

## Putting it Together and Finishing the Hat? Deconstructing the Art of Making Art

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### Abstract:

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Sunday in the Park with George* dramatises the life and work of Georges Seurat, inventor of pointillism. This neo-impressionist style of painting constructs the image out of tiny pixels of different coloured paint, a technique that Sondheim's musical was to portray both mimetically and stylistically. In doing this, Sondheim constructs a rhetoric of composition that consolidates conventional wisdom on how art is created: the artist starts with nothing and creates something. The musical is littered with references to this, not least in the titles of two of its most celebrated numbers, 'Putting it together' and 'Finishing the hat'. However, Sondheim's show offers more complexity than this, and its culmination in the whiteness of 'a blank page or canvas' asks us to reconsider this rhetoric. This article deconstructs the rhetoric of composition, asking whether the 'putting together' of dots or notes actually serves to reveal meaning, or whether it obscures, paints over or drowns out what is beyond the dots.

### Keywords:

Sondheim

Sunday in the Park with George

Derrida

Deconstruction

Putting it Together

Composition

## Introduction

At the end of Act I of *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), the Georges Seurat painting *Un dimanche d'été à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884) is brought to life on stage, completing an artistic creation that we have seen being put together throughout the act. 'Order',<sup>1</sup> begins Georges, and the characters spring to attention; 'Design', he announces, and they begin taking up positions; 'Tension', he continues; 'Balance', and then, as the painting is brought to completion before our eyes, 'Harmony'. It is a triumphant moment of musical theatre in which the 'whole' composition of musical, lyric and dramatic ingredients comes satisfyingly together.

Sondheim and Lapine's representation of the nineteenth century neo-impressionist painter Seurat has shown him literally applying paint to the canvas in Seurat's trademark pointillist style. The music and lyrics, spiky 'dots' of sound at their most pronounced in 'Colour and Light' but characteristic of the entire score, mimic the delicate application of dots of colour that typifies Seurat's work.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sondheim *et al*, *Four by Sondheim, Wheeler, Lapine, Shevelove and Gelbart* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2000), p. 645. References to *Sunday* in performance relate to the DVD of the original Broadway production: Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Sunday in the Park with George*, Mandy Patinkin, Bernadette Peters, 1986, DVD 82876553289.

<sup>2</sup> Sondheim describes his technique in an interview with Mark Eden Horowitz (Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), pp. 91-118.

More red...

*(Dabs with more intensity)*

And a little more red...

*(Switches brushes)*

Blue blue blue blue

Blue blue blue blue

[...]

Color and light.

There's only color and light.

Yellow and white.

Just blue and yellow and white.<sup>3</sup>

Seurat had developed pointillism (or 'divisionism') in the wake of contemporary scientific research into colour and light<sup>4</sup> which showed that

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<sup>3</sup> Sondheim, *Four by Sondheim*, p. 592.

<sup>4</sup> Amongst the scientists known to have influenced Seurat were Michel Eugène Chevreul, whose 1839 work *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* was cited by Charles

colours reach the eye in the form of light of varying wavelengths, and are only mixed once they get there. Instead of mixing pigments on the palette, he applied them to the canvas as dots of primary colour. Only when these are processed on the viewer's retina do they combine to form the desired hue.<sup>5</sup>

The engagement of the viewer with the art-work is therefore entirely phenomenological, by which I mean that the encounter with the depiction of the painting takes place wholly within the viewer's inner consciousness: it is an act of presence. 'What the eye arranges / is what is beautiful',<sup>6</sup> sings Sondheim's Georges, and this particular spin on the process consolidates the idea that beauty exists in a privileged, ontologically transcendent location.

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Blanc in his *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1867); David Sutter, whose 'Les Phénomènes de la Vision' was serialized in *L'Art* magazine, beginning with issue 1 (1880); and Ogden Rood, whose *Students' Textbook of Colour: or, Modern Chromatics, with Applications to Art and Industry* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1879) was translated into French in 1881. An account of Seurat's learning can be found in Herschel B. Chipp, 'Orphism and Color Theory', in *The Art Bulletin*, 40.1 (1958), 55-63.

<sup>5</sup> Rose-Marie Hagen and Rainer Hagen, *What Great Paintings Say* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), p. 685.

<sup>6</sup> Sondheim, *Four by Sondheim*, p. 636.

