

## Reflections on Happenings (1970, 13,200 words)

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

Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*

NOTE 2021: I have changed or explicated some unnecessarily compressed, untranslated, repetitive or misleading items, for example American into US, but not tampered with the rest. At the end is, as Addition, an exchange of views with my late friend Lee Baxandall. Given the sharp turn to the Right in world politics after the mid-1970s, I would today not call nihilism as simply being on the Right, while maintaining its insufficiency.

### *1. Taxonomy with Examples*

The phenomena loosely associated with the term Happenings can be differentiated into at least four different types: Events, Aleatoric scenes, Happenings proper, and Action Theatre (but see the reservation about the latter below, which reduces the number of types to three).

#### **Events (or Pieces)**

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

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

Fence moved next 200 feet, maintaining direction. Groundline drawn. Flare and marker number 2. Fence moved next 200 feet. Groundline. Flare. Marker 3. (portable radios, food deliveries.)

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

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

'Events' are related to music and dance, primarily modern, they deal with a rhythmic use of a delimited time duration. In *Overtime* this is the sundown to sunup interval; its title is, I take it, a

pun on this 'overtime' work which is also dominant or victorious 'over' a structured time (as well as space). Cage's 'Pieces' indicate this relationship still more clearly, being largely unconcerned with space. Space (say, a concert hall) is for Cage a neutral constant and not a dynamic variable, which is the aesthetic characteristic of music as the purest time art. In so far as an Event is homologous to a basic 'compartment' within Happenings proper, which ideally also enacts one basic metaphor, this Cage strain or orientation is significant for all Happenings.

### Aleatoric Scenes

The provenance of aleatoric or chance scenes, such as Jackson Mac Low's *Marrying Maiden*,<sup>2</sup> is clearly musical. They have a more complex structure, based on a combination of authorial choice (Mac Low chose the text, the *I Ching*, and a list of 500 adverbs indicating the manner of speaking fragments from it) and chance from aleatoric music (in this case the order, duration, tempo, volume, and inflection of the verbal material). As Dick Higgins has pointed out, Cagean aleatoric technique only places the decisions at one remove from the composer, allowing the material to be determined by the system the artist-composer determined: 'And the real innovation lies in the emphasis on the creation of a system' (Higgins 55-7). Though permutations exist, any performance will still be a performance of Jackson Mac Low's *Marrying Maiden*, within a field of possibilities which, although much larger than that of a univocal script, is in principle a closed field just as that of *Hamlet*. Conversely, any theatre or concert performance is always one variation on an underlying score, libretto, or text.

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

### Happenings Proper

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

(1) In Kaprow's *Eat* (see *TDR* 30) there is a field of possibilities - physical materials and gestures-connected with the topic or theme of food and the ritual situation of a communal meal-feast (the author calls it 'a quasi-eucharistic ritual'). Its enacting depends on participants interacting with a rehearsed troupe. This Happening is situated halfway between a religious Mass and the cold buffet at a modern Individualist party, and its rehearsed actors halfway between acolytes and choice-triggering hosts at the party. The participating audience is supposed to be reawakened to a sense of communion, and to a sense of the miraculousness of food. Yet it remains unclear what type of communion is desired and why food is miraculous: the only value-system implied is the lowest common denominator of a biological solidarity of human beings.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the real complexity of human relations this approach may be a convenient jumping-off point, but little more. Let us take for the moment a grisly real-life happening, such as the My Lai massacre: it is surely true to say that the massacred Vietnamese were human beings, and that this -- as against a comparably

gratuitous killing of 200 or 300 apes or boars -- is the basis for our feeling of outrage. But the deeper, significant, operative truth about My Lai is not simply that both Vietnamese peasants and US soldiers are biologically human: it is that the latter are killers and the former are their victims, at which point a political, economic and ideological analysis of the reasons for that situation would have to set in. To stop at the first-level approach is simply liberal sentimentality. Analogously. Kaprow's refusal to make further distinctions which could adequately deal with civilisational complexities is a Rousseauist persuasion that a return to supposed fundamentals outside civilisation will illumine present-day life. Pseudo-biological values substituted for historical ones: a Eucharist without a Real Presence, a dumb Symposium. (Here I am singling out authors only in so far as their talents clarify the tendencies of a whole group: it is a representative, and therefore ideal figure I am calling 'Kaprow' or 'Oldenburg, etc. for convenience's sake.)

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

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

(2) Claes Oldenburg's *Fotodeath* (*TDR* 30) is a developed urban Happening with a conventional division between actors and spectators. It can be compared to a *Commedia dell'arte canovaccio* (scenario) without speech and the *lazzi* tradition, or to a multi-focus mime without plot. It consists of three sets of five Events (scenes) each, forming a spectrum of situations from a crowded urban environment. The unit-Events are contiguous in space, but the space is not coordinated along the axis of a firm value-system -- e.g. in medieval Mysteries from Heaven upstage left, to Hell upstage right. Oldenburg himself, quite lucidly, calls his Happenings events in an associational pseudo-plot and confesses to a preference for 'a structure which is an object in itself', such as snapshots or circus (in Kirby ed. 201-2). Correlatively, Oldenburg's events have no temporal focus either -- e.g. the medieval vertical vanishing-point of God's timeless glance -- they are performed simultaneously on a neutral, geometrically divided stage. This results in a multi-focus stage, with all five events of the same set contiguous and simultaneous. They are coordinated like a family of parallel, coexisting time/space systems in a roughly synchronic crosscut, like Einsteinian co-variant island universes each of which is autonomous but all of which are deduced from the same basic formula by varying some parameter(s) in it.

Each of Oldenburg's three sets of five Events has a common theme, and each set seems to possess what I call a 'pilot-scene' explicating more clearly than the other scenes the common denominator of the set (see the script in *TDR* 30, 87-93). The theme of the first set is the futile

enacting of roles in a topsy-turvy world-by implication our world: (1) man posing before mirrors, (2) girl in jingoist poses, (3) man wrestling with a soft laundry-bag, (4) transvestite confusion of sexes, and (5) pilot-scene explicitly showing a family's unsuccessful posing for a photograph in front of landscape samples. There are marked similarities to allegorising painters from 14<sup>th</sup>-century Italy to 16<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders, say to Breughel's *Wedding* or *Proverbs*. The theme of the second set is futile search for partnership: (1) narcissistic woman, (2) bygone times of a naive adolescent friendship. (3) man leaving invalid woman for a party, (4a) two drunks unsuccessfully helping each other up, and (4b) man picking up spilled cans but not the fallen partner. The third set tops the futility of social posing and the breakdown of human friendliness with a final bogging down of all situations in a mechanical, reified denial of vitality as in a nightmare of arrested or viscous time. It features: (1) a mechanical majorette, (2) a wounded man (a soldier in the performance) unable to sit down-like Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*, (3) the pilot-scene of the USA as a collage of objects in a viscid paste, (4) dinner with a dead woman, and (5) men degraded to movers of a huge assemblage of black boxes. In the whole Happening (itself only one part of a tripartite Piece called *Circus*) there is a clear progression through the three sets from singular through dual (the woman in the second set 1 is also dual, faced with her own mirror-image, while the family in the first set 5 constitutes only one unit) to general, and from futility to death. This was carried out by a series of brief snapshot situations (an idea developed in a more formalistic way by the Living Theatre's 'snapshots' scene in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*), amounting to a kind of foreshortened, aerial survey of the US anthropological situation. The title of *Fotodeath* indicates the diagnosis.

