

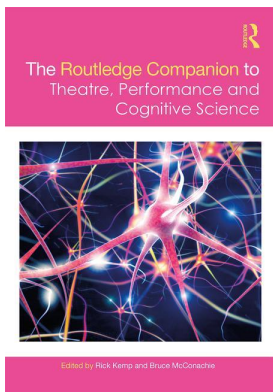
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance, and Cognitive Science**

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### **Aesthetics and the Sensible**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315169927-27>

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**Published online on: 05 Sep 2018**

**How to cite :-** John Lutterbie. 05 Sep 2018, *Aesthetics and the Sensible from: The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance, and Cognitive Science* Routledge

Accessed on: 16 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315169927-27>

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# AESTHETICS AND THE SENSIBLE

*John Lutterbie*

Time, in Gertrude Stein's essay 'On Composition,' has two registers (Stein 1993, 502). The first is the time of the composition, or the context in which the work was created from the perspective of the artist or experienced from that of the beholder. The second, the time in the composition, has an equally double valence: the time required for the artist to create the work of art, and the time taken by the spectator to behold it. Stein's two temporalities do not exist in isolation but are inextricably intertwined. For the purposes of this essay, however, I focus on the spectator who views the work, one who comes with a set of expectations and who engages a composition (whether literature, visual art or performance) for a period of time, the time *in* the composition. This is a first-person, phenomenological encounter that can last a second or continue to engage us for years after the event. It is in this temporality, however long it takes, that aesthetics comes into play. By aesthetic I don't mean the pleasure of encountering something beautiful, although that can be part of the experience. Rather, I mean an encounter with the unexpected, Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or a rendering of the familiar unfamiliar:

The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.*

(Lodge 1988, 20)

Shklovsky's use of the term object is unfortunate when talking about actors; rather, its use is better understood as referring to the work of art as a whole. A book is an object, as is a painting. Similarly, a performance can be viewed as an object, such as a production of *King Lear*. Nonetheless, Shklovsky's theory continues to be critically vibrant, surfacing in Brecht as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the work of the surrealists, and more recently in the aesthetics of Jacques Rancière.

For Rancière, we encounter a work of art with a set of expectations derived from our life experience, which he calls the distribution of the sensible. When he uses the sensible literally, Rancière refers to the world that our senses have access to. Like Merleau-Ponty's flesh, it extends and delimits us as individuals. But he also uses it metaphorically to define the local and

global environments we engage as subjects, defining for Rancière both a politics and an aesthetics. In this sense, the sensible is a fabric organised and supervised by institutions through the exercise of power, and breaching the sensible is configured by Rancière as a bottom-up democratic action designed to empower and strengthen communities through collective awareness, if not immediate action. Cognitively, puncturing the sensible has the potential for reorganising our understanding of it. For Catherine Malabou, this results in a transformation of synaptic connections, a characteristic of neural plasticity, with far-reaching implications.

The concept of plasticity has an aesthetic dimension (sculpture, malleability), just as much as an ethical one (solicitude, treatment, help, repair, rescue) and a political one (responsibility in the double movement of the receiving and the giving of form).

*(Malabou 2008, 30)*

Politically, it is the domain in which the marginalised can actively affirm a community, and intervene to challenge and destabilise policies and institutions. Aesthetically, it provides the work of art with the potential for creating an emerging understanding that ‘emancipates’ the spectator. The use of the singular ‘spectator’ indicates that the individual must be emancipated as a step towards the realisation of collective action. Or, following Malabou, when the sensible is disrupted, the transformation in neural networks has the potential for creating forms that enact the political.

Rancière sees in the arts the potential for disrupting the sensible through the use of images that create a tension between perception and expectation. His approach resonates with the Situationist International, and their goal to disrupt the everyday as a means of making people aware of the pervasiveness of the spectacle, thereby revealing forms of oppression and surveillance. For Rancière, there are images/forms that reinscribe existing relations between peoples and those that resist the reproduction of oppressive values. The politically productive ones are those that resist pre-existing expectations. ‘Images change our gaze and the landscape of the possible if they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects’ (Rancière 2009, 105). In *The Emancipated Spectator*, he identifies two types of image that he believes can have political efficacy: the intolerable image and the pensive image. The intolerable, as the name suggests, causes the viewer to ‘close one’s eyes or avert one’s gaze’ because, in his example of an anorexic model, ‘the beautiful appearance’ is offset by the ‘abject reality’ (83, 85). The pensive image operates through ambiguity, by confronting the spectator with ‘social banality in the impersonality of art’ (119) and thereby creating a ‘zone of indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also between art and non-art’ (107). The pensive, in this sense, does not suggest a state of cognitive inactivity, but an unreflective acceptance of the status quo. In the need to avert the eyes and/or through the undecidability of the image there is the potential to open a temporal gap in which the viewers’ expectations are confronted by the force of the image, creating the possibility for new meanings, understandings to emerge.