As the mimetic representation of *La Grande Jatte* comes together at the end of Act I, this optical fusion of colours is celebrated in the lyrics:

Sunday

By the blue

Purple yellow red water

On the green

Purple yellow red grass.<sup>7</sup>

And yet – deliberately, it would seem – the lyrics, despite mimicking the adjacency of the coloured dots, conspire to do exactly the opposite: they acknowledge and indicate the artifice, the non-presence of the painting, pointing to the strange gap that lies at the heart of this work and claiming back some of the work’s own contingency. For if the work relies on the presence of the viewer to ‘arrange’ its final completion, it is *not* a finished product in itself. We become aware of the dots as they exist on canvas, *pre*-presence, which do not coalesce, which have individual identities and therefore individual edges, a *between* which constitutes that individuality: a space around the dot. This creation is self-consciously aware of and exploits the individual elements that make up its structure (the dots), but it is as much the seams, joins or gaps between the dots that account for the trick of creation. The image relies on what is peripheral or *beyond* the dot.

In the words of art historians, Seurat’s process ‘exploded the structure of colour in order to build it back up again, dot by dot’,<sup>8</sup> and this is a particularly apposite phrase to

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 645.

use, because it at once evokes constructive creation ('Dot by dot / Building up the image'<sup>9</sup>) and de(con)structive energy ('exploded'). Throughout *Sunday*, the rhetoric of creation is compositional, one of 'Putting it Together', yet the final image of the show is a bare stage: metaphorically 'white. A blank page or canvas'.<sup>10</sup> At the heart of the show is a paradox which deconstructs the concept of composition: Georges's words themselves are given a double meaning:

Look, I made a hat...

Where there never was a hat...<sup>11</sup>

Already I have invoked the Derridean terminology of 'deconstruction', and my aim in this article is to consider *Sunday in the Park with George* in terms of this Derridean thought. I will begin by deconstructing conventional theories of representation in art, which Paul de Man sees as a corollary to Derrida's main deconstruction of

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<sup>8</sup> Hagen & Hagen, *What Great Paintings Say*, p. 685.

<sup>9</sup> Sondheim, *Four by Sondheim*, p. 684. Sondheim has since observed that the 'dots' of Seurat's canvas are 'more like blobs than dots' (Sondheim & Lapine, Audio Commentary); elsewhere he refers to them as 'dabs' (Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, p. 93). In both sources he also speculates that the rate at which Seurat could have applied these would have been far slower than is implied by the tempo of 'Colour and Light'.

<sup>10</sup> Sondheim, *Four by Sondheim*, p. 708.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 625.

logocentrism<sup>12</sup>, and which I will define in terms of a rhetoric of composition. I will consider the synergy between the work of Derrida and the work of Sondheim, and suggest how a notion of ‘putting it together’ – the composition of an art-work – can be seen as a concealing rather than a revelatory act. I will focus on *Sunday* as both a discussion of this area and a cipher through which to discuss it, clarifying two major elements of Derrida’s focus, presence and the origin, as metaphysical tensions framing the horizons of ideological discourse.

#### A Derridean approach

Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction stems from an interrogation of language and phenomenology, particularly the relationship between speech and writing, and the existing orthodoxies that lie behind the metaphysics of presence and the origin in Western thought. His favoured strategy is to ‘deconstruct’ the writings of other philosophers through which he detects received assumptions that have become embedded within established ways of thinking, and the project of his deconstructive thought is to overturn these habituated and complacent paradigms.

The principle paradigms that he targets are the established classical binaries that form the basis of Saussurean structuralism ‘(soul / body, good / evil, inside / outside,

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<sup>12</sup> Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 123-24.

memory / forgetfulness, speech / writing, etc.)'.<sup>13</sup> For conventional structuralism it is the difference (space) between the poles that allows our concepts of 'meaning' – 'truth' - to be systematised. As Derrida sees it, however, 'an opposition of metaphysical concepts is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination'.<sup>14</sup> The privileged pole is merely privileged because it holds a greater claim to 'presence', and our acknowledgement of this structural system is kept at bay through a constructed belief that there exists *de facto* an originary authenticity, an ideal, a 'truth' or 'meaning', and that it is therefore transcendental metaphysics rather than human agency that dictates and validates the structure. It is in interrogating such claims to presence and the origin that Derrida upsets the binaries and inserts into the space between them instead of 'difference' his (concept) of *différance*.

Whilst Derrida is characteristically cryptic about *what* deconstruction actually is ('All sentences of the type "deconstruction is X" or "deconstruction is not X" *a priori* miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false'<sup>15</sup>), he discusses what might be interpreted as the deconstructive process: a 'double gesture, a double science, a double writing [that might] practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. with an introduction and additional notes by Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. with additional notes by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), p. 4.



