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Theatre and Time Ecology: Deceleration in *Stifters Dinge* and *L'Effet de Serge*

Abstract

This article explores the production of 'time ecology' in two works of postdramatic theatre: Heiner Goebbels' *Stifters Dinge* (2007) and Philippe Quesne's *L'Effet de Serge* (2007). By focusing on the practice of deceleration, it argues that theatre's ecological potential resides not so much in its ability to represent the world, but rather in its capacity for producing new types of temporal experience that purposefully seek to break with modernity's regime of historicity and the accelerated rhythms that it has given rise to. Importantly, my concern with deceleration is not an argument for slowness *per se*; on the contrary, I am interested in highlighting the presence of multiple and interpenetrating timescales and rhythms. As well as exposing the full extent of theatre's temporal potential, such a concern with postdramatic 'chronographies' offers an implicit critique of dramatic theatre's extant practices of eco-dramaturgy that, all too often, attempt to construct a linear narrative which is invested in conventional sequential models of temporality (beginning, middle, end).

Keywords

Time ecology, deceleration, postdramatic, simultaneity, boredom, Heiner Goebbels, Philippe Quesne.

Biography

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Introduction

In a capitalist and global culture addicted to the accelerationist ‘high’ that carbon consumption, smart machines and fibre optics invariably supply, it comes as no surprise to find artists and critics asking new questions about what art can do. The art historian Yves-Alain Bois, for instance, wonders ‘if the artwork can slow us down? Can it alter our viewing habits?’ (2013, 146). Bois’ concern to foreground the role of time in the act of aesthetic reception has important implications for the future of ecocriticism. It invites the discipline to shift its focus of attention away from its traditional interest in how a text may represent nature or actively engage in environmental debates. Henceforth, the onus is now placed on what we might call the artwork’s temporal praxis, that is to say, its capacity for intervening into the temporal regimes that invisibly structure all human behaviour patterns today. For if, as Bois implies, the affective and political charge of any artwork is bound up with and inseparable from larger socio-economic rhythms that determine its reception, then it is no longer sufficient to analyze what a given work is striving to communicate semantically and/or represent formally. Rather, if art and criticism are to fulfil their potential as ecological agents in a period of increasing accelerationism – what the philosopher Paul Virilio, in a striking metaphor, refers to as ‘dromological pollution’ (2003, 22) – it is imperative that ecocriticism addresses a more fundamental question. Namely, how can the artwork offer a performative critique of the temporal models that have not only produced global warming, but are increasingly unable to respond, in any effective way, to the temporal ‘weirding’ that it has given risen to today? A good indication of what this ‘weirding’ consists of is provided by ecocritic Greg Garrard:

CO² emitted now could stay in the atmosphere for centuries, especially if deforestation and ocean acidification reduces biological absorption. Yet the paleoclimatic evidence includes evidence of phase shifts on a global scale that happened in years, rather than centuries. The global climate system may be relatively

easy to disrupt, but impossible to retrieve... [W]e still must strive to minimise anthropogenic climate change, while grieving for a future we have already lost. (2012, 385)

In order to approach these issues, and in the hope of outlining a new direction for ecocriticism not listed in Laurence Buell's important *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination* (2005), this essay brings together two areas of study that, to date, have existed independently. On the one hand, the recent interest that scholars in Theatre Studies (especially those interested in postdramatic theatre) have shown in the time-specificity of the theatrical event; and, on the other, the more longstanding concern that environmental thinkers have had with what the sociologist Barbara Adam calls 'time ecology' (1997) – a mode of thinking that stresses the necessity of expanding our temporal repertoire to include a multiplicity of competing human and 'more than human' timescales (geochronology, planetary time, the gestation period of animals, the times of migration, the cycles of the seasons, etc.).ⁱ