(3) In Dick Higgins' *The Tart, or Miss America* (TDR 30) words acquire greater importance. There is an abundant use of chance techniques, but the material manipulated is, first of all, a set of socially typical cliché phrases, written by the author, and combined with bodily actions, optic or acoustic effects, and some scenery (this Happening was performed in a boxing ring, an old dream of Brecht's). Secondly, the words and gestures are performed by 'stock urban characters' (Higgins, TDR 30, 133), by typical agents or *dramatis personae* akin to what Diderot called *conditions*. Their number is changeable, and the same stock character can be acted simultaneously by several actors, but at the very least a central triangle is always present consisting of The Tart. The Young Man and Mr Miller, a subtopian Babbitt-Everyman; further typical *dramatis personae* might include a Prophet, a Steelworker, a Drinking Man, and similar. Each performer had 36 different non-verbal situations in which he was assigned at random one sentence, one action, and one special (optic, acoustic or kinetic) effect. Permutational collage-scenes resulted, quasi-simultaneous actions supplemented by the activity of a Special Performer, a coordinator responsible for cueing and flow, who had a collection of Americana ('the relevance to be determined by the social intent of the performance', Higgins, *ibid.*, 135) which he produced at random. There are only 36 lines in the whole play, and they were always explicitly quoted as said by one of the 'roles', regardless of which role or *persona* actually pronounced them; I particularly liked sentence 13: 'The steelworkers say no. No, say the steelworkers. (No. No.)' Higgins was clearly aiming at an estrangement effect of the Brechtian type, which would prevent the audience empathising with the *persona*: 'I wrote *The Tart* to express a sociological concept [about women] ... my hope was that the audiences would sympathise with the performers (not the characters) in their social contexts and that the lines would be more tragic than funny' (*ibid.*, 132).

This type of Happening explicates the specific allegorical quality of *dramatis personae* and begins to utilise the unequalled suggestiveness of language. A similar approach is found in the first scene of *Mysteries* by the Living Theatre (a performance which is in a way an anthology of different types and uses of Happenings). It featured a pantomime of militarism developed from a scene of *The Brig* and joined to fugal chanting of a poem by Jackson Mac Low consisting

exclusively of the words found on the US \$1 note. ('One dollar/ In God we trust/ Douglas C. Dillon' -- if memory serves). It ends with the gradual formation of a drilling platoon and a final incomprehensible harangue of the commander, saluted with a roar of 'Yes, Sir!'. Its effect is a powerful, foreshortened glimpse of the military-industrial complex operating in the flesh of people. Not much is needed to transform this type of Happening into Action Theatre: it would suffice to allegorise the performance space and thus conjure up the vague outline of a story. This explains why Higgins claims *The Tart* is not a Happening. However, I would assume his boxing ring had not quite become an imaginary universe of its own suggesting an autonomous story or diegesis. Therefore, one would have to consider *The Tart* as a very advanced form of Happenings, while scene 1 of *Mysteries* trembles on the brink of Action Theatre because of its inclusion of the *Brig* scene.

### Action Theatre

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

### Comment

This brief taxonomical survey indicates the existence of a typological series of ascending complexity. The series starts out from single non-verbal activities (Events) and longer aleatoric activities where text is treated mainly as sound (or indeed noise) and the allegorising of participants is vague and very general. Kaprow seems to be the master of this approach, and he is out of his element as soon as he leaves it for what I have called Happenings proper (e.g. in *Eat* or *Courtyard*.) It should be remembered that the Kaprow performance which gave a name to this genre was called *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (so that, characteristically, he thinks of Happenings in terms of what is usually, and in this chapter too, called an Event), The culmination of this typological series -- from which I am excluding its overspill into dramatic theatre, the Action Theatre -- are Happenings proper, which range from a non-verbal symbolic field of activities with the nuclear performing troupe used as seeders only, through mime with typified *personae* who demand well-rehearsed actors and contain a clear compositional progression, to aleatoric use of a purposefully composed text with rehearsed acting of social stock characters or types akin to those in modern allegorising plays (expressionist, surrealist, Brechtian, absurdist, etc. -- the conception of *The Tart* seems rather akin to a play such as Pirandello's *To Clothe the Naked*). Thus, there seems to be little reason to treat Happenings with less scholarly attention than, say, *Gorboduc* or the plays of Noel Coward. Their significance can be looked at from two aspects which are blended in any particular Happening in very different proportions. It can be thought of as an exercise in unclogging the perceptiveness of participants, in which case it is properly speaking pre-theatrical or propedeutical; or it can be thought of as the use of a meaningful semiotic structure with some kind of role-playing and an organised rhythm-even if the figures and the organisation of events are difficult to recognise because they are of an unfamiliar type.

Many Happenings were simply Events or Aleatoric Scenes. Often they seem to have been akin to unclear and under-rehearsed mimic psychodramas. This is, however, not the fault of this form or genre as such, but of the societal and ideological situation in which they were performed. This situation also accounts for the frequent indifference or hostility of the performances toward

the audience. Though this is sociologically very significant (see section 4), it seems aesthetically more important to note that Happenings can assign to the audience the same ontological status as to the performing troupe: both can provide events for the performance by action and provoked reaction; both can be, and often are, treated as objects.

## 2. Aesthetic Location and an Attempt at Definition

### Location

'Are Happenings theatre or not?' The answer is an exercise in semantics. If we define theatre as implying the performance of an action organised in a plot, which is the dominant trend since the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Aristotelians, then they obviously are not. If we define it much more broadly, as Cage does, as a performance which engages simultaneously the two public senses of eye and ear (see *TDR* 30), then they are. In the absence of any convincing definition of theatre, it might be more useful to start by identifying Happenings as a form of *spectacle*, a wider aesthetic category embracing dramatic theatre, mime, ballet and opera as well as the non-plotted genres such as pageants, fair shows, jugglers and circus, and the intermediary genres of music-hall and cabaret, vaudeville, burlesque, etc. The common earmark of spectacles is the presence of *actions by human performers*; according to the immediacy or reality of that presence, theatrical spectacles are further differentiated from films, television, etc. The non-plotted genres are sociologically, as a rule, lower-class forms. In the 1920s, the Russian Formalists held a theory that literary and artistic genres evolve not in a straight but in a zig-zag line.<sup>5</sup> The pioneering work of Viktor Shklovsky held that in each artistic period there are several schools in any one art; they exist simultaneously, with one school the most orthodox at any given time, and others coexisting with it, uncanonised and spurned by official aesthetics. In the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, for example, the courtly tradition in literature existed simultaneously with 'low' vaudeville verse and adventure-novel prose which were creating new forms on an officially despised, 'subliterary' level. Such creativity in the societal depths brings forth a 'junior line' which grows up to replace the old: 'Chekhov introduces the low farce and *feuilleton* into Russian literature; Dostoyevsky raises to the dignity of a norm the devices of the dime story' (Shklovsky, *Rozanov*). The 18<sup>th</sup>-century western European novel stems from imaginary voyages and travelogues (Defoe), diaries and manuals of letter-writing (Richardson), etc. -- *not* in a straight line from the major epic form of the preceding epoch, the verse epic. Pushkin's lyrics come from album verses and folk songs, Blok's from gypsy ballads, Mayakovsky's from comic periodicals. The 'junior line' or 'low' genre (which is as a rule also a 'small' form) is then canonised by an artistic revolution which transforms it into the accepted 'senior line' or 'high' genre (and as a rule into a large form) of the new period.