*displacement* of the system'.<sup>16</sup> It is this function that I would like to suggest is central to Sondheim and Lapine's work on *Sunday*, and I will suggest that they facilitate this process through a playful toying with the theme and materiality of 'space' ('nothing', 'silence').

In terms of this article, we have already noted an important assumed 'truth' that is fundamental to the metaphysics of Art: we assume that in the putting together (composition) of Art something *more* valuable is created out of *nothing* – painting is inscribed as an image upon the blank of a canvas; music is the filling of silence with ordered sound. This rhetoric of composition is called upon throughout *Sunday*: Seurat is seen in the act of painting, building up the image and 'finishing the hat'; the music seems to emulate this process, and the lyrics repeatedly use compositional phrases ('bit by bit', 'dot by dot' 'putting it together') to consolidate the idea of a constructive process.

This rhetoric can be understood as conforming to the particular metaphysics that Derrida sees underpinning classical theories of art, whose ideology privileges presence on the one hand and the ideal or origin on the other.

One makes of art in general an object in which one claims to distinguish an inner meaning, the invariant, and a multiplicity of external variations *through* which, as through so many veils, one would try to see or restore the true, full, ordinary meaning: one, naked.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, p. 329.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 22.

In classical terms, Seurat's completion of the painting and Sondheim and Lapine's majestic *coup de théâtre* at the end of Act 1 are fulfilling acts, whose 'meaning', 'truth' and 'beauty' are self-evident in their wholeness. Nevertheless, Sondheim and Lapine mount a daring expose of this ideology in *Sunday*, and nowhere more obviously than in the second act's reception for Chromolume #7. Here 'modern art' as a twentieth-century audience understands it is positioned as the offspring of what 'modern art' is to a nineteenth-century audience, though one whose integrity is brought into question through an undermining of what are perceived to be art's formal constructs – medium, form and content. The Chromolume breaks down, revealing its fragile claim to status; it is framed as a superficial gimmick, and by association we are invited to call into question the validity of so-called 'works of art'. Chromolume #7, as depicted through its breakdown and through the ridiculing of the art establishment in this scene, is clearly an artistic pretender that calls into question the certainty of mythologies such as 'truth', 'value' and 'originary meaning' in the ideology of art; on its own, though, Chromolume #7 is an easy target. By comparing it to *La Grande Jatte* – an established work of art that enjoys the privileges of this ideological set-up (yet which was itself ridiculed when it was first painted) – *Sunday* complexifies what might otherwise be the show's simple dismissal of gimmicky modern art. The ideological trappings of the art world and the mythology of 'great art' are exposed and as a result we are guided towards a genuine consideration of

(such ‘truths’<sup>18</sup> as) inner meaning, to ask what lies *beyond* the surface of the painting, between the dots of the completed composition.

### Deconstructing the text

Sondheim’s playful strategy – discussing an issue through undermining its central tenets – is a deconstructive coup, and Derrida’s own discussion of similar issues employs very similar strategies. He discusses writing through the unconventional texts of Mallarmé; theatre through the anti-theatrical effrontery of Artaud; and music through a consideration not of the ‘dots’,<sup>19</sup> but of the gaps between them – the intervals.

In these discussions, we notice Derrida deliberately subverting conventional approaches, initially in respect of language: he looks at it from other directions and resists a simple semantic understanding such that, for him, writing ‘does not give rise to a hermeneutic deciphering, to the decoding of a meaning or a truth’.<sup>20</sup>

Derrida considers Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés* (1897), whose typography navigates by tacks and diagonals across the page. He sees the pattern of letters as if ‘woven [...], spread out before us, but also being regularly stitched down’,<sup>21</sup> and reminds us of the root of ‘text’ as ‘textile’,<sup>22</sup> bringing to mind the materiality of a text. Later he

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida would place this word ‘under erasure’, striking through it to suggest the concept’s impossibility.

<sup>19</sup> The term ‘dots’ is commonly used by musicians to refer to the score.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 240.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

considers the landscape – the topography – of texts, focussing on the letter *i*, which ‘with its little suspended dot [...] continually pricks and rips through – or almost – the veil’.<sup>23</sup> In these discussions it is not only the text as inscription that interests him, but also ‘the regular intervention of the blanks, the ordered return of the white spaces’.<sup>24</sup> He talks meta-textually about his own text and, to illustrate the hieroglyphic nature of writing, picks up on another image of Mallarmé: that of the dancer’s pirouettes which, ‘in the blank space of the inter-text, entrain, entail, and encipher each other, moving about like silhouettes, cut out like black shadows against a white background’.<sup>25</sup>

The way that Derrida dislodges our conventional perspective on writing might be compared to the way that Sondheim and Lapine dislodge our conventional view of *La Grande Jatte*. I would like to discuss how they work together to do this, Sondheim in realigning the relationship between note and rest in music, and Lapine through reconfiguring the Seurat image into the volume of the theatrical space. Just as Derrida reveals the ‘truth’ of writing by using writing itself as a tool, Sondheim and Lapine wrestle with the ‘inner meaning’ of this pointillist art-work by using their own interpretation of pointillism which, like the dots of Mallarmé’s *i*, ‘continually pricks and rips through the [sonic and visual] veil’ of performance space.

