

# In Media Res

## A Review article of Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*

**Ed McKeon**

There are moments that stay: memories of extravagant strangeness; riddle-me realities hiding in plain view; encounters with a sensuous world returning our gaze, lending us an ear, disturbing time's flow.

In a cavernous former palace of German manufacturing, 160m depth of light and shade, a seated orchestra is silently and mechanically manoeuvred from the mid-space to 'stage' front, their music shifting from a Stravinsky-inflected big-band boogie woogie to chiming chords in a hovering pattern, punctuating time yet left reverberating. The space is resonant.

An enchanted stillness settles, illuminated only by a distant motorised zeppelin, moon-faced towards the audience then stretching elliptically in its lateral trajectory. A blue-white pool of light fades in, revealing what our ears could only a short while earlier bleatingly disbelieve, but which our noses know is unmistakable: a flock of 60 apparently untended sheep in 'centre stage'. For 20 minutes – or what feels like a moment unbounded – they bathe together in the light, unconcerned, in-themselves yet simultaneously for-us.

A choir laments a sonnet on desire, death and immortal love by the nineteenth-century Dutch poet Willem Kloos, the orchestra's harmonies sound alarm, and as a climax is reached, as if on cue, the sheep follow the course of the zeppelin as it serenely glides into the far-distant and unseeable back stage. Meanwhile, a set of the 1911 Solvay Conference (on radiation and the quanta) is rapidly assembled forestage for the final monologue of Marie Curie, combining moments of her Nobel Prize-winning speech and diary entries in the wake of her husband's death.

So ends Heiner Goebbels' production of Louis Andriessen's symphonic opera *De Materie*, a manifest exploration of the relationships between material and spirit; substance and subject; nature and culture; and between text, music, light, and scenography. Goebbels stages a reading-as-listening, and a musicalisation of spectacle.<sup>1</sup> Strategically avoiding conventional taxonomies of production, consumption, authorship and their hierarchies, his writing – like his work – recasts the relationships between periphery and foreground, the edge-of-frame and focus. It presents a movement in-between, a twilight zone, *in media res*.

This movement confounds those whose value of the arts is predicated on the divisions of labour; or, quoting Hans Eisler: 'anyone who only understands music, doesn't understand that either.'<sup>2</sup> Musicians mistake him for a director; theatre-makers underappreciate his compositional discipline; like most scenography, the visual qualities of his work go unremarked; and audiences who prefer to be shepherded in what to think or feel are likely to find themselves lost. As such, he is sometimes taken for a minor figure, whereas his achievements as musician *and* composer *and* radio artist *and* theatre-maker *and* educator *and* artistic director suggest he may be a modal figure in a minored discourse.<sup>3</sup> *Aesthetics of*

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<sup>1</sup> David Roesner, 'The politics of the polyphony of performance: Musicalization in contemporary German theatre', in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18:1, pp 44-55

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre*, ed, Jane Collins with Nicholas Till, trans, David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao, Routledge, London, 2015, p 73

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/about/biography> [accessed 14 October 2015]

*Absence*, the first collection of his writings translated into English, makes a significant contribution to shifting the margins and the centre of the discourse on practice.



Scene from Part III, *De Materie*, courtesy Wonge Bergmann

The book's subtitle, 'Texts on Theatre', implies a focus on stage-work, yet Goebbels addresses the practices of performance more broadly as a *becoming-musical*.

Perhaps it is not even "absence" which has become paramount for me on stage, but a shift of presence from the visual to the acoustic. (xxiv)

So while the title *Aesthetics of Absence* invokes post-structural critiques of the aesthetics of presence as the production of the audience's gaze – the 'I' of the beholder – Goebbels supplements this with a plastic, temporal practice of the ear.<sup>4</sup> This collection of short essays and speeches may draw primarily on his own work, that of others he admires (Godard, Robert Wilson, Rimini Protokoll, Erich Wonder, Ensemble Modern), and on pedagogy, but it's as much a manifesto on the possibilities for contemporary performance as it is an introduction to this composer. Rather than repeat, in editorial fashion, the summaries of his writing that introduce the book, for this review I follow Goebbels's underlying and compelling arguments of how musical thinking and practices can operate within and across a variety of media and performance to create a space for the Other within the audience's work of self-production.

How might we *listen* into this absence becoming present, this presence made absent? Returning to the fold, what do the sheep in this staging of *De Materie* care for us? Are they listening to us listening to and watching them?