The Formalists recognised that artistic evolution is never as pure as a critical model but is contaminated by many inner and outer factors. Nevertheless, they asserted that there is a law in the history of art by which 'the legacy is transmitted not from father to son but from uncle to nephew' (Shklovsky, *Literatura i kinematograf*). The admission of attitudes and genres from popular culture, existing on the periphery of official aesthetics, into the consecrated precincts of official Art, runs parallel to societal changes in which the tastes of the upper classes are supplanted by 'lower' popular tastes. Today, we might add to the Formalists' insights that artistic and societal changes are in certain complex ways causally connected. In France in the 1820s, for example, the assumption of devices from 18th-century bourgeois sentimental comedy into the ossified *ancien régime* tragedy resulted in the romantic tragedy of de Vigny, Dumas père and Hugo. This was

clearly related to the sharp conflict between the lifestyles and worldviews of the feudal reaction and those of the young democrats, a conflict representing antagonistic class interests in culture. A history of literature or theatre should seek to explain the rise of any new genre by focusing on the 'lower' artistic levels and forms from which it sprang. 'Each period of creative flowering is preceded by a slow process of accumulating means of renewal in the lower, often unrecognised strata' (Tomashevsky). In spectacle too, the non-plotted genres which I am discussing are, as a rule, sociologically lower-class forms. In our century -- just as in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages -- these forms are lifted into the realm of official aesthetics by the pressure of new societal forces and structures of feeling.

### Elements for a Definition

As soon as there are human performers -- implying a real or imaginary audience -- it is inevitable that they adopt implied or explicated, shifting or stable *roles*, or better *stage types*, of some kind, e.g. 'young intellectual Everyman', 'the artist as sufferer' (or more rarely 'as celebrator') or similar. Robert Whitman, for example, wanted 'clean-cut American teen-agers' for two girl performers in *Water*, and dressed them accordingly. As Kaplan (95-8) pointed out against Kirby,<sup>7</sup> misunderstandings arise primarily from the fact that these roles are matrixed in an unclear way (usually in very vague allegorical frameworks) so that they do not amount to Individualistic characters. I called them types or Diderotian *conditions*, Higgins called them stock characters, and possibly a still better name may be found: but surely this different matrixing should not be taken as representing non-matrixed acting. Whatever their seeming unorthodoxy to our conditioned eyes, these *dramatis personae* are aesthetically nearer to a Shakespearean or Sophoclean character than to a man walking down the street.

Furthermore, and contrary to a widespread prejudice, it is clearly not necessary that Happenings be based on improvisation, or on aleatorics (chance or random effects), or on the absence of a division of labour between troupe and audience; the testimony of *Fotodeath* could be multiplied. Against this, and against the equally unconvincing necessity for an absence of roles, Kirby's identification of Happenings as non-matrixed in *time and space* seems valid, fundamental, and never seriously transgressed. A forest/room/street/city or whatever the space of a Happening may be, is a forest/room/street/city or whatever, in the manner of Gertrude Stein, and does not pretend to any other imaginary localisation; the time-duration likewise. Space and time revert to an empirical status identical to the status or epistemological level of the audience's direct experience before and after the performance. Space becomes, in principle at least, the sum of all objects (including people) and the dimension of their displacement; time is not the space of causal sequences but the measure of qualitative change (very slow or more rarely, alas, very fast). Both space and time are no longer given conventions but problematic materials, whose extent and character, structured through object relations, largely *are* a Happening. The structuring will necessarily be discrete or compartmentalised, carrying to its conclusion the tendency of modern theatre toward open composition, or episodic autonomy in Aristotelian universe only at the privileged 'holy circle' of the stage. This imaginary scenic universe with own laws and constellations of forces is constituted by means of a causal story or plot. Borrowing a term from film theoreticians and from aestheticians like Souriau, one can call this universe of the theatrical plot diegetic (from the Greek *diegesis*, a story told). The unfolding of a Happening does not give rise to another imaginary but vivid and coherent space/time universe overlapping with our own: *a Happening is non-diegetic*. Paradoxically, any diegetic theatre genre, such as mime, or indeed drama, can thus be envisaged in aesthetics as a limit case of a non-diegetic genre (such as the

Happening) whose time and space had become fixed into a constant. In mathematical notation, if a Happening is a function of time, space, dramaturgic figures, and dramaturgic situation:

If  
 then for      (1)  $H = f(t, s, \text{fig}, \text{sit})$   
                   (2)  $t/s = k$  (which is the case in drama),  
                   (3)  $Dr = k \cdot f(\text{fig}, \text{sit})$

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

Historically, Happenings have used various materials grouped around the stylised activities of human performers, as dramatic and diegetic theatre also does (dance and mime, music and noises, light and scenery, film, literary texts, etc.). But Happenings have used these materials in new and sometimes startling ways. Persons are treated as objects enclosed in shrouds or sacks, wrapped in paper or tinfoil, painted or used as surfaces for film projection, etc.; indeed, many Happeners seem uncomfortable with normally clad or normally nude figures. Only the best authors escape this hysterical syndrome, an aspect of the Happenings style which Susan Sontag explains by the experience and pressures of New York painting, preoccupied with urban junk and highly aggressive not only against the audience but above all against their medium and materials -- a style based on the artefacts and human relations of the modern American city: 'the brutal disharmony of buildings in size and style, the wild juxtaposition of store signs, the clamorous layout of the modern newspaper' (Sontag 271- 2).

### A Tentative Definition

A tentative definition might thus read: Happenings are a genre of theatre spectacle, using various types of semiotic signs and media organised around the action of human performers in a homogeneous and thematically unified way and in a non-diegetic structuring of time and space.

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

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

Drama is the presentation (1) of a complete action (2) which is of a determined magnitude, (3) in differentiated and heightened language, (4) in the form of events, not of narrative.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to the above definition of Happenings -- and leaving aside for the moment the moot factor of language, to which I shall return at the end of this essay -- we note the universal hallmark of spectacle common to both in (4) and the differentiating factor of a predetermined magnitude (i.e. of plot in time) in (2), which latter is a hallmark of diegetic genres only. We are then left with an open question about factor (1): are Happenings simply 'free form' or are they thematically unified, possessing a complete action (*praxis*) or indeed story (*mythos*). I would argue that there is no such thing as free form in art: a form called free is either inoperative or new. In that sense, I trust even my brief analyses indicate that any successful Happening has a limited thematic field, and that its action, though oscillating, is complete unto itself. Further, I would argue that -- as different from Individualist plot, which is based on univocal causality -- Aristotle's notion of fable or story could and should be salvaged for any modern theory of theatre and spectacles.



Aristotle's definition, taken from the same place and adapted in a similar way, would be: *The story (mythos) is the presentation of actions; for by story I mean the arrangement (composition) of incidents*. This is elastic enough to encompass both univocally causal relations of incidents and any number of transformational or associational arrangements of incidents, just as in contemporary poetry and other arts: e.g. isomorphic, isogenetic, isothematic (by formal, provenance or thematic resonances or associations).