Sondheim’s musical text

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

The ‘pointillism’ of *Sunday*’s music, heard throughout the show, is the most obvious representation of Seurat’s dots both musically and mimetically and is one of the dominant characteristics of the score.

The first way Sondheim uses pointillism is absolutely of the period, and does appropriate homage to Sondheim’s recognised influence, Ravel. An arpeggiated spreading of notes forms harmonic texture and consolidates the thematic impressionism of the show<sup>26</sup> with its 7ths, shifting harmonies, and oscillating arpeggio patterns (the Celestes’ motif, ‘Finishing the Hat’, ‘We Do Not Belong Together’, ‘Beautiful’, etc.). The effect, as with Seurat’s painting style, gives an ‘illusion of unity’<sup>27</sup> – the ‘very plethora of small notes on the page suddenly suggests the flickering light effects that Seurat and his contemporaries could achieve with their dots’<sup>28</sup> – and its paradox seems to embody the play of silence and music in the score and colour and light (white) in the painting. Banfield traces this style back to Wagner’s ‘Waldweben’ in *Siegfried*: ‘a coruscation of adjacent notes in the strings whose effect is that we are not quite sure whether we are hearing slowed trills within harmonies that are grammatically static [...], or rapidly oscillating appoggiatura chords [...]. Everything is still, yet everything is moving: a dissolution of the senses thereby occurs at this moment of heightened

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<sup>26</sup> ‘I’m very old fashioned - I’m about 1890. I’m still early Ravel – that’s my idea of terrific’. Sondheim in Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans., with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 213. Here he is referring to Foucault’s description of Laplanche’s *Hölderlin et la question du père*.

<sup>28</sup> Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, p. 351.

perception'.<sup>29</sup> Such a 'dissolution of the senses' is of course key to the presence of the reception experience: in this case, what the *ear* arranges is what is beautiful, and the discrete dots and spaces – notes and silence – become subsumed into an impression of completion – a classic example of conventional compositional fulfilment.

The other major style of music used in *Sunday* could be said to exploit space somewhat differently, undermining the conventional expectation of such fulfilment. From early in the show, we see Seurat sketching,<sup>30</sup> and for six bars<sup>31</sup> this is detailed with staccato crotchet chord clusters<sup>32</sup> on the first two beats of each bar. The remaining two silent beats of these bars are held while Dot – only in the gaps - mutters to herself, first in

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>30</sup> Though of course Seurat's crayon sketches would not have been pointillistic; this style would have been employed later, in paint, in the studio. Incidentally, discussions between Sondheim, Lapine, Patinkin and Peters on the Audio Commentary of the DVD make interesting reference to Seurat's other existing crayon sketches: 'There's so little on the page, he's almost drawing what isn't there' (Sondheim & Lapine, *Sunday* DVD Audio Commentary).

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Sunday in the Park with George*, Vocal Score (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co., 1997), 'No. 3: Sunday in the Park with George', bars 2a-5; again later at bars 9-12, 99-102, etc.

<sup>32</sup> Like Seurat's dots, 'when adjacent notes are clustered together [...] we begin to hear them as a single sonority without worrying about the individual notes'. Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 374).

speech<sup>33</sup> and then in rhythmic spurts of melody. Throughout, even her speech pattern is jerky and pointillistic, with her comments spat out ('Sunday in the Park with George'<sup>34</sup>), dolloped like blobs of paint (the repeated '(bi)zarre, fixed, cold'<sup>35</sup>), and eventually rattled off in ever-increasing torrents of semiquavers ('Staring at the water'<sup>36</sup>, etc.). This is more than simply a musical representation of the painting style, though, for in drawing attention to the significance of space between the notes (the 'blank page or canvas'<sup>37</sup>), Sondheim causes us to recognise that silence is a fundamental part of the compositional whole. This is used particularly for the painting / sketching scenes ('Sunday in the Park with George', 'Gossip Sequence', 'The Day Off', 'Colour and Light', etc.), and as such, Sondheim allows us to consider the notion of composition in both music and art.