I begin this exploration of the image and cognitive processes that underlie it through a case study, a production I saw in 2013. The analysis following the description uses the concepts of fluency and disfluency developed in psychology, a theory of cognitive prediction, and the recent discovery of the default mode network. Aesthetics in this construct is a temporal process in which the ambiguities and juxtaposition of images defer the possibility of spectators arriving at an interpretation. The viewer’s expectations are challenged, forcing a reformulation of the engagement with intolerable and/or pensive images before arriving at an emergent understanding of the experience.

### The concept of the face: regarding the Son of God

Romeo Castellucci's 2010 production of *Sul concetto di volto nel figlio di Dio* (*The Concept of the Face: Regarding the Son of God*) is a triptych.<sup>1</sup> The first section portrays the tribulations of a middle-aged son dealing with his father's incontinence. The second involves a gang of teenagers throwing hand grenades at a Renaissance portrait of Christ and the third the dissolution of that painting revealing words that clarify the artist's intent. For this discussion, the focus is on the first segment, with reference to the second and third. First, a description of the set (Figure 23.1).

The scene is the home of an old man and his middle-aged son. It is divided into three parts. Stage right there is a living room, in the middle the semblance of a kitchen (represented by a table and two chairs) and stage left the bedroom consisting of a bed, table and lamp. A white carpet covers the floor. The furniture is made of a light-colored wood (possibly birch) with white upholstery, and in the bedroom, white bedding. The legs of the table and chairs are chrome. Ikea-simplicity might be an appropriate name for the style. Everything is placed parallel to the front of the stage, reducing the dynamic tension often associated with modernist scene design. At the back of the stage, from the floor to the flies is a reproduction of Antonello da Messina's *Ecce Homo*, a painting of the passion of the Christ during his scourging at the hands of Pontius Pilate. It is a beautiful, seductive and in Rancière's terms a pensive image; one that is passive, completely devoid of compassion or suffering.

The narrative of the first part of the triptych is of a man taking care of his father. There is very little dialogue, with most of the story communicated through physical action. The acting, for all intents and purposes, is psychological realism. The son, dressed in white shirt and black slacks, appears to be getting ready to go out, when his father enters in a white, terry cloth bathrobe and an adult diaper, although the latter is not at first apparent. As the son scurries around getting ready, the father, in the living room, turns his back to



Figure 23.1 The set for the first part of *The Concept of the Face*.

the audience and one notices immediately a brown stain on the robe. Clearly the father has fouled himself. The son then cleans the father, changing the diaper. This scenario is repeated two more times, once in the kitchen and then in the bedroom. Each incident is more intense and graphic, with the final incontinence being best described as projectile diarrhea. Each time the son gets more frustrated and the father more humiliated. The scene concludes with the father pouring what appears to be disinfectant over himself and sitting on the bed. Evident throughout the performance is the deep and compassionate love the two men have for each other. This is apparent in the care with which the son tends to the father's needs, and the parent's repeated moans: 'Scusi! Scusi! Scusi!' This loving story is in stark contrast to the intolerable image of the incontinence, including the subtle aroma of feces pumped into the theatre.

Significantly, it was impossible for me to keep my eyes on the last two defecations. Each time I had to avert my eyes, to look away, my gaze was drawn to the oversized image of the Christ. The movement from father and son to the Ecce Homo created another triad, a triangulation between the two men and the Son of God. There was, in the movement of the eye, a growing awareness of the impassiveness of the portrait set against the impassioned relationship between the two characters. I found myself, quite literally, regarding the Son of God, with a growing understanding of the way the face was looking down on the action under its gaze. There was no understanding, no compassion, no concern for the human suffering that was being depicted. With each repetition, Castellucci's critique of the Catholic Church became more evident. An interpretation that was confirmed in the final moments of the performance when (unnecessary in my opinion) the words appeared as the portrait dissolved and was shredded: 'the lord is not my shepherd.'