*and the sly animals see at once  
how little at home we are  
in the interpreted world.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I draw on the notion of 'plasticity' developed by Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans, Lisabeth During, London, Routledge, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans, Edward Snow, New York, North Point Press, 2000, p 5

Rilke's beasts unburden their gaze on us, leaving us unsettled, nomadic. The sheep in *De Materie* likewise regard us, the hearing-herd, in our serene ignorance. They are uncorralled, unconcerned at our woolly thinking and knit brows. Goebbels doesn't domesticate the Other or present us with a fabled animal with which we identify.<sup>6</sup> This un-called flock appears indifferent to our power to name it (or to count it for wont of sleep): it is neither a presentiment of our dinner, nor of our death.

Instead, subjective time is suspended in the reverberant space between the harmonic oscillations of chiming percussion. It recalls the work's opening, brassy staccato chords pumping out airborne vibrations, yet now stilled, untroubling the waves on which the airship breezes by. We are presented with a multitude in the act of listening, as we too listen to each other listening, and it is precisely this listening *in time* (not *to time*) that calms the flow of time's current, allowing us to drift backwards *and* ahead of ourselves. Writing of this effect in his 'no-man show' (or 'theatre-without-actors'), the automated performing installation *Stifters Dinge* (2007), Goebbels writes:

We are powerless against other things, strange things; this is where our sense of time no longer takes effect: here, we are forced to accept a completely different kind of time... you could call it, perhaps a bit loftily, "the time of the other".<sup>7</sup>

This re-wilding (beyond the Brechtian *verfremdung*) of the performance space is significant. In a similar way, he recounts a poker game of pitching concepts for a work based on texts by Elias Canetti – which became *Eraritjaritjaka* – to the artistic director of the Théâtre Vidy de Lausanne. After failing to register interest with his first ideas, making a piece to enframe another production or action, he proposed to cast an animal, 'another non-manufactured dynamic thing with a reality of its own, to which the texts could react'. He proposed a heron, though this proved too difficult: 'unpredictable, too expensive and problematic for an international tour because of baffling heron-entry-regulations.'<sup>8</sup> An eagle owl too proved unsatisfactory; he settled on a 'robotic' creature, comprising two lights, remotely controlled, on wheels.

By returning the gaze back onto us, Goebbels stages the act of looking – a point he makes explicitly in his reflection here on work by Rimini Protokoll, as also in his works *La Jalousie* (1991, after Robbe-Grillet) and *Walden* (1998, on Thoreau via Auster's 'Ghosts') on the intimacy of being observed observing. In disturbing the sequential time of the gaze, he adopts Gertrude Stein's concept of 'landscape', a focus spread across a canvas without the hierarchy of centre, margin, and frame translated as the idea of a continuous present produced through a play of relations between sense and non-sense, and a multiplicity of textual rhythms.<sup>9</sup>

As in his own works, he separates the media of performance as in a fugue, or rather polymetrically:

Hearing and seeing are being repeatedly disentangled in *Stifters Dinge*. [...] This creates an opportunity for an interesting observation: hardly anyone is able to watch and listen at the same time. [...] You either follow the narrative – in which case you will always miss the gradual change of the colour nuances – or you concentrate on the slowly changing picture [...] It seems that different modes of cognition collide with each other here; rhythms of seeing and hearing.<sup>10</sup>

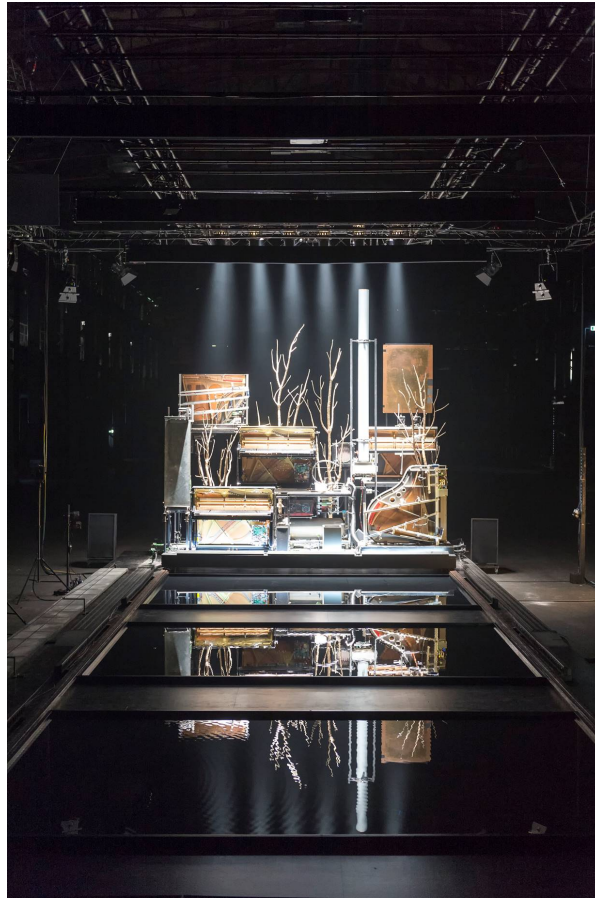
<sup>6</sup> This contrasts with the logocentric animal with which Derrida confronts us. Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am', trans David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, Winter 2002, pp 369-418