Derrida's discussions of music<sup>38</sup> also draw on the significance of space, alerting us not to the musical notes *per se*, but to 'the necessity of interval, the harsh law of

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<sup>33</sup> Sondheim & Lapine, *Sunday*, Vocal Score, 'No. 3: Sunday in the Park with George', bars 2a-c.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, bars 7-8, 40-41, 43-44, etc.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, bars 18-23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, bars 29-31, 119-122.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase 'White. A blank page or canvas' bookends *Sunday*, and frames the thematic discussion of composition in the show (Sondheim, *Four by Sondheim*, p. 575 and p. 708).

<sup>38</sup> If Derrida's discussions of silence are eloquent, his writings on music remain muted: 'I don't have the confidence [...] I am even more afraid about speaking nonsense in this area than any other' (Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 21).

spacing [...] That without which, strictly speaking, the song would not have come into being'.<sup>39</sup> Not only does the interval define melody, but it also constitutes the divisions of the chord that create harmony. It is the space, rather than the 'dots', that composes what is musical in music.

Such possible alternative readings of the musical interval are of particular interest to us in respect of Sondheim's work. His explicit and theoretically organised use of intervals in *Sunday* reflects Seurat's scientific use of dots in *La Grande Jatte*. At first, his replication of Seurat's colour theory was to have led to a musical palette of close chromatic sequences, 'to do the musical equivalent'.<sup>40</sup> Having rejected this idea, he still made use of carefully calculated intervals – not least the distinctive signature motif that returns throughout, formed by 'juxtaposing one major triad next to another [...] the idea again is to keep putting the colors together and juxtapose them until finally they lock in on the word "harmony" and it becomes very clear what they are'.<sup>41</sup> Again Sondheim is challenging the conventions of musical composition with a carefully designed

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Despite this, he does make use of musical analogy: Artaud's art 'penetrates the ear and the mind' (Derrida, *The Secret Art*, p. 86); its 'intonation is a detonation' (*ibid.*, p. 87).

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 200. This echoes his comments on writing, in which he sees as much importance in the under-valued 'spacing' of the text, 'the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious' (*ibid.*, p. 68), as he does in its content.

<sup>40</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-4.



exploitation of where space should exist within the chords. This motif forms a major component of the show's musical thematic backbone, recurring in slightly altered form in the main themes of 'Finishing the Hat', 'Putting it Together' and in the horn fanfare of Act 2.<sup>42</sup> Equally distinctive is the opening interval of 'Sunday', a minor 6<sup>th</sup> ('a primary building block not least because it articulates the title word *Sunday*'<sup>43</sup>) that is again used throughout the score and first appears as a Horn call in the Opening Prelude. In this interval, Banfield sees 'two different worlds, chromatic and diatonic, petitioning bitonally for reconciliation in the insistent presence of the upward sixth'.<sup>44</sup>

The musical interval – as Derrida suggests<sup>45</sup> – operates in both pitch and time: each consecutive note of the phrase follows its precedent and relates to it both vertically and horizontally (in the score), or temporally and tonally (when heard). We could introduce a theoretical understanding of how this differed / deferred<sup>46</sup> subsequence

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<sup>42</sup> See Swayne, *How Sondheim found his Sound*, pp. 232-3.

<sup>43</sup> Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, p. 356.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> 'Spacing (notice that this word speaks the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space)', Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 68.

Derrida is keen to point out the space / time resonance, since this is central to his (concept) of *différance*; indeed, for Culler these terms are almost interchangeable (Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 97).

<sup>46</sup> Derrida's play on the temporal dislocation of 'deferral' and the spatial relocation of 'differal' is central to his concept of *différance*.

conventionally constructs the musical meaning of melody, or, in terms of pitch, how the difference between simultaneous notes contributes to the harmonic structure of the show. 'Sunday' offers a prime example of both characteristics of the interval being used, as it builds up a chorale-like anthem celebrating the completion of Seurat's image at the end of Act I. The vocal harmonies fall throughout the word 'trees' to 'fill in the chord over time', 'spread[ing] the texture of the voices'.<sup>47</sup> But it is the gaps between the notes (intervals in pitch, suspensions in time) that give order to the chaos and form music. We become increasingly aware of how the material of 'space' – the negative matter – is vital to composition, even if the space can only be heard when it is framed by notes. In this light the conventional rhetoric of composition (moving towards completion, *finishing* the hat) is called into question.