The touching relationship between the human father and son pulled me into the stream of the narrative, only to be cruelly pulled out of it by the graphic depiction of the defecation. Once the immediate shock of the incontinence dissipated, my gaze left Messina's painting and returned to the two men and the changing of the father's diaper. The intolerable image of the man's incontinence was juxtaposed with the pensive image of the Ecce Homo, commenting without commenting. The shifting of the eyes did not lead immediately to understanding, but to a disturbing ambiguity that remained at the margins of awareness as the narrative recaptured my attention. Understanding the cognitive dynamics of this process requires an understanding of fluency and disfluency.

### ***Fluency, disfluency and the aesthetic experience***

Scientists are applying their growing knowledge of the brain and how it works to the aesthetic experience. They focus primarily on understanding the pleasure experienced in the encounter with works of art and the beautiful. V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, for example, identify aspects of various works of art that activate pleasure centers in the brain, arguing that organisation, distortions and abstractions in works of art give rise to aesthetic experiences, at least as defined by them (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999). Psychologist Rolf Reber takes a different tack by looking at the processing of perceptual experiences and theorising that the flow of experience or fluency is the source of aesthetic pleasure. His approach bears at least a resemblance to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow* (1990). 'Processing fluency, or simply fluency, is defined as the ease with which information flows through the cognitive system (which includes both perceptual and conceptual components)' (Reber 2014, 225). The distinction between

perceptual and conceptual is significant, and will be addressed later. At the moment the idea of the ease of movement of information through the cognitive system needs to be developed.

The ease with which data are processed cognitively depends on prior exposure to the same or similar stimulations. In this sense, Reber writes: flow depends ‘on both the stimulus and the person’s prior experience. The better the fit between stimulus and processing capabilities, the more fluently the stimulus is processed’ (Reber 2014, 226). The habituation or at least familiarity with perceptual information facilitates processing through patterns of recognition because we tend to pay attention to familiar circumstances. The same is true of conceptual information: prior experience with related ideas allows for greater fluency in processing. Ease of recognition is understood to be pleasurable because there is minimal disruption of experience, and patterns of thought arise that enhance the emergence of familiar forms of meaning. Such events reinforce expectations of the same and tend to conserve habitual patterns of behavior. Reber’s study led him to conclude that flow in aesthetic experience is what gives rise to pleasure in art.

Not everyone agrees with Reber’s conclusions. To his credit, Reber acknowledges disfluency, or moments when the flow of perceptual and conceptual experience is disrupted. Claudia Muth and her colleagues decided to test the effect of disfluency in responses to modern art. They discovered that the interest and attention of beholders of art increases when there is ambiguity in the engagement. ‘Ambiguity refers to multiple meanings attributed to an object and varies with information, context and interaction between an observer and an object...It is thus more a subjective than an objective variable’ (Muth, Hesslinger & Carbon 2015, 2). Their investigation looked at aspects of the art objects to which subjects responded:

In contrast to previous reports, we found no evidence for a preference for flow or moderate levels of ambiguity but a clear positive relation of high levels of ambiguity with liking, interest and powerfulness of (perceptual and cognitive) affect. We revealed the largest effect for interest—which indicates that this dimension is especially crucial concerning the aesthetic appreciation of ambiguity in modern art.

(6–7)

If Muth and her colleagues are correct, greater interest and attention are paid when there is a tension between the manifest qualities of the work of art and the flow of the familiar. My interest in Jackson Pollock shifted radically when I moved from viewing the work from a distance to a close examination of the way the different paints interacted with the canvas. Some ‘drips’ were absorbed by the canvas, while others formed impasto, adding a third dimension to what appeared to be a two-dimensional painting. Suddenly there was depth, and my understanding of action painting underwent a transformation that I remember and continue to think about. The fluency based on previous perceptual and conceptual experiences was broken, and my attention and interest were directed to information that defied expectation and required a restructuring of my understanding.