<sup>7</sup> Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, p 32

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 22

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans, Karen Jürs-Munby, London, Routledge, 2009, pp 62-63

<sup>10</sup> Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, p 29



Piano scenography for *Stifters Dinge*, courtesy Wonge Bergmann

His attention to the phenomenologies of different media and their combinations is acute. Throughout these unfoldings of his work, he articulates the multiple contrapuntal strategies he has adopted to suspend and subvert the hierarchies of perception by which performances usually produce their audiences: from making an actor appear to disappear and abandoning conventional expressivity, to introducing obstacles and points of resistance for performers.

Because what I like to call the “balance of means” can never exist *en detail* – only ever in succession or a complex interlacing. ... it is about creating mutual, unforeseeable displacements of priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Yet crucial here are the transitional moments of uncanny synchrony, the different media dancing together before shifting apart, an effect he analyses in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Nouvelle Vague*.

Goebbels composes with intensities, playing with media to disrupt habitual practices of identification to allow *time* to stick to experiences, enabling the listening imagination to move freely. This plasticity of time echoes Catherine Malabou’s immanent account of *voir venir*, the move ‘to see (what is) coming’, whereby habit becomes habituated, unaccustomed to itself – becomes the spanner it seeks to remove from its own mechanism – and that attunes intuition to the ‘excess of the future over the future’.<sup>12</sup> It registers the possibility for a becoming-otherwise. Where Malabou registers this prophetic vision as a mode of seeing without seeing, a practice of *reading*, Goebbels supplements this with a *déjà entendu*, an attunement to the as-yet unheard: *a virtual listening*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p 19

<sup>12</sup> Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, p 6

This reading-as-listening invokes Eisler's remark that 'music without words acquired its great importance and its full development only under capitalism', and Walter Benjamin's corollary, 'that the task of transforming concert music requires help from the word.'<sup>13</sup> Goebbels stages ideas as well as experiences, but he chooses his texts carefully – these are always borrowed, and tend to be short, non-literary, 'objective' and non-dramatic, avoiding attachment to the speaker, and range from Mehboob to Giordano Bruno, Eliot to Kierkegaard, his former collaborator Heiner Müller to Malcolm X.

He finds the musicality in words spoken, rarely sung, often incorporating texts in a Babel of their original languages. These regularly include German, English and French, but have also taken in Mandingo, Arabic, and titles from Japanese and Aranda. Beyond signification, 'one can "rest in [language] untroubled"' as Goebbels quotes Stein.<sup>14</sup> This dancing to the rhythm of strange tongues perhaps explains the predominance in his work of French writers (Lévi-Strauss, Michaux, Blanchot, Ponge, Poussin, Robbe-Grillet), of Francophile Anglophones (Auster, Beckett, Stein), and his decision to use Canetti's texts entirely in French for *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004).



André Wilms with robotic light, *Eraritjaritjaka*, courtesy Mario Del Curto

Goebbels describes his method of working with 'placeholder texts' (which can later be absented), around which rhythms, visual ideas, music and lighting coalesce, 'following a poetic logic'. He often works with trusted colleagues, like the scenographer and lighting designer Klaus Grünberg, the actor Andre Wilms, and the musicians of Ensemble Modern, improvising with all the media of theatre from the beginning 'until a text is found which develops its own strength in the right amount of distance to the scene without

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, trans, Anna Bostock, London, Verso, 1998, p 96

<sup>14</sup> Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, p 2

degrading the latter by illustrating it.’<sup>15</sup> He doesn’t ‘set’ text, so much as listen through it and compose with it, sonifying its syntax, punctuation, and even its typography.

It is precisely this ear for the text that lies in wait for the quarry pursued by the imagination, as Walter Benjamin invokes in his metaphor – borrowed by Goebbels – of the text as ‘a forest in which the reader is the hunter’.<sup>16</sup> It appears in the arboreal texts of Müller, Ponge and Joseph Conrad he explores in *Ou bien le débarquement désastreux* (1993); and in the roaming projection of Paolo Uccello’s *The Hunt in the Forest* (1470) that features in the scenography for *Stifters Dinge*, itself based around the enchantment in Adalbert Stifter’s sure-footed description of encountering the splendour of a forest under snow and ice.