## Genetics

This is not to deny that, genetically, Happenings evolved through theatricalisation and spectacularisation of music and the plastic arts, and only secondarily from older scenic genres such as dance. Historically, *plastic arts evolved into temporality* through mobiles, collages, and kindred developments: Calder, Duchamp, Gabo, Rauschenberg, Tinguely, and many other experimental artists and groups strove to make an art-form out of the environment. At a later stage, human beings used as objects were brought into the environment,<sup>10</sup> which then immediately tended toward theatre. Traces of that procedure are frequent in painters' Happenings (e.g. Kaprow's *Eat* or Oldenburg's *Washes*) and have infiltrated the style of the whole genre. Simultaneously and complementarily, *concert music evolved into spatiality*, directly from music performing (Cage) or still more easily through scenic dance to music (Cunningham, Halprin).

### 3. Some Historical Analogies - the Masque

Happenings have some curious and instructive analogies with a number of other non-dramatic scenic genres. These analogies need to be discussed within a proper theory of theatre based on a sociology of spectacle forms. I shall mention a few, centring on the English "Masque," in an attempt to bring out salient features of the Happenings' sociological profile.

## The Masque

The Masque has been defined as 'an evening entertainment in which the chief performers were masked courtiers, accompanied by torchbearers, all in costumes appropriate to the device presented: the elements of song and dialogue were developed later, the original nucleus being dances and conversations with spectators selected by the masquers' (Cunliffe, 146). It developed when a variety of medieval folk customs- chiefly the 'mumming', a procession of disguised people, but also the 'king- game', the election of a mock Saturnalian ruler, and the sword dance, a mimic combat, were appropriated by the upper class for an evening entertainment leading up to a banquet. The entertainment absorbed 16th-century influences from Italy (directly or by way of France), where Renaissance revels had reached unprecedented splendour in theatricalising public living and translating it to the stage, and in which all the known arts were used to express a world of ideal loveliness. This led to many modifications of the original simple procession with dance, chief of which is the introduction, first, of conversations and set speeches, and, at the apogee of the Jacobean Masque, of elaborate singing and plotted, diegetic dialogue. The nucleus of the Masque is thus non-diegetic, simply a potlatch-type procession-cum-dance organised within a certain field of possibilities (the 'device', e.g. the Green Men representing Spring renewal) to which costumes, masks and dances were related. Its primal character of a communal fertility rite was modified into

aristocratic conventions of conviviality promoting Tudor upper-class unity and, increasingly, the splendour and magical position of the Court itself.

### Parallels and Oppositions

Some obvious parallels would thus include the one-shot or two-shot nature of any particular Masque performance, and its division into open-air and 'palace' forms. Further, it was based on a closely knit, numerically small social group which resulted in the use of allegorised themes and figures played by members of the audience (with a few resource persons such as the author and the choreographer). Though disguised as symbolic stage figures for the duration of the performance, they returned into the audience for the final celebratory dance (as is often the case in Action Theatre today, e.g. *Mysteries* and *Dionysus in 69*). The Masque took over from Italian public entertainments a new usage of combining all known types of semiotic signs on the scene. The Happenings, though more hesitant (perhaps because they have not had the evolutionary span of the Masque), and more suspicious of the celebratory media of speaking and singing, have similarly pillaged the new music, the plastic arts, and in some indirect and incomplete ways even drama and poetry. The fascination with theatrical machinery in the Masque has no full parallel in the Happenings, but it has cropped up in some related projects such as E.A.T. and Joan Littlewood's plans for an electronic fun palace -- not to mention the electronic and other modern gadgetry often present in Happenings themselves. Most important perhaps, the Masque also attempted to allegorise the audience, and its appeal, as that of any coterie 'myth-play', was 'a curious mixture of the popular and the esoteric; it is popular for its immediate audience, but those outside its circle have to make a conscious effort to appreciate it' (Frye 282). Finally, the Masque 'even at its best was an attempt rather than an achievement, but although it never quite gained an intrinsic and permanent value, it had a deep, fruitful, and lasting influence' (Welsford, 243- 4)- not only on poetry but also on theatre, which enriched itself by incorporating many of its elements and ways of using space, music (i.e. time) and actors.

On the other hand, the late, Jonsonian Masque added a danced scene which showed disruptive powers at work against the advocated harmony and which was often more striking than the celebratory scene. The basic aim of this 'anti-masque' was to enact a deadly threat to or sickness of the contemporary way of life, identified with the monarchist State, and its final triumphant recovery ending with the symbolic harmony of banquet and dance. The Masque often relied, both in its general form and in its dance patterns, on a quasi-Pythagorean or Neoplatonic numerology claiming to represent an arithmetical, geometrical and musical harmony of spheres which symbolised and guaranteed the harmony of the political microcosm. 'The Masque writers were bound to represent both marriage and monarchy not as faulty human institutions, but as joyful mysteries.... This enforced orthodoxy led, as it was bound to do, to a stiff insincerity, very alien from the true spirit of romance' (Welsford 290-1). As different from the more sophisticated and mediated medieval approach, the late Masque idealised the values represented by its audience, the ruling social class. Compared to medieval dramaturgy, which was based on an Augustinian theory of salvational history, the Masque therefore had only an intra-class, institutionalised function but no generally valid *telos*. Where the Elizabethan History Play still had the ideologically powerful, though secularised, 'Tudor myth' to inform its structure, which therefore emphasised the deadly threat of civil war with only a perfunctory final communion (e.g. at the end of *Richard III*), the Masque had to fall back on a stock Morality plot and a narrow cast of types, usually from classical mythology: 'The dramatist might depict life as sorrowful or ridiculous or contemptible, but in the masque absurd or malevolent beings appeared only to be put to flight by the entry of the noble joyous and joy-bringing masquers' (Welsford 366).

Reacting against new Individualist myths which celebrated a false civil community, late 19<sup>th</sup>-century drama began again to grope for more mature allegorical forms. Much of modern drama from Jarry on is an antimasque-like recognition of the absurd and malevolent as the new normality, or indeed, with *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungs*, Ibsen's *Ghosts* or Strindberg, of the bourgeois reality as a horrifying and haunted space and time. For example, Mallarmé envisaged the future work of dramatic art as a sacramental participation in mystery, a scenic presentation of the State religion.<sup>12</sup>

As opposed to all such attempts at sacramental yea-saying comedies, the nay-saying Happenings want either to escape from capitalist society or to pull it down; they emphasise either the necessity for a non-existing communion or the alienation of a life without it (sides of the same coin, in fact). For the authors of most Happenings there is both a crying need for and a total absence of any supra-individualistic social entity in which one could believe sufficiently to celebrate its order. That is why -- unlike the Masque or the early French amateur *mascarade* and ballet -- the Happenings have steadfastly refused to take their devices from the prevalent dramatic form, even to the point of being somewhat hysterically suspicious of its dominant medium, words, regardless of the uses it might be put to. Again, numerology is very evident in Happenings, but is based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century thermodynamics, implying that humanity and its affairs exist as aggregates in a mechanical, valueless universe subject to the laws of chance and large numbers (that 'Welfare State of the mind', Kaplan 96). Though Happenings often revert to ritual attitudes, their ritual is subjective and almost without explicit myth. The 'antimasque' stage has completely taken over, and from the point of view of a world of clear and constant values it would not be too difficult to see the world presented in the Happenings as a demonic chaos rampant with secularised monsters of ultimate neo-capitalist alienation.