Andy Clark, in *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind*, replaces fluency and disfluency with prediction and prediction error. Viewing the body as an open system subject to the influence of perceptual experience, he puts less emphasis on what is perceived and more on ‘the ceaseless anticipatory buzz of downwards-flowing neural prediction that drives perception and action in a circular causal flow. Incoming sensory information is just one further factor perturbing those restless pro-active seas’ (Clark 2016, 52). The fluency

of Reber, in Clark's universe, is replaced with the top-down movement of anticipation derived from attention and previous experiences in similar circumstances. The circularity of which he speaks is the integration of perceptions into the appropriate and predicted behaviour, involving the facilitation of percepts that support the current action and ignoring those incoming signals that are not relevant to the flow of experience. Prediction error, or disfluency in the theories of Reber and Muth, occurs when expectations established by the 'top-down movement of anticipation' are disrupted, requiring the formation of a new understanding. 'But should things fail to fall into place (should the results of the perceptual "experiment" appear to falsify the hypothesis) those error signals can be used to recruit a different hypothesis' (70). The result in extreme perturbations is the necessity to formulate 'revisions in our model of the world' (80). For Rancière and Shklovsky, such disruptions define the aesthetic event, for it involves both the viewer's reformulation of the sensible after the encounter with the work of art (Rancière) and the essential function of art – 'The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar"' (Shklovsky). We can see in the confluence of the two theorists the intersection of politics and aesthetics, of the beholding of art and the creativity of the artist.

In the flow of fluency, as defined by Reber, perceptual and conceptual understanding can be seen to move in tandem because previous experiences have created associations between what is perceived and the meanings derived. My early engagement with Pollock established a certain way of seeing and thinking that established a set of expectations that predetermined my future encounters with his art. Moving towards the canvas broke that circularity because my perceptual expectations were disrupted, requiring new conceptual formations, a redistribution of the sensible, to reconcile what his work had meant to me and what it could mean to me. The provocation of the new information initiated a 'complex way of seeing' (Brecht 1956, 44) that required a period of reflection because the familiar was suddenly unfamiliar. The complacency of expectation had been ruptured, requiring a recalibration of what art means and can do.

There is experimental evidence for this recalibration. Neuroscientists working with imaging technologies (fMRI, PET Scans, etc.) can identify the default mode network (DMN), that is, a baseline of mental activity, once perceptual and somatic neural activities are extrapolated from the image. The neural activity that persists once interference has been removed suggests the DMN has a function. The 'prevailing view is that the default mode or "conscious resting state" involves the retrieval and manipulation of past events, both personal and general, in an effort to solve problems and develop future plans' (Greicius & Menon 2003, 257). To Michael Greicius and Vinod Menon this suggests, 'that the retrieval of episodic memories and semantic knowledge are likely candidates.' Not everyone believes the separation of the DMN and sensory information is complete. Michael D. Fox and Abraham Snyder believe the 'underlying intrinsic organization encourages shifting one's perspective of brain function from the view of a system simply responding to changing contingencies to one operating on its own, intrinsically, with sensory information modulating rather than determining the operation of the system' (Fox et al. 2005, 9677). The implication is that the DMN marks a period of reflection following perceptual activity:

One possibility is that the default network directly supports internal mentation that is largely detached from the external world... Another possibility is that the default network functions to support exploratory monitoring of the external environment when focused attention is relaxed...[and] the default network operates in opposition to other brain

systems that are used for focused external attention and sensory processing. When the default network is most active, the external attention system is attenuated and vice versa.

(Buckner, Andrews-Hanna & Schacter 2008, 18–19)

In other words, when attention in the external world is the strongest, the DMN is less relevant, and when internal thought is strongest, attention to external stimuli is the weakest.

If this is true, when there is fluency in aesthetic interactions, the DMN is less active, and more active when something in the work of art breaks the flow of attending to the world, giving rise to a disfluency. When the external sensory and motor perceptions are strong, less attention is paid to evaluating the present, problem solving and planning for the future because top-down expectations and the focus of attention prescribe the sensory inputs to which I am attending. The opposite seems equally true. There is convincing evidence that cross-fertilisation occurs between the perceptual apparatus and the DMN, with one influencing the other, suggesting a 'dialectical' relationship between the two. Moments of ambiguity in the aesthetic experience create a disfluency that requires reflection and the construction of representations outside of normative expectations, allowing for the emergence of structures of meaning that attest to the relevance of the disruption. Or, in Clark's terms, new hypotheses are recruited. Brecht, reformulating Shklovsky's defamiliarisation for political ends, writes that 'Some exercise in complex seeing is necessary—though it is perhaps more important to be able to think above the stream than to think in the stream.' His *Verfremdungseffekt* creates an ambiguity that breaks with the narrative flow of experience, giving rise to a period of reflection and the attempt to construct a coherent understanding based on perceptual experience. This state of disfluency lasts an indeterminate amount of time before the new hypotheses emerge or some aspect of the event pulls the beholder back into 'the stream' – the rhetoric of the story, in the case of narrative theatre. Whether or not the new hypotheses are satisfactory is something only time will tell, because it may be that meaning will only emerge in a coherent understanding in some future time and the redistribution of the sensible will be complete.

