

BOOK REVIEW

Thinking Barthes Through, and as, Performance

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Harry Robert Wilson and Will Daddario, eds, *Rethinking Roland Barthes Through Performance: A Desire for Neutral Dramaturgy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

When the name of Roland Barthes is invoked, one may ask: which Barthes? Is it the committed Marxist? The structuralist semiologist? The textual hedonist? The mourner pondering love and death? Is it the critic of popular culture, fashion, literature, or photography? Of James Bond or Proust? Barthes adopted the critical terms of Brecht, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, among others, but did so as if they were outfits in his discursive wardrobe: timely and perhaps necessary in their moment, but ready to be shed, in full or in part, for a successor. The sartorial metaphor is further apt, for underneath the discursive systems lay an excess that Barthes located in the body, often his own: a corporeal generator of possibilities, decked with successive discourses and systems but reducible to none.

Barthes's critical terms often came in pairs: the readerly and the writerly, the obvious and the obtuse, pleasure and *jouissance*, *studium* and *punctum*. It may seem ironic that a critic who resisted systems relies consistently on difference and opposition, the building blocks of systematicity, but in Barthes's dualisms it's a false binary. The first term represents the system, the other its disturbance, an excess to the paradigm that pre-occupies Barthes from *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) through the lecture course on 'the neutral' delivered shortly before his death in 1980. The posthumous reconstitution and publication of this course contributes to his enduring

stature as a point of reference for the study of literature, popular culture, and the visual arts.

Barthes's import in the realm of performance has also been explored, but his position in relation to live performance remains oblique; the references to 'stagings' are often theoretical or metaphorical, leaving their bearing on performance practice a question for his readers. The project of *Rethinking Roland Barthes Through Performance: A Desire for Neutral Dramaturgy*, as the title suggests, is to explore the zone of contact between Barthes's thought and live performance, often (though not always) with focus on 'the neutral'. The authors of the fifteen chapters position Barthes's writings in relation to the performing arts (dance, performance art, theater), but also to practices of writing, painting, dramaturgy, and, consonant with Barthes's known *gourmandise*, cooking.

It's an eclectic mix, but the organization of the chapters into two parts broadly follows the Barthesian duality between systems (with their discourses) and their generative disturbance. The second section of the anthology, 'Rethinking Roland Barthes, Theatre, Performance', draws closest to what a reader might anticipate in a scholarly account of Barthes's thought. For example, it includes an exegetical survey of 'the face' as a *topos* in Barthes's writing from his early essay on wrestling through his later writings on photography. The commentary engages recent theorists, but the examined performances (writ large) remain those Barthes studied: Garbo, Maria Casarès, and an Avedon portrait. In a similar vein, a contextualization of *Empire of Signs* positions its theatricalized Japan within both Barthes's thought and Japanese theater traditions; another chapter frames Cy Twombly's paintings, and Barthes's writings about them, as dramaturgical practices. For other contributors, his concepts act more as a heuristic lens to train on more contemporary performance practice; specifically, the concept of writing as a *praxis*, not as a product, provides the key to understanding recent works of performance art and dance. The section also includes chapters in which the work of the dramaturg and the choreographer is positioned as a gesture of writing in the sense Barthes lends this term. Although the contributors to this part of the book recognize *le neutre* as resistance to 'illusory ground of a stable, masterful site of origin', Barthes's texts nonetheless remain the primary source material: these chapters are explications of Barthes's thought and how it relates to performance.

The other part of the book, which opens the anthology, constitutes an original and, perhaps for some readers, a more enigmatic contribution to Barthes's discursive wake. Editors Harry Robert Wilson and Will Daddario name these chapters a 'Dictionary of Twinklings' (a translation of Barthes's *scintillations*), a 'patchwork' of 'secret references' to Barthes that present a 'generative and benevolent' opportunity to enact rather than to explain the neutral ideal. While some of these chapters bear similarities to those in the second part of the book (the entry on the notation of a live performance 'score', for example, resonates with the chapter on choreography), others may be characterized as creative stagings of writing as *praxis*. One chapter comprises an exchange of letters on time, memory, and performance, with a meditation on Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Another reads like a text of modernist literature, with plural registers that shift from narrative prose to free verse, in which the reference to Barthes remains indirect. The most surprising may be an exchange of four recipes, each with its variations and a personal memory related to the preparation and the consumption of the dish. Although formatted like the entries in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, there is, again, no direct mention of Barthes in this chapter. Is it a provocation? How does one evaluate, argue with, or otherwise engage a statement like 'I always eat this with a baked sweet potato'?

But then, Barthes himself bluntly wrote that he liked cherries but not mangoes. He then pondered what to do with such a statement, and how an obtuse affirmation rooted in an individual body's sensory inclinations jams explanatory paradigms. Barthes's terms are useful conceptual tools, but his writings are also permissive and give license to break the 'law', to indulge desire, to play and not to explain. *Rethinking Roland Barthes Through Performance: A Desire for Neutral Dramaturgy* is an exploration of how to write about Barthes on performance, and, in some instances, of how to write with Barthes *as* a performance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Scheie teaches in the Humanities section of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music. His publications include *Performance Degree Zero: Roland Barthes and Theatre* (University of Toronto Press, 2006) and the forthcoming monograph *French Westerns: On the Frontier of Film Genre and French Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

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