#### 4. *Happenings and Their Times: Cognitive and Nihilist Estrangement*

##### **Effect**

Most Happenings seem to have been rather unsatisfactory in their own terms -- primitive or muddled -- often through lack of time and money, but also through lack of clear aims. One has to insist that in Happenings, as in all spectacles, the effect will depend on clarity of gestural and verbal actions, on their social meaningfulness (different fields of possibility or topics are not aesthetically equivalent), on the skill by which a coordinated series of situations is performed, and on the overall consistency of purpose embodied in the selection and the space/time spread of the materials used (i.e. on the authors' point of view). This last point is the more interesting since the audience's possible reactions often have to be included as a margin of co-authorship in the authors' point of view: this is touched upon at the end.

Theoretically, however, if and when these demands are met, a Happening should have a specific effect on participants. By getting drawn into a 'real' event (one not taking place in a special diegetic universe), the participants should experience a shock of poetic cognition directed at the performance's thematic field, and beginning with themselves and their environment. A Happening 'is designed to stir the modern audience from its cozy emotional anesthesia' (Sontag 275); 'some specific frustrations, caused by cybernated life, require accordingly cybernated shock and catharsis' (Nam June Paik, *Manifestos* 24); 'the highest priority must be given to the re-education of its audience's perceptions' (Baxandall 29). A Happening is, according to Schechner, '(1) an attempt to bring into celebratory focus the full message-complexity of a downtown street, and (2)

a playing with modes of perception' (Schechner 148); it isolates events or images in order to revitalise them: 'Deadened habits, routine images, unused sensibilities, and even places (Kaprow's highways and supermarkets) are reinfused with meaning', he concludes optimistically (Schechner 154). Dominant fossilised views of reality should, when juxtaposed to 'unpackaged' events, be revealed 'as grotesque, inadequate and dangerous':

In a performance by the Once Theatre, bureaucratic dossiers on young people were monotonously read, while technicians encased the individuals, upright and nearly nude, in a box one by one between layers of plastic sheeting. They looked like frozen fish on ice, bugs in an ice tray, people in an apartment house. -- The banal, aggressive or grotesque may also be aestheticised before one's eyes. *In Meat Joy* by Carolee Schneemann, the lovers, having undressed one another, paint the flesh of the other. In Ken Dewey's *Without and Within* a rough tug-of-war with audience participation is transformed into a deliberate ritual, then into dancing which ends with rock-and-roll. Hostility into beauty into joy. (Baxandall 32-3)

### **Baxandall's 'Alienation Antidote' Hypothesis**

Even if one does not quite share the millenarism of Higgins, who programmatically states that we are 'approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant' (Higgins 11-13), Happenings at their best may prefigure possible new modes of human relations and living, construed as fragments or elements of a new aesthetics (and ethics), 'the outlines of everyday life for the post-compulsive, post-manipulated man' (Baxandall, 33). Upon such elements, some Leftwing or radical critics, such as Baxandall and Schechner, have based their defence of Happenings, claiming for them the hypothetical status of an *antidote to existing forms of alienation* (reification, desensualisation) in the mass society of corporate capitalism. They argue that Happenings use special devices in order to overcome communication and perception barriers in the manipulated consumer society, in an age of television addiction, public-relations credibility gaps and mass propaganda techniques marketing everything from pollutants to genocidal imperialist wars, such as that in Vietnam. In such a context, a re-education of audience perception, a de-pollution of senses, is most urgent; mimetic recognition (anagnorisis) in Happenings should function as a therapy counteracting the brainwashing effects of contemporary, profit oriented life, and demystifying the ruling relationships in life and on stage. They envisage Happenings exclaiming with Yvonne Rainer: 'NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamor and transcendence of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti- heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved' (*TDR* 30, 178).

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

### Brecht, Happenings and Their Times

Brecht's dramaturgy is the principal example in this century of an assumption of the plebeian spectacle tradition into drama. Logically, its substratum of popular fairs, folks comics, cabaret, burlesque and other spectacle (what I called in an essay on Brecht the Azdak-Schweik 'look from underneath' of plebeian demystification) has some affinities with the stance of the Happenings.<sup>13</sup> He too passed through a phase of writing for a closed and homogeneous group during which his aim, in the 'plays for learning', was to make the participants more active and critical, with the audience secondary or unnecessary. More generally, Brecht felt the routine actions and situations, representing the anthropological commonplaces of our way of life, should be estranged in order to recognise and expose their alienated quality. Happenings estrange basic conventions of spectacle such as an audience entering by an aisle or sitting in front of the performance area, as well as the field of possibilities presented in their performance. They also lift everyday commonplaces -- 'the visit to the supermarket, eating TV dinner, TV, the preliminaries of sex' (Baxandall 32) -- out of the 'ordinary' aura and into the focus of attentive scrutiny. However, they very rarely, and this is clearly a weakness, focus their attention on political or economic relationships of any kind: Happenings are more than a little socially inbred. None the less, they theatricalise the audience and its relationships: the audience becomes to a certain extent its own spectacle. This may be in a way a logical extension of Brecht's approach; yet the methodology of Brechtian dramaturgy and of Happenings differs considerably, and for good reason.

The comparison is crucial because Brecht too started out (ca. 1916- 28) as a Villonesque or Rimbaudesque nihilist. The 'storm and stress' in Europe after the first World War, the exemplary experience of the Leninist phase of the Bolshevik Revolution, proved to him that human relations (people's 'nature') can be changed by intelligent and organised, though painful, intervention into them. After *The Threepenny Opera* he ceased writing for bourgeois audiences, however liberal or dissident they might be, and turned to performances of workers' and schoolchildren choruses (ca. 1929-34). At that point, he began functioning as a partisan or guerrilla in the Lukácsian sense of a creator who coordinates his actions with a disciplined revolutionary 'main body,' but proceeds on his own responsibility, autonomous yet not independent. (This epicyclic way of operating makes nonsense out of the division between inner-directed and outer-directed action, which has befuddled so much liberal criticism of Brecht before and after Esslin.) The experiences of his two phases fused the nihilist clean sweep of the artists (the familiar which is systematically rendered incomprehensible to the senses) with Marx's gnoseology and dialectics which used the resulting view of alienation not as an object of subjective empathy but of cognition. Even after the catastrophic Nazi advent of 1933, Brecht never forsook such a synthesis. Indeed, his path through the 'didactic' phase, and in particular the much undervalued impact of his new audiences, made it possible for Brecht to return, in his mature phase, to a new concreteness enriched by an insight into the inner model of empirical existence, the 'events behind the events'.

The Happenings' authors' critical dates were not 1917 and 1933, but 1945-47 and the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. The first period is the time of their first conscious experiences of social relations, of growing up in a USA which was turning from a contradictory Rooseveltian anti-fascism to the Cold War outside and the 'witch-hunt' repressions and stagnation within. The second period is the breakdown of that stagnation in an inconclusive flurry of shocked recognitions of papered-over contradictions. The Happenings were created in this period and shared in its inconclusiveness. The New York *bohème* lacked available or persuasive foreign models, lacked strong native workers' or socialist movements, and faced with new and more pervasive methods of mass persuasion based on the lure of prosperity. Because of these and many other factors, the

Happenings' authors did not as a rule emerge out of nihilism into the universe of people enmeshed in political economy and a theatre interested in civic responsibility. Instead, they emerged as an isolated little group catering more or less to each other: their lack of interest in audience was formally analogous to, but sociologically poles apart from, Brecht's second phase. Rejecting US capitalism but disbelieving in the possibility of a humanising social change, Happenings were as a rule more pessimistic than Brecht's plays. Together with much contemporary European drama, they postulated, as in Hansen, an absurd, meaningless reality: '... there is the traffic jam, the construction job, the bus that gets four flat tires all at once for no readily explainable reason, the train that stops mysteriously in the middle of the tunnel under the East River. To the average persons, these might be minor tragedies; a happening person would exult that the normal, mundane order of things had been suspended or changed vividly'<sup>14</sup>. Faced with such attitudes, one recalls the witty definition of the absurd as 'a dialectical situation seen by a masochist' (Eco 237).

