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Theatre as Philosophical Enquiry: Aesthetics of the Sublime

This research project explores the ways in which the aesthetic idea of the sublime is embodied, negotiated, and transformed in selected examples of contemporary European drama and theatre practice. The research will bring philosophical accounts of the sublime into play with the art of theatre with the aim of foregrounding the philosophical significance of artistic practice and aesthetic experience. The project explores what is distinctively theatrical and performative about the concept of the sublime and it examines how the dramaturgical practices of contemporary theatre allow us to rethink the possibilities (and limitations) of this aesthetic experience.

The hypothesis for this research is that theatre is an event of sensation and thought, and that it provides a distinctive spatio-temporal framework which enables a productive reassessment of the sublime and related questions about representation, appearance, desire, mimesis, and affect. Methodologically, the central aim of this project is to recontextualise the sublime within the theatrical performing arts in an approach that examines dramaturgical practices as material forms of thought. This means that rather than conventionally philosophising *about* theatre, the project will identify ways of philosophising *out of* dramaturgical practices and theatre events, following a methodology of immanent aesthetic critique which is inspired by the work of Theodor W. Adorno and Alain Badiou. The aesthetic practices and events in question will be selected dramatic texts and performances by major European theatre makers whose avant-garde theatrical styles are concerned with the problem of the body and the possibilities of representation and expression at the limits of the theatrical frame. Specifically, the project will involve text and performance analyses and focus on the dramatic theatre by Howard Barker (UK) who calls his work a 'theatre of catastrophe', the radical directorial approaches and productions by Romeo Castellucci (Italy), and the multimedial work of theatre and performance artist Jan Fabre (Belgium).

The focus on drama, theatre and performance represents a new shift of attention away from literature and the visual arts (where Romantic poetry, landscape painting, and conceptual art have been identified as the traditional sites of sublime aesthetic experience) towards the performing arts. The project will explore how the art of theatre - understood as an assemblage of text, bodies, objects, space and time - is capable of offering reconsiderations of the aesthetic idea of the sublime. The project's methodology of grounding philosophical enquiry in innovative contemporary European theatre practice will make substantial new contributions to the discipline of Performance Philosophy.