In its attempt to expand the still somewhat limited remit of 'eco-dramaturgy' by opening it to time ecology (Arons and May 2012), my thinking here inevitably impacts on a debate that has haunted the nascent field of eco-performance criticism from the very beginning, as it were. This dilemma generally focuses on the ability of Western drama to engage with ecological and environmental issues in a manner that avoids contradiction and self-negation. One thinks here, for instance, of Michel Serres' rejection of tragedy as an anthropocentric genre obsessed only with 'spilled blood' (1996); of Una Chaudhuri's critique of naturalism (1996); of Baz Kershaw's suspicions about the ecological value of the actual auditorium itself (2007); and, more recently, of Wallace Heim's anxieties that 'conventional forms of theatre ... may not be adequate to the combination of fiction and reality' that pressing problems, such as climate change, demand (2014, 197). Unlike Chaudhuri, Kershaw

and Heim, however, I do not attempt to disclose the environmental contradictions of dramatic theatre in any explicit sense by critiquing specific works. Mimicking the strategies of the works that I will presently analyse, I prefer to proceed obliquely by focusing attention on what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls ‘postdramatic time’ (2006, 152-62). Whereas Western drama, for Lehmann, attempts to transcend the real time temporality of theatre by creating ‘a segregated area of “dream time”’ in which ‘spectators abandon their own sphere of time to enter into another’ (155), postdramatic theatre, by contrast, exploits theatre’s presentness – the fact that it happens in the now - to make the audience coeval with the performer. Postdramatic theatre is, Lehmann explains, a mode of performance where ‘*time as such* is the object of aesthetic experience’ (156; original italics), a theatre, then, where simultaneity, repetition and duration take precedence over the unfolding of a linear narrative in a fictional cosmos.ⁱⁱ Instead then of absorbing themselves in the life of a character, audiences in postdramatic theatre are encouraged to attune themselves to a variety of temporalities moving at different rhythms, speeds and intensities.

Three additional points of clarification.

Although I speak of it constantly, this essay is not about time per se. Its primary focus is on analyzing and critiquing modernity’s ‘regime of historicity’, a constellation of historiographic, economic, and technological practices which order abstract notions of time into experiential and culturally predetermined categories. Like the historian François Hartog, whose terminology I borrow, I contend that our contemporary regime of historicity is reflective of a ‘world so enslaved to the present that no other viewpoint is considered permissible’ (Hartog 2015, xiii). However, differently from Hartog who contends that such ‘*présentisme*’ represents a break with modernity’s obsession with the future, I contend that is a mere intensification of modernity’s unfinished temporal project. In my reading, modernity’s

futurity was always contradictory: the path of future was repeatedly configured to serve the needs of the present, not of those generations yet to come.

Second – and despite my critique of accelerationism - I am all too aware of the limitations of my project. Modernity's ever-increasing 'speed of acquisition' does not play out evenly (Brennan 2001). For many in the Global South, as Rob Nixon has argued so brilliantly (2011), environmental violence is experienced as 'slow', both in terms of how it is perpetrated by multinational companies such as Shell and British Petroleum and in the glacial time that it takes for legislative bodies to act.

Third – and closely related to the previous point – my critique of accelerationism is not done in the name of slowness. Not only does slowness reintroduce a problematic sense of human agency to environmental debates – if only we could find our proper pace, then all would be well with the world – but it also overlooks, as Sarah Sharma has pointed out (2014), the idea of time as something multiple and differentiated. Instead then of calling for slowness in binary opposition to speed, my interest in deceleration is an attempt to foreground a heterogeneous set of temporalities, all of which are at play at any given moment. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, slowing down might actually speed up perception. In a decelerated world, in other words, things might get quicker.

Accelerationism and Time Ecology

Regardless of the development since the Enlightenment of increasingly sophisticated and accurate technologies of measurement (digital watches, nuclear clocks, carbon dating, etc.), time is not an object that can ever be measured or known as a thing-in-itself. Rather, time is more accurately understood as an *a priori* category; the substance we are immersed in, the inscrutable and elliptical place where being unfolds. The anxiety produced by time, the helplessness and horror that human beings feel at being subjected to its flux and flow, has

produced, from the writing of St Augustine onwards, a desire to either outwit or deny it – what the environmental philosopher James Hately critiques as ‘temporal ambition’ and ‘temporal abnegation’ (2012, 13). In the West, this drive to control or manage time has largely manifested itself through a performative nexus that links metaphysics, technology, and economics. The result of this ‘enframing’ (Heidegger 1977, 20) has not only been to simplify, dangerously, our conceptual understanding of time, but to divorce us from a whole series of variegated temporalities (biological, planetary, seasonal, indigenous) that refuse to comply with linear notions of time and progress, and which persistently evade our attempts to manage them.