### Cognitive and Nihilist Estrangement

Comparing the just quoted little exemplum of Hansen's to, say, Brecht's stance toward a traffic accident in his essay *The Street Scene*, it becomes evident what Happenings assume: that the techniques of mass persuasion have badly weakened the normative powers of reason, and the only approach left is to subject people to a non-explicit, more primitive and aggressive kind of experience, which will reorientate them by 'direct perception' (the protracted exposure time of Happenings issues out of this). The premises of such a proceeding are strictly magical: it can be called an infantile celebratory myth of 'social reconstruction through sensory awakening' (Schechner, 155). In other words, the Happenings' authors expanded their magical nihilism into the only other direction available when one rejects the Brechtian horizon of humanity alienated into political economy: into a quasi-religious, non-cognitive estrangement. Affecting a ritual and mythical rather than a cognitive approach, Happenings therefore opposed a *nihilist estrangement* to Brecht's cognitive dialectics. Of course, it might sometimes be useful to think of these oppositions as polar possibilities present in each significant Happening, and reduced to the nihilist pole only in the less significant ones. It would then be the task of a sensitive critic to characterise each particular performance on its own merits (certainly *Fotodeath*, for example, is not predominantly absurd or nihilist: it shows absurdity up).<sup>15</sup> Brecht himself did the spadework in defining a non-cognitive estrangement by pointing to the Asian and generally pre-Individualist theatre techniques. Such estrangement 'from the right,' so to speak, is nihilist rather in a religious than in a political sense, and an unkind way to describe the atmosphere of a number of Happenings would be to call them a sort of bohemian Moral Rearmament -- a very American form of nativistic movement (cf. Schechner 155). The most sophisticated nihilist religion is, of course, Zen Buddhism, and a quote from the precept of Gautama Buddha in his fundamental text on contemplation and meditation, *Satti-patthana-sutti*, immediately calls to mind the technique of primitive Happenings (cf. Kaprow's *Calling*, TDR 30, 202ff.):

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

Buddhist contemplation paradoxically uses estrangement and a perverted form of cognition to advance toward Nirvana. It is a beatific vision of the discontinuous flux of things, related to a consciousness of the limits of philosophical humanism and of the positive meaning of alienation. As such it is the horizon of all consistent nihilist estrangement. It may be unnecessary to mention how strong an attraction Zen has therefore provided for the social group from which Happenings too have sprung.

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

### *5. Some Words at the End, But Not in Conclusion*

The Happenings are forcing us to rethink a number of basic spectacle concepts. Their non-diegetic organisation leads us to re-examine the concept of dramaturgic fable or story -- i.e. to think in terms of an integrated effect of non-verbal materials and non-diegetic relationships. The very concept of theatre has to be redefined in order to include a number of genres hitherto neglected as too vulgar (from Latin *vulgus* meaning the people) for official aesthetics. This can only lead to a more precise definition and delimitation of drama and other canonic genres, and have a quite salutary effect. However, when the impact of Happenings works in the direction of a simple-minded denial of the relevance of drama or story in our times, the baby is being chucked out instead of its bath water renewed: sterility ensues. The struggle between cognitive and nihilist attitudes is at its clearest in the theoretical domain, which by nature does not tolerate much vagueness. Nevertheless, such sterility is not a consequence of the rise of Happenings, but of their context. Among other things, Happenings are thus a socio-cultural document. Above all, they show the potentiality of new forms and materials for theatrical communication, and challenge our aesthetics.

Yet the uncertain status of Happenings in theatrical theory and practice is, to a large extent, due to intrinsic problems of their development. As I have tried to point out, their point of view or principle of allegorical stylisation is unclear. In the allegorical mode an antecedent situation is juxtaposed to the present fable, the two being connected by a belief, purpose or ideal which provides the point of view. For an allegorical work of art to succeed, its creator must be able to derive his authority both from his personal achievement of a new structure and a new meaning, and from an antecedent ideal which is in some way classical. As a rule that purpose or ideal is absent from Happenings, which are concerned primarily (in a way that is perhaps understandable but none the less crippling) with nay-saying -- or with a vague and general yea-saying which is equivalent to an absence (see my section 1).

Furthermore, to their contact-magic premise of human reorientation through 'direct perception,' I want to oppose two questions: (1) Does this 'counter-magic' not mean playing the game of the opinion manipulators, albeit in the contrary direction? and (2) Does this not mean playing the game on the terrain of the Establishment brainwashers, where they are much more powerful? One may discount the first question as liberal relativism. But the second surely implies that Happening techniques can have an antidote effect only if and when television programming, newspaper and film financing and distribution, town planning, and so on, are under the control of their producers and consumers, and that, in the meantime, the alienating powers of the system are such that 'live' performances can do little to influence it.

I believe the greatest possibilities for Happening techniques do in fact lie in a diffusion through media such as film and television, which are already using some of them (e.g. in *Laugh-In* or *Blow Up*). Obviously, the exploration of such possibilities is at least a worthwhile pursuit in *avantgarde* finger exercises. At best, it might become of great influence as a laboratory experiment in new perception.

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

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

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Apart from the classic approaches of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Diderot's *De la poésie dramatique* and some other writings, Lessing's *Laokoon*, and Brecht's *Schriften zum Theater*, the following secondary literature has been most useful in these reflections (and some of my conclusions and indeed terms are obviously indebted to them, whether I agreed or disagreed with them). When quoted, they will be indicated in parentheses by author's name with the pages following, otherwise they are not as a rule acknowledged.

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



- Eco, Umberto, *Opera aperta* (Milano, 1967).  
 Higgins, Dick, *Foew and Ombwhnw* (New York/Barton/Cologne, 1969).  
 Kaplan, Donald M., 'Character and Theatre', *TDR* no. 32 (1966).  
 Kaprow, Allan, *Some Recent Happenings* (New York, 1966).  
 Kaprow, Allan, *Untitled Essay and Other Works* (New York, 1967).  
 Kirby, Michael, ed., *Happenings* (New York, 1965) [with statements and scripts by Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman and others].  
 Lebel, Jean-Jacques, *Le Happening* (Paris, 1967).  
*Manifestos*, by Ay- o and others (New York, 1966).  
 Schechner, Richard, *Public Domain* (Indianapolis & New York, 1969).  
 Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation* (New York, 1969).  
 Tarrab, Gilbert, 'Le Happening', *R d'histoire du théâtre*, special issue (1968).  
*TDR* no. 30 (1965), issue devoted to Happenings.

Though I have seen a number of performances billed as Happenings in Europe and America, I have worked basically from scenarios and descriptions, just as if discussing the *Commedia dell'arte*, since my chief interest is in this case not that of a chronicler but of a 'socio-formalist' theoretician of spectacle.

<sup>2</sup> See an account of it in Kirby, *TDR* no. 30, 34-6, and of its direction by Judith Malina in Pierre Biner, *Le Living Theatre* (Lausanne, 1968), pp. 52-3.

