its own powers of representation" (Goodwin and Brofen 19). From Freud to Artaud to Kristeva, through Herbert Blau and Tadeusz Kantor, death and the theatrical representation have been inseparable for this reason. While theatrical representation makes death known and knowable in the languages of material culture, death shows itself to be an unstable signifier, and its effects equally variable.

In its representations of death, *Hamlet* marks this instability. Hamlet opens in an overlap between a material world and a non-material world. Elsinore appears as a world of apparitions. In the *terra incognita* between death and life, the spirit of a dead king and father walks the night in atonement (I.iv I. 9-13), and such rational minds as Horatio's accept ghosts by "the sensible and true avouch" of sight (I.i l. 54-56). There is, in the performance of this opening, an ambiguous half-state of body/not-body. In death this spirit has qualities of the living—voice, feeling, identity, armor, a "likeness." Yet the words "I am thy father's spirit" speak from death. The dead body with the qualities of the living proposes an opening in material conditions. In this aperture Hamlet, alive and sensate, can confront a "thing" which is and is not his father, is and is not dead. In his desperation to see his father one more time, Hamlet is willing to accept the apparition, to set reason against sensory perception, and to follow until he can go no further. That is, to follow to the limit between life and death.³

The play ends in a radically different configuration of life and death. Dead bodies are laid on the stage with no ghostly doubles to speak for them. The

living will live off the lives of the dead, with rituals and repeated stories. At the end of the play, death is silence. Hamlet leaves his voice to Horatio to re-present the “carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts” at Elsinore (V.ii 301-335). His political body goes to Fortinbras, who takes it up with “sorrow” in the aftermath of havoc (V.ii 308-318). Hamlet’s own body rests, silent (V.ii 310). There is no return to conquered Denmark for revenge, this death lives on in Horatio’s retelling of “cunning and forced cause,” and in the iconography of the final procession, the display of Hamlet’s political body in “rites of war” (V.ii l. 349-354, 357). This dead body’s identity is cultural property. The loss and the grieving, when the bodies are taken up and off, is for Denmark. Unlike the play’s opening ambiguity and speculation on death, *Hamlet* closes with death as final, stone-cold and political.

Hamlet’s radically different constructions of death play out, almost mockingly, the impossible relationship between representation and death—the impossibility of representing in text or performance what cannot be known. Representation can mark death by tracing its effects, as *Hamlet* defines and redefines dead bodies and their relationship to the living. Yet, as clearly as death is constructed and re-constructed in *Hamlet*’s first and final images, death’s power as an image is rooted in the reciprocity between death as an observed phenomenon and the elusive quality of death’s description in representation. This is the ephemeral resonance between representation, interpretations of experience, material culture, and critical thought.

In *Henry V* Mistress Quickly watches Falstaff die. With the dead body off-stage, and relegated to memory, the actress playing the character tells what the character saw:

So a’ bade me lay more cloths on his feet. I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were cold as any stone. Then I felt to his knees, and so up’ard and up’ard, and all was cold as any stone. (II.iii)

For a character to have watched this death and to tell its story is to force into the open a lack, an alterity, alienation and abjection. It is to say “I could not see what he saw, I could not go where he went, I could not feel the cold he felt. I am not-dead.” This narrative of death is haunted by a motion of cold through flesh, and a metaphor of unmoving solidity. These are indeed the traces of a death: the sensation of cold, a stone to the touch, the imprint of the body on a blanket, the absent person. Mistress Quickly, twice removed from death by narrative and mimesis, does not answer Jan Kott’s question “what is death?” The telling of a

death without the body present marks the painful difference between dead and not-dead, the perplexing condition of theatre described by Kantor.

Yet these words also describe dying with a remarkable precision which touches, even centuries later, upon the impossibility of knowing death. The following passage comes not from representation, though it has now become that, but from a memory. Even sanitized in the culture of “cool,” and mediated by the “psychological security” of a modern hospital, the wrenching intellectual ambiguity of death, and its emotional effects refuse to be silenced.

The man has five I.V. tubes dripping liquids. His eyes are open. Blood has been seeping into their whites for twenty minutes now. His mouth opens, but words cannot get out. In this chaos, my father is dying. His bloody eyes focus on my face, then on something else I cannot see. As I hold his hand, the flesh goes cold. I move my hand up his arm, following the chill. His shoulder. His neck. My hand comes to rest on his face. The clock clicks. It is almost midnight and the nurses come into the room to change the I.V. I tell my father to rest, and I go out. I leave him, and the door closes. Almost immediately, the nurse opens the door. She says his breathing has changed and it won't be long. So I re-enter the room. I see that my father's body is free of tubes, and that my father is not in this body. I do not know how I know this. Air goes in and out of this body, pulling the slack jaw up and down, with a wish-click sound oddly like a respirator. Then the body stops. A death.⁴