It’s perhaps no accident that one of Goebbels’ favourite writers, Elias Canetti, proposes the forest as the crowd symbol of the Germans, the uniform, rhythmical, *marching* forest.<sup>17</sup> Many of Goebbels’ works marvel at a world emerging despite the shadow of conflict, and that even presage it, as in the balaclava-clad musicians of *Landscape with Distant Relatives* – an image he adopted from the work of Albanian artist Sisley Xhafa, eerily echoed whilst the performance was in production by the hostage-taking of Moscow theatre-goers by Chechen rebels.<sup>18</sup> This listening in the forest of the work, stuck in the groove of our own gaze, is an encounter with the wilderness of the self, a *becoming musical*. More specifically, our listening ears stick out *together*, collectively, as a mob ruminating on what we hear. Goebbels aims for a heterogeneous audience, a social body with its contradictions intact, quoting Hannah Arendt:

The public space like the world we all have in common gathers people and at the same time inhibits them from mutually savaging each other.<sup>19</sup>

He composes as a listener, staging the political as a listening awry: not as Brecht would have it, thinking inside others’ heads.<sup>20</sup> Like flocking sheep, he determines no dominant hierarchy of media or perception, but allows the movement of one to stir the others without leading *per se*.

This rejection of the omnipotence of the artist and a counter-emphasis on the immanence of the composer to the process of *production* is a constant throughout his writings and his work. It underscores the porous boundaries between his work and that of others, whether directing another artist’s work (as with Andriessen’s *De Materie*), incorporating others’ texts or music in his own (from JS Bach and Shostakovich to the Beach Boys and Prince), or in the group improvisation of the teams he assembles for his staged pieces.

Here again, he picks up from Benjamin’s argument that the artist must break down the ‘barriers of competence’ in the division of labour:

technical progress is, for the author as producer, the basis of his political progress. [...] the barriers of competence must be broken down by each of the productive forces they were created to separate, acting in concert.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p 28

<sup>16</sup> Heiner Goebbels, *Komposition also Inszenierung*, ed. Wolfgang Sandner, Berlin, Henschel, 2002, pp 64-70

<sup>17</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans, Carol Stewart, London, Penguin, 1984, pp 202-203

<sup>18</sup> Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, p 15-16

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p 14

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, ‘Author as Producer’, p 92

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p 95



Ensemble Modern, clad in balaclavas, in *Landscape With Distant Relatives*, courtesy Wonge Bergmann

He celebrates the organisation of Ensemble Modern, his long-time collaborators, in their practices of self-administration off-stage that reflect on-stage in their collective responsibility and openness to the new (in contrast to the ‘hierarchical and alienated conditions of [orchestral] hired musicians’).<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most radically, he presents the act of composition as the creation of a method of production adequate to the people with whom he collaborates. In order to experience the not-yet-known, the artist must play a role immanent to the culture within which that experience will be produced.

The respect for the other, trusting his perspective and his competence, also ties in with refraining from the dominance of one discipline, and the openness to an aesthetic coexistence based on heterogeneity. ... To see one’s own lack of competency not as a weakness to be downplayed, but to use it as a strength in order to enrich one’s artistic perspective with the perspective of the other – that is the core of working collectively.<sup>23</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Goebbels is critical of the conventions of musical, dramatic and performance pedagogy, with its separation of media and disciplines, emphasis on technique, its institutionalisation, and aversion to risk. He calls instead for a more subtle, sensual and interwoven relationship between theory and practice, a curriculum of *un*-knowing, of questioning everything, and above all for performance laboratories, spaces of invention: ‘Isn’t it just like with a car? A new car won’t be invented at the assembly line either’.<sup>24</sup>

His texts don’t present a methodology, a technique of production. They don’t teach, but present the act of learning itself as a strategy, leading us safely from the green pastures of our familiar knowledge into the forest of our incomprehension to lie in wait. Asked to look into the future for the ways his practice will develop, he responded:

<sup>22</sup> Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, p 69

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 90

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 80

The relationship between concept and intuition is very complicated for me. In the best of my work, the unknown plays a major role, which I can only ever explain in hindsight.<sup>25</sup>

What makes Goebbels' work a pleasure to read as well as to experience is the opportunity to listen between the lines, to hear the wood for the trees, and to listen with the flock without instruction from the shepherd's whistle.

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<sup>25</sup> My translation. Ruhrtriennale programme book for Louis Andriessen, *De Materie*, 2014, p 34