### **The concept of the face: regarding the Son of God *Redux***

The empathy created with the suffering of the two men, one in frustration, the other humiliation, is broken by the visual/olfactory experience of the three defecations. When I describe this production to colleagues, there is an involuntary withdrawal by the listener; their repulsion recreates a disfluency similar to what I experienced in encountering those intolerable images. My need to avert my eyes and their coming to rest on the face of the Christ created a pensive dialectic between what was happening on stage and the emotionless passivity of the painting. The disfluency was intensified by the beauty of the painting in contrast with the graphic representations of feces. The son's activity of cleaning the father drew my attention back to the narrative. The repetition of the violence through the three instances of incontinence, the triadic structure of the set, and the triangulation between the two men and the image of Christ led to an emerging understanding. This understanding of the characters' dilemma, the first of the three part structure of the performance, was pitted against the throwing of hand grenades at the image of Christ, without impacting the image, by teenagers (who were devoid of any apparent anger or other intense emotion), created another triad between the painting, the action and the father and son narrative. In the final segment, the father is onstage in the bedroom, and one of the young men is on the other side of the stage as the painting dissolves, creating a final triad with the inscription 'the lord is not my shepherd.'



None of the three sections of the work provided an answer to *The Concept of the Face*; rather, the audience is left with an unsettling critique of the Church. The three divisions are marked by disfluency, breaking our engagement through an abrupt change in the flow and direction of the performance. The incontinences of the father, the cacophony of the amplified sound of the projectiles thrown at the painting and the total dissolution of the painting are intolerable images that created a pensive state in me as an audience member, which led to understanding sometime later. Partial interpretations arose but did not sequence themselves into a coherent thematic. What eventually emerged, reinforced by the words projected on the back wall, was a politics that denounced the impersonal hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and its claims to a compassionate spirituality. That understanding arose over time, and was the result of the intolerable and pensive images as defined by Rancière and created by Castellucci.

Jacques Rancière conceptualises the distribution of the sensible as a ‘fabric’ that defines the parameters within which we normally relate to each other. The potential of art is its ability to puncture the surface of the sensible by employing intolerable and/or pensive images giving rise to a disfluency or prediction error. The repetitions of disfluency that pulled me out of the flow of the production put me in a temporary state of reflection on a set of disturbing perceptual and affective experiences. I was compelled to seek a deeper understanding, the creation of a new hypothesis. Before a final conclusion can be reached, the production seduces me once again into the stream of events. In the moment of reflection evoked by the intolerable images, I deal with my repulsion and inability to look by shifting my gaze from the distress of incontinence to the beauty of the painting and the passivity of the image of Christ. In the disruption of perceptual experience, as partial understandings emerge with each perturbation, I remain trapped in ambiguities while the production returns to performing its structure, bringing my attention once again to the matters at hand. But my expectations are no longer stable despite the return to the norms of narrative. Instead, they are in a continual state of flux, the experience with the pensive image lingering in working memory. Each disfluency is dependent on what has preceded, reminding me of earlier attempts at meaning-making, which, as I experience the newest intolerable image, complicate my attempts at understanding.

Through grappling with the perturbations to the field of expectations, there arise larger social images, imbued with a politics that call for resistance to the institutions that demand conformity, seemingly without empathy for its subjects. The fissures created by the intolerable and the pensive permit the spectator to grapple with ambiguities that lead to an oscillation between my attention to the performance and the reflections induced by images that don’t promise a resolution. There is in this aesthetics the potential for a redistribution of the sensible, rendering the familiar unfamiliar, constructing a new set of expectations, and a reformulation of the hypotheses on which we act. In the intersection of Shklovsky and Rancière, Castellucci and Pollock, lies an aesthetics with the potential for the redistribution of the sensible, and in that perhaps a step towards a new way of being together.

### Note

- 1 The performance I attended was at Montclair State College in 2013.

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