From this memory of a modern hospital, Mistress Quickly's short speech takes on a new and vibrant reality. These two last passages intersect a theatrical death which can never be real, knowledge of death which can never be accurate, and a memory which is both culturally constructed and wholly subjective. The representation of death, even in the late twentieth century culture of “coolness” and critique, has the potential to open space for the acknowledgement of loss, for memory, and for re-interpretation of experience. In that opening is a free-play of resonances if subjective experience and representation play off each other. Perhaps what Samuel Hazo calls “largeness of soul” is the willingness to account for this reciprocity, without assuming that subjective experience has universal application, as a viable extension of critical knowledge.⁵

Notes

1. *Doch als du gingst, da brach in diese Buhne ein Streifen Wirklichkeit durch jenen Spalt, durch den du hingingst: Grun wirklicher Grune, wirklicher Sonnenschein, wirklicher Wald.*

2. Goodwin and Brofen, like Schleiffer, posit death in material conditions, and the analysis of death's representation as a function of representation. For example:

Every representation of death is a misrepresentation. Thus the analysis of it must show not only how it claims to represent death, but also what else it in fact represents, however suppressed: assertion of alternative power, self-referential metaphor, aggression against individuals or groups, formation of group identities and ideologies, and so forth [. . .] Attempts at representation [of death] therefore seek to appropriate that resistant power. (Goodwin and Brofen 20)

3. For a short essay on *Hamlet* and death, see Samuel Schuman, "'Good Night, Sweet Prince': Saying Goodbye to the Dead in Shakespeare's Plays," (*Death Studies* 20, 185-192) 187.

4. The referent for this passage is the death of the author's father, Thurston Dox, in November 1994. The observation of this death altered the author's perceptions of death in representation enough to warrant an essay on the general subject.

5. This essay was originally written for presentation at the 1996 American Society for Theatre Research conference seminar, "Theatre and Emotion" chaired by Phillip Zarrilli. I wish to thank Herbert Blau, Kathleen Woodward and Rosemarie Bank for their "largeness of soul."

Works Cited

- Aries, Philippe. *The Hour of Our Death*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.
- _____. *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Trans. Patricia M. Ranum. Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Gavin, William Joseph. *Cuttin' the Body Loose: Historical, Biological, and Personal Approaches to Death and Dying*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.
- Goodwin, Sarah Webster and Elisabeth Bronfen, eds. *Death and Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.
- Hazo, Samuel. "Essay." *Poets and Writers Magazine*. July/August 1996, 26-31.
- Jay, Martin. "The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Inability to Mourn" in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*. Eds. Gillian Robinson and John Rundell. New York: Routledge, 1994, 30-47.
- Kott, Jan. *The Memory of the Body: Essays on Theatre and Death*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, .

- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Best of Rilke*. Trans. Walter Arndt. Hanover: UP of New England, 1989.
- Schleifer, Ronald. *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare, Vol III*. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- _____. *The Life of Henry the Fifth*. *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare, Vol II*. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Stearns, Peter N. *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*. New York: New York UP, 1994.

THEATRE RESEARCH INTERNATIONAL



VOLUME 22 1997

Photo © Joachim Giesel

Theatre Research International covers the historical, critical, and theoretical study of documentation of drama, conceived as the art of the theatre. The journal publishes original articles on performance, acting and production techniques, theatre architecture, and actors' social conditions. Contributions appear generally in English, but the journal publishes occasional articles in French. The journal carries reviews of the most important studies in the field. It provides both a medium of communication for scholars, and a service to students of art, architecture, design, music, and drama literature.

Forthcoming articles

Beyond Style: Typologies of Performance Analysis,
by **Christopher Balme**

Karen Finley's *Hymen*, by **Dean Wilcox**

Interculturalism, Aestheticism, Orientalism: Starting from Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, by **Maria Shevtsova**

Les Opéras Parfumés: Aspects of Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century French Opera, by **Charles Dietrich**



Supplementary Issue (Spring 1997): *Towards Theatrical Communication*
Guest Editor: **Mitsuya Mori**

Features selected papers from the 'East-West' Theatre conference held in Tokyo in October 1995.

1997 Order Form for Volume 22

3 Issues + Free Supplementary Issue: US\$122/£64*

- Please send me a free sample copy.
- Please enter my 1997 subscription to **Theatre Research International**.
- I enclose a check payable to Oxford University Press.
- Please charge my Mastercard/Visa/American Express/Diners/JCB Card.

Card Number:

Exp. Date: Name.....

Signature..... Address.....

City/State.....

Zipcode.....

*Please note: £ Sterling rates apply in UK and Europe, US\$ rates elsewhere. Customers in the EU and Canada are subject to their own local sales tax.

Oxford University Press Journals Marketing (X97) 2001 Evans Road Cary NC 27513 USA
Tel: USA & Canada Only 1 800 852 7323 or 919 677 0977 Fax: 919 677 1714