Even before this, however, the 'silence' of the blank canvas is given particular resonance in the music. Following the 'Opening Prelude', which 'foreshadow[s] a number of aural and visual items',<sup>48</sup> introduces the (spread) five note signature motif on which much of the score is based, and sets an appropriately impressionistic scene, the show opens with silence. There is no big opening number as one would have been expected from a musical, but instead a silence that reflects the blank of the canvas, the boredom of Georges's muse Dot, and the still heat of the breezeless afternoon.

Importantly, it is from this silence that composition begins to emerge: the banter of

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<sup>47</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, pp. 106-110. Sondheim attributes this aspect of the vocal arrangement to conductor of the original production Paul Gemignani.

<sup>48</sup> Swayne, *How Sondheim found his Sound*, pp. 232-3. Notice how Swayne recognises visual elements in the musical soundscape.

dialogue (*between* the notes), the recognisable background images (boats, trees) of the painting (flown or tracked in), and the first pointillistic representations of the music. Importantly too, it is at this early stage that composition is already questioned, as Georges erases a tree and it disappears up and out of the painting. The visual background of this early scene is as much constituted by erasure (the tree) as it is by inscription (the boat), and the sonic by silence as music; indeed, the very minimal and iconic inclusion of music in the signature motif is so surrounded by silence that the gaps as much as the non-gaps become a resonant part of the musicodramatic soundscape.

### Silence and whiteness

This appropriately positions *Sunday* within post-structuralist commentaries on silence. For Michel Poizat, 'it is the cutting apart of vocal sound by the scalpel of silence that creates the word, or, more precisely, the verbal signifier, in much the same way as, at a secondary level of linguistic articulation, it is the flash of silence signaling the end of each word, phrase, or sentence that locks in their meaning'.<sup>49</sup> In this, we are reminded of the Lacanian suggestion that 'in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative [...] all art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness'.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile for Derrida, 'silence plays the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and *against* which alone language can emerge [...] Like nonmeaning,

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<sup>49</sup> Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. by Arthur Denner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 43.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: Seminar of Jacques Lacan VII*, trans. by Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 130.

silence is the work's limit and profound resource'.<sup>51</sup> These comments subtly differ, but for Derrida the suggestion is that the substance of silence (and its comparative materiality, emptiness), is less a trace of what will be inscribed, but more a structure within which the pre-inscription is always already inscribed.<sup>52</sup> Cobussen's Derridean take on John Cage<sup>53</sup> and Mallarmé expands on this perspective of silence as a resource, and this commentary could just as easily be applied to *Sunday*:

the notated piano sounds [...] emerge from a world that is occupied by silence. Analogously, a text could be seen as emerging from white space [...] The space between words, the gap, the white, becomes the precondition for a text to appear as text [...] the text joins the white and complies with the blank in the same way the prescribed musical sounds

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<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>52</sup> See David Cecchetto, 'vagrant(ana)music: Three (four) Plateaus of a Contingent Music', *Radical Musicology*, 2 (2007).

<sup>53</sup> John Cage's *Notations* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969) archives some of the mid-twentieth-century experiments in musical notation, causing us to reconsider the notated representation of a musical score. His writings – *Silence* (London : Calder and Boyars, 1968), *A Year from Monday* (London : Marion Boyars, 1985) – like Mallarmé's, renegotiate the conventional trajectory of the written word to expose the play of space and inscription; his music – most famously *4:33* (1952) – needs little introduction; parallels between his thinking and that of Derrida are discussed in Cecchetto, 'vagrant(ana)music'.

join the already existing silence [...]. Silence, not an unarticulated nothingness. No meaningless absence of sounds. Silence must be rethought. Through whiteness.<sup>54</sup>

Lapine's theatrical text

The text of *Sunday* is not merely the Sondheim score, but the collaborative performance text of Sondheim, Lapine and their performers. I would now like to turn to the way in which Lapine has used theatrical space to complement Sondheim's playful discussion of composition through music. We have seen how, for Sondheim, the spaces between the 'dots' constitute a fundamental part of the musical score and lead us to question the rhetoric of composition. So too, the use of theatrical space by Lapine – and particularly his staging of *La Grande Jatte* – renegotiates the concept of composition. Again we can turn to Derrida to guide us.

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<sup>54</sup> Marcel Cobussen, 'Cage, White, Mallarmé, Silence', *Deconstruction in Music* (Interactive Dissertation, Department of Art and Culture Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam,

2001) <[http://www.cobussen.com/proefschrift/300\\_john\\_cage/316\\_cage\\_and\\_silence/316\\_a\\_cage\\_white\\_mallarme\\_silence/cage\\_white\\_mallarme\\_silence.htm](http://www.cobussen.com/proefschrift/300_john_cage/316_cage_and_silence/316_a_cage_white_mallarme_silence/cage_white_mallarme_silence.htm)> [accessed 4 September 2007] (para. 4 of 7).