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

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

<sup>5</sup> The main works dealing with this theory are:

- Shklovskii, Viktor, *Rozanov* (Petrograd, 1921).  
 Shklovskii, Viktor, *Khod konja* (Berlin, 1923).  
 Shklovskii, Viktor, *Literatura i kinematograf* (Berlin, 1923).  
 Tinianov, Yury, *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Leningrad, 1929).  
 Tomashevskii, Boris, *Teoriia literatury: Poëtika* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1925).

Most quotations can be found in the excellent study by Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague, 1955); see also René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1956), chapter 17. The translations in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, transl. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, 1965) have gaps and terminological difficulties. Since this essay was first written, a number of other translations have been published, e.g. *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska (Cambridge MA, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Whitman was quoted to that effect in *Happenings*, ed. Kirby, 180.

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

<sup>8</sup> Etienne Souriau, *Les grands Problèmes de l'esthétique théâtrale*, (Paris, 1962), p. 11. Souriau has enlarged on this score in several other works, e.g. in his presentation of the anthology *L'Univers filmique* (Paris, n.d.), and in the magisterial *Les Deux cent mille situations dramatiques* (Paris, 1950),

<sup>9</sup> For a reading of mimesis as (re)presentation or performing preferably to copying or simple imitating, see my brief argumentation in the essay "The Mirror and the Dynamo" [now reprinted in my book cited in note 13, Addition].

<sup>10</sup> An excellent formulation of that process can be found in Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (New York, 1967), pp. 165-6.

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

Cunliffe, John W. 'Italian Prototype of the Masque and Dumb Show', *PMLA*, 22 (1907).

Evans, Herbert Arthur, *English Masques* (London, 1897).

Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, 1966).

Furniss, W. Todd, 'Ben Jonson's Masques'. *Three Studies in the Renaissance* (New Haven, 1958),

Gilbert, Allan H. *The Symbolic Persons in the Masques of Ben Jonson* (Durham NC, 1948).

Honig, Edwin, *Dark Conceit* (New York, 1966).

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope, *The Breaking of the Circle* (New York, 1960).

Orgel, Stephen, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge MA, 1965).

Prunières, Henri, *Le Ballet de cour en France avant Benserade et Lully* (Paris, n.d.).

Reyher, Paul, *Les Masques anglais* (Paris, 1909).

Rossiter, A.P., *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (London, 1969).

Schoenbaum, Samuel, ed., *Essays Principally on Masques and Entertainments* (Chicago, 1968).

Talbert, Ernst W., 'The Interpretation of Jonson's Courtly Spectacles', *PMLA* 61 (1946).

Taylor, R.A., *Aspects of the Italian Renaissance* (London, 1923).

Welsford, Enid, *The Court Masque* (Cambridge, 1927).

These books are quoted by author's name and page in parenthesis. See also R.B. Parker's parallel of 'Dramaturgy in Shakespeare and Brecht', *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly* no. 3 (1963).

<sup>12</sup> Haskell Block, *Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama* (Detroit, 1963), p. 86. I have already mentioned affinities with Expressionist, Surrealist, and Futurist drama, and Kirby has gone much further in following one tradition behind the Happenings (the so-called Dadaist one) in the 'Introduction' to *Happenings*.

<sup>13</sup> This section owes much to Lee Baxandall's article (see note 1); though I am dubious about his basic stance, he had the perspicacity of first posing and problematising the crucial comparison of the two estrangements -- Brecht's and the Happenings'. It also owes much to discussions with Richard Schechner, before and after his quoted book.

ADDITION 2021: See by now for my views of Brecht the book *To Brecht and Beyond* (Harvester P and Barnes & Noble, 1984) and many further items listed in "My Brecht: A Look from 2016," *Communications of Int'l Brecht Society* no. 1 (2017), <https://e-cibs.org/issue-1-2017/#suvinstart>.

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

<sup>15</sup> See, on the other hand, Oldenburg's remarks on his *Gayety*, a very interesting manifestation of the tension which went into the making of that 'civic spectacle': 'In *Gayety* I want to create Chicago, in the way I see it.... I think of O. Henry's or anyone else's municipal report, sociological studies etc. but that mine is poetic/satiric/symbolic. The enigmatic portions may be taken to be the situation of the spirit in the community, often these have a violent turn. The relation of the incidents is fortuitous as is the case in real life.... Unfortunately I am limited to typicalities, but the spectator may imagine the numbers. -- The piece closes with a Finale, an apotheosis, in the form of a destruction which always seems appropriate in which the forces of the community are released functionlessly in relieving chaos' (*Happenings*, ed. Kirby, 234- 5).

<sup>16</sup> See George Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London, 1971); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris, 1960), *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted for this observation, as well as for stimulating my interest in a possible parallel between Masque and Happening, to Donald F. Theall of McGill University, and to his unpublished manuscript of an address to McGill alumni from Autumn 1968.

<sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács, 'Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des Kinos', in *Schriften zur Literatursoziologie* (Neuwied, 1968), p. 78.

## APPENDIX:

### Happenings: An Exchange between Lee Baxandall and Darko Suvin

#### Lee Baxandall

The analysis by Darko Suvin in regard to Happenings has much in it of interest -- but much also, I fear, which obfuscates the last few years of theatrical experiment, and which wrongly discredits the Happenings tendency. Since Professor Suvin paid considerable attention to an article of mine on this topic in formulating his view, perhaps you will permit me to respond.

Foremost, the Suvin piece smacks of remoteness from an adequate experience of Happenings and related theatre pieces. To found this suspicion, one need not have picked up on the statement that his theorising about this mode of theatre proceeded 'basically from scenarios and descriptions' rather than from first-hand contact. ('Just as if discussing the *commedia dell'arte*,' Suvin hastens to add -- but the *commedia* and Happenings are very different animals

indeed, as even a cursory comparison will prove! And even assuming Suvin's analogy were accurate, should we then regard our impoverished means of knowing about the *commedia* as an appropriate and adequate means for approaching contemporary theatre pieces?)

Suppose that his contact with Happenings had been more frequent than he suggests. Would Suvin's conclusions then tend to be less remote from the function of perceptual phenomena which Happenings constitute? We can doubt it. For Professor Suvin proceeds very consciously on the basis of a theory of cognition. His particular idea of a real or material theory of knowledge is unsuited, I submit, to understanding the function of the best of the Happenings and also to describing the cognitive process we all undergo. Yet Suvin's premises are none the less lucidly held by him. And this makes difference and discussion more valuable, more productive with him than if one were to differ with others who vaguely hold a comparable prejudice (here, against a non- conceptualising theatre) but fail to conceptualise their own particular values. Hence, Professor Suvin does more than assert that Happenings exhibit a 'nihilist' attitude toward reality. Suvin makes clear that when he says that Happenings are 'strictly magical... religious, non-cognitive', he judges them by a gnoseological standard. He explicitly tells us: 'The meaningful word seems to make the difference between nihilism and cognition'; 'the spoken word, the conceptualized sound, is of paramount importance.'

Now, an obvious and, I think, irrefragable retort would consist in asking Suvin if he believes that no cognitive expression occurs among the non-literary arts, for example, in painting. But to point up Suvin's fundamental error merely by taking note of his bias for the literary genres and for the more conceptualising examples of those genres is not sufficient. We should also directly indicate a theory of cognition more adequate to life, and art, than his highly rationalistic, almost 18th-century, limited idea of cognition.

The alternative to an overly exalted idea of the roles of Concept and Reason is not anti-intellectualism, and not irrationalism as, in the theatre world, the likes of Robert Brustein want to cause us to believe. No. The alternative to an enthronement of Reason is a more comprehensive material theory of cognition.