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Derrida's understanding of theatre – though little discussed<sup>55</sup> – takes into account the multi-dimensionality of the tools of performance, and particularly the possibility for theatrical language to 'reinstatate the "volume" of theatrical space and [...] utilize this volume "in its undersides (*dans ses dessous*)"'.<sup>56</sup> He is responding to what he sees as the staid conventions of habitual practice, which have historically 'subjected [theatre] to this structure of language';<sup>57</sup> instead, Derrida calls for theatre to encompass spatiality and 'to be governed according to the requirements of another language and another form of writing [in which] words themselves will once more become physical signs that do not trespass towards concepts [and in which] words will cease to flatten theatrical space and to lay it horizontally as did logical speech'.<sup>58</sup>

Even in terms of language, however, Derrida invokes the notion of a three-dimensional volume, which exists as he sees it in the space between the signifier and the signified (presence and absence). Derrida suggests that 'absence is the permission given to letters to spell themselves out and to signify, but it is also, in language's twisting of itself, *what* letters say: they say freedom and a granted emptiness, that which is formed by being enclosed in letters' net'.<sup>59</sup> Here Derrida's observation explicitly situates itself

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<sup>55</sup> Derrida discusses Artaud's *writing* about theatre (*Writing and Difference*, pp. 212-45 and 292-316; *Of Grammatology*, pp. 302-13) rather than the non-language-based discourse of theatrical 'texts' themselves.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 240, citing Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 87.

within the central argument of his deconstructive thought: recognising language as a discursive site between presence and the origin, rather than simply a lens revealing truth.<sup>60</sup> Typical contradictions, such as the evocation of both freedom and constraint, cause Derrida to speak in terms of the ‘twisting’ of language. Elsewhere, similar terms such as the ‘folding’ of language, and his perhaps discomfoting use of the term ‘hymen’<sup>61</sup> in this context, disrupt expectations of linear or teleological inter-relations within the discursive (knowledge-giving, phenomenologically constitutive) framework. Other perhaps even more obviously ‘foldable’ media such as art and theatre are likewise located at this nexus, and as Derrida sees it, the site of theatrical inscription – the stage space – is a uniquely material location in which this twisting might be enacted.

James Lapine deliberately exploits this space in having the characters interact and interweave in a way that they cannot on the canvas, and most interestingly in having Georges move physically between the characters. During the course of ‘Sunday’, we are made particularly aware of this: at times the painting’s characters (Frieda and Franz, the Celestes) move outside the ‘frame’ of the onstage painting, whilst the Boatman sits straddling the bottom edge of the frame. Periodically, Georges leaves his ‘rightful’ position outside the picture to enter the frame - to retrieve his jacket, to fetch cut-outs from the theatre’s offstage spaces, and to summon props from both above (the parasol) and below (the monkey) the ‘canvas’ space; finally, he rushes into the almost ‘complete’

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<sup>60</sup> This has been a focus of Derrida’s writings since the very early *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*, trans. by Marian Hobson (London and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> These terms are both used throughout *Dissemination*.

image to remove Louise's spectacles. The trajectory of Georges's journey throughout this number takes him amongst, behind and between characters in ways that threaten the logic of the painting: at one point he moves between Dot and Jules to her left and his right, yet in the painting their relationship to one another is reversed (the 'between' is to her right and his left). Most exploitatively, we see in the final moments of the number the characters of the Soldier and Mr leaving the stage. Here, then, Lapine removes a character who *is* in the painting (the Soldier) and one who never has been (Mr). Even at this moment of completion, the process of erasing characters is underway.<sup>62</sup>

This staging is undoubtedly effective, and audiences are so accustomed to the theatrical use of depth that our anticipation of the painting's completion (our adherence to the metaphysics of representation) perhaps overshadows our observation of this interesting 'folding'<sup>63</sup> of the onstage 'picture', its 'twisting of itself'.<sup>64</sup> Elsewhere, Lapine's *mise en scène* further manipulates the logic of space, as in 'Colour and Light' when the incomplete canvas is reversed and we are able to see Georges through the gauze, on the other side - not quite as if we are in the painting, but perhaps as if we were allowed privileged witness to the unseen spaces that are later exploited physically by the perambulations of 'Sunday'. Like the play of silence and music in the aural dimension of the show, the *mise en scène* of performance confounds expectations of the spatial dimension.

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<sup>62</sup> Mrs, also not a Seurat character, has left the stage at the beginning of the number.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, throughout.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 87.