I hesitate to bring the outstanding statement of a more comprehensive theory of cognition to the reader's attention for, although written in 1950-1, it unfortunately has only been published to date (and this is truly extraordinary) in Serbo-Croatian. The work I refer to is the masterful *Theory of Creativity on a Marxist Basis* by the outstanding philosopher and visual arts expert Max Raphael, whose *Demands of Art* was published by Princeton University Press in its Bollingen Series in 1968. Yet so prevalent and misunderstood does the prejudice exhibited by Professor Suvin in the realm of theatre remain, that perhaps an overview of its basis in a faulty notion of cognition can well be justified.

In the view of Max Raphael, then: Cognition must be seen as a dialectical process arising with the human experience of the world. The process, which occurred historically for the species, occurs anew with each infant that is born. Raphael locates the initial cognitions in *bodily activity*. The animal begins to know its way about the dark night of protozoic existence, while the infant threshes in its crib or at the breast. Then, the cognitive function is built upon by the *experience of the various senses*. Perception and its transformation and expression are learned by trial and error and with growing assurance. But in the initial stage, that of bodily activity, sensations can be affirmed or rejected at once: a tree and a crib are hard and they hurt when struck; water is soft, but one sinks in water. At the level of experience through all of the senses, perception is not that readily verified. Hence, sensuous experience must isolate a sign from the environment; the sign stands for a perception. It is fixed and distanced from its source; the sign enters 'within' the subject and, subsumed in the process of cognition, is transformed and synthesised with other perceptions on a basis of continued dialectical interaction with the environment.

In the third stage, cognition is comprised of thought that understands or *comprehends* the world. The baby and man-the-species begin to seek, 'in what is common to all the particular images, for the force that inheres to reality as such and that regulates the relation of all its parts to one another, i.e. for the generality that dominates the particular. Understanding is thus linked to the perceptions, in its effort to encompass all the particular determinants.'

At the last stage of development, Raphael locates *speculative reason*.

We will define reason (on the basis of our total historical data) as the mediation which is predicated on the unmastered world in its entirety, which seeks to construct that world theoretically from a single source point and to master it in the imagination, and which constitutes the unity of all contradictions, therefore, the Absolute.

Note that speculative reason is not only the final cognitive faculty to develop; *its reliability is contingent* on the reliability of the faculties that are developed earlier.

The three mediations of cognition – the body, the senses, and the understanding – are in a dialectical relationship which historically has arisen under the impress of the outer world, in such a way that these mediations, in association and with continual interaction, have developed into a higher unity from whence, with different means, they confront the same task: mastery of a theory that will dominate practically the impingent outer world.

Reason, moreover, is in the process of development. Early in the history of the species, a kind of reason developed; not a scientific reason, but not wholly untrue to the external world, either. The Absolute, or source point, from which the world is mastered in theory, has progressively grown more equal to its practical task, therefore, objectively more absolute. Raphael describes the emergence of Reason from magic through religion and metaphysics to Marxism.

I should wish to emphasise, *contra* Suvin, Raphael's notion of the interpenetration of reason -- as it is developed in any individual and at a given period -- and the earlier-developed cognitive faculties of *the body, senses and comprehension*. These at once aid in determining the nature of reason and are in turn shaped by reason. Accordingly, it is incorrect to find no cognitive aspect in art that refuses to interpret, to comprehend or to reason, for the apprehender. The art which is only made up of 'sensuous qualities' is also cognitive; it also represents a subject in dialectical relation with the world-as-object.

In the above, I have not given specific instances of the cognitive properties of non-conceptual elements in Happenings. But the reader undoubtedly has had many examples occur to him.

A final important matter raised by Suvin is the question, Where have Happenings gone? Does their displacement indicate their inadequacy or their insignificance?

I would place the downturn of the Happenings trend in 1967. Now, at least two major practitioners (Carolee Schneemann and Ken Dewey) turned up that autumn at the Siege of the Pentagon, and it should have been no great cause for surprise. I have a hunch, and I am sure that it is not mine alone but would be found widely among Happeners, that the development of political struggle and also the *dramaturgical character* of the struggle have perhaps been chiefly responsible for the eclipse of Happenings. And this development I would describe not as the rejection (a mechanistic concept) of Happenings, but rather as a stage wherein a historically necessitated and validated phenomenon was incorporated, revised, and *superseded* (a dialectical concept) by a further stage of historical activity.

Darko Suvin

We all start out from working hypotheses (which those who disagree are free to call prejudices) and the utmost a discussion can achieve is to clarify their thrust and limits. Lee Baxandall's rejoinder to my 'Reflections on Happenings' contributes to such a discussion, and I agree with much of what he says. Now, as to some matters arising out of our disagreements:

(1) I do not want to comment extensively upon his contact-magic assumption that the understanding of an aesthetic activity is directly proportional to temporal exposure to it. Obviously, there is a necessary minimum of exposure: anything beyond that seems to equate sensual perception with dialectical understanding. Mr Baxandall proceeds to buttress this later -- I think mistakenly -- by paraphrasing Raphael. In that view, the greatest expert on rodents is undoubtedly Mickey Mouse. This seems to me to be a (or the) heresy of the US New Left, and probably the basis of our disagreement. As an antitoxin to it, a Diderotian type of rationalism is sometimes indicated.

(2) Nothing in Raphael, if I have not forgotten something, applies specifically to theatre arts. Theatre arts are not painting. (That is only what some Happeners would like to think.) The history of *homo sapiens* in the last five or ten thousand years indicates that the significance and meaningfulness -- the power to express human relationships -- of theatre arts has been wedded to the growing sophistication of their verbal signs' level. Nobody in his right mind claims this is the only, or even the basic, type of signs employed by theatre. But it is the type which has permitted it to transcend the static ritual stage with its magico-religious approach to the world and engage in understanding the dynamic world of changing human relations. I would therefore maintain that a return to nonverbal rituals cannot today fail to be nihilistic.

(3) Yet Mr Baxandall throws into relief the constrictive aspects of our (mine, his) present-day 'artisanal' criticism, with each critic sitting in his private little workshop, alone or -- if he is very clever, and lucky to boot -- with a few apprentices. It is a sad reflection on North American life that out of 2000 universities and colleges teaching theatre and/or dramatic arts, so far as I know none has an Institute for Theatre Theory (or Aesthetics or Poetics). If some such centres existed, presumably Lee Baxandall and I would have had an opportunity to discuss my essay before publication, as part of a learning process in such an institution. I do not doubt that some possibly one-sided emphases in my reflections (all emphases are by definition one-sided -- his too) might have been rendered more adequate. Nevertheless, I'm somewhat puzzled that he should think I was simply rejecting Happenings. I have received comments from the other side of the spectrum disagreeing with my too great concern with, and the importance accorded to, Happenings. But I was not trying to write either a pro or a con article; I was just trying to reflect on what could be learned from Happenings, negatively and positively, about further developments in theatre (or spectacle), and about its theory. I agree with Baxandall's conclusion about a possible dialectical superseding by political 'street scenes'. But, as that development also shows, a superseding is not simply incorporation and revision; it is also rejection. The reader might have noticed that the structure of my essay is not an 'either-or' one, but a 'not-only-but-also' one. Baxandall's critique has -- as is perhaps proper to a rejoinder -- fastened only on one aspect of that structure.