## Inscription as a veil

If these alternative readings reveal the significance of the blanks, the silences and the spacing behind, beyond and between, we might wish to turn our focus for a moment *to* those spaces: the white page of the score beneath the notes; the empty space of the stage beyond the *mise en scène*; the silence of the music beyond the notes; the pre-dot of the painting: 'White. A blank page or canvas'. And we should consider these elements in relation to the rhetoric and the deconstruction of composition as a creative act.

The assumption underlying the ideology we have been discussing is that there is some form of originary idea<sup>65</sup> that is tapped into through presence – our encounter with the work of art. A conventional corollary is that it is the act of composition and the product that is composed that enables that revelatory encounter. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that, through deconstructing this work by Sondheim and Lapine, we are allowed to conceptualise composition – each dot, each note – as covering up a little more of what might exist *beyond* the art-work: not constructing meaning as they are put together, but concealing what is (always already) inscribed on the 'blank page or canvas'.

Sondheim and Lapine's realisation of the completed *La Grande Jatte* fills the sonic and visual canvas almost completely. As the *mise en scène* constructs the final image of the painting, each pixel of the simulated canvas covered, the chordal palette is so dense that at times seven of the eight notes of the major scale are heard simultaneously, utilising almost the entire possible texture of the musical palette.<sup>66</sup> Yet in

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<sup>65</sup> Sometimes referred to by Derrida - often confusingly - as *eidōs* or ideal.

<sup>66</sup> See for example Sondheim & Lapine, *Sunday*, Vocal Score, 'No. 24: Sunday', bars 69-72.

one sense this fulfilling compositional whole seems to have obliterated, obfuscated, hidden what is 'beyond' the dots.

After all, concealment is what Derrida sees operating at the very heart of all discourse, whether this is in the mediation of the 'economy' of meaning,<sup>67</sup> the quest for the origin (of art, geometry, music, human knowledge etc.)<sup>68</sup> or the absence constituted by the *épisteme* even in speech:<sup>69</sup> 'That which also metaphysically menaces every structuralism [is] the possibility of concealing meaning through the very act of uncovering it'.<sup>70</sup> If these inscriptions do conceal, however, we must ask what it is they

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<sup>67</sup> 'The meaning of meaning [...] is infinite implication [...] its force is a certain pure and infinite unequivocal which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs?' (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 29).

<sup>68</sup> Derrida's writing has consistently interrogated the philosophical quest for the origin, deconstructing texts on the origins of Art (he tackles Heidegger's *On the Origins of the Work of Art* in *The Truth in Painting*), Language (Rousseau's *The Origin of Language* in *Of Grammatology*), Geometry (Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* in *An Introduction*) and Human Knowledge (Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* in *Margins*).

<sup>69</sup> 'Within the voice, the presence of the object already disappears. The self-presence of the voice and of the heading [sic]-oneself speak conceals the very thing that visible space allows to be placed before us' (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 240).

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 31.

are concealing, and whether de-composing the structures serves – as Derrida claims – as a revelatory act.<sup>71</sup>

Even as Seurat's canvas, Sondheim's score and Lapine's stage fill with dots, the composition is already unravelling; even as the picture is completed, the 'Order... Design... Tension... Balance... Harmony' that tightly wove the painting / chorale together begin to unravel with the intrusion of three discords,<sup>72</sup> the minor 6<sup>th</sup> call of the horn, and ultimately (by the end of Act II) the disappearance of the whole *mise en scène* to resolve, once more, with 'white. A blank page or canvas'. This revelatory act – the taking apart – serves as a metaphorical counter to the constructive act – the putting together – of composition; and in foregrounding this as the culmination of the show, Sondheim and Lapine allow the rhetoric of composition to be questioned, together with the metaphysical concepts of presence and the origin – privileged binaries in the 'opposition of metaphysical concepts'; 'truths' that normally inhabit cultural discourse unquestioned, and which themselves are simply parts of mythologies constructed to support ideologies and (transcendental) hierarchies of value, meaning, status and beauty.

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<sup>71</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's lengthy introduction to *Of Grammatology* paraphrases Derrida's project as a 'notion that the verbal text is constituted by concealment as much as revelation, that the concealment is itself a revelation and vice versa' (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. xlvii).

<sup>72</sup> Sondheim & Lapine, *Sunday*, Vocal Score, 'No. 24: Sunday', bars 73-76, noted by both Banfield (*Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, p. 354) and Swayne (*How Sondheim Found his Sound*, p. 26).

Ultimately, it is *these* constructs that Derrida, Sondheim and Lapine and *Sunday in the Park with George* help us to de-compose.