The self-generating and seemingly self-evident nature of modernity’s regime of historicity - its narcissistic belief that Western history is the only temporal measure that counts - has motivated a number of environmental thinkers to argue for the necessity of expanding our temporal imaginary to include those of ‘nature’ and other cultures. Much of the recent interest in this area in the environmental humanities is indebted to the work of the sociologist Barbara Adam. Drawing close to critics of accelerationism such as Hartmut Rosa (2014) and Paul Virilio, Adam concludes that the neglect of the ‘rhythms of nature’ by the ‘24 hour schedule of the machine’, with its non-stop obsession with production and consumption, ‘has brought us to point of environmental collapse’ (2003, 94). Hence, it is imperative, Adam argues, that we systemically recognise and establish the relevance of the multiple temporalities constituting life on the planet. This expansive agenda forms the basis of Adam’s practice of time ecology – a form of environmental thinking that seeks to dissent from modernity’s monolithic and exclusively anthropocentric temporal schema:

Time ecology focuses on the multiple forms of time: rhythms and time markers; variable time frames and time scales; *Eigenzeiten* which means the embedded time specific to an organism or system; *kairos*, the right time for action, and *chronos* which

refers to the passage of time; the timing of events and their duration, sequence, beginning and end; the speed and intensity at which (trans)actions are conducted; the commodified time of economic exchange and production as well as the generative time of care, nurturing and reproduction. (1997, 75)

Adam's research into time ecology has proved influential. Since 1997 a number of thinkers have built on her ideas to offer alternative and more ecologically sensitive ways of existing in and performing time. Michelle Bastian looks at the need for creating new clocks in an age of global warming (2012); James Hateley (2012) and Mark Levene (2013) at the ethics and politics of species extinction; Russell West-Pavlov (2013) and Julie Cruickshank (2010) at indigenous time keeping in Australia and Alaska; Rob Nixon at the slow environmental violence perpetrated on the poor in the Global South (2011); Wendy Parkins (2004) at the environmentalism of care in the slow food movement; and a number of historians, such as Elizabeth Callaway (2014) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2015), have argued that the current ecological crisis calls out for the need to rethink our understandings and practices of history and historiography. Similarly, in her own work with the philosopher Chris Grove, Adam (2007) has investigated how different cultural attitudes toward futurity produce divergent ecological results. According to Grove and Adam, this is dependent on whether or not the future is determined by the needs of the present (the present future), or something, by contrast, that is conceptualised as properly futural (the future present).

Irrespective of the work of Russell West-Pavlov and Timothy Morton, most of the work on time ecology in the environmental humanities, to date, has been carried out by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and historians.ⁱⁱⁱ Somewhat bizarrely, relatively little has been contributed by time-based arts scholars, despite the fact that much recent work by visual artists such as Tacita Dean, Bill Viola and Douglas Gordon has been concerned with investigating the temporal qualities of their respective media. This absence is perhaps

even more glaring within Theatre and Performance Studies. For not only is theatre arguably the most temporally complex of all art forms – the one whose expansion and dilation of time insists on taking place in the present while always leaving remainders - but contemporary performance practitioners, like their homologues in film, have a rich history of experimentation with alternative temporalities.^{iv} In light of this experimentation, and in the context of the times we are living in, the ethical and political imperative, or so it seems to me, is to disclose the ‘ecological unconscious’ implicit in what Lehmann refers to as postdramatic theatre’s ‘*durational aesthetic*’ (2006,156; original italics); or what we might refer to, in more broader terms, as theatre’s new ‘chronography’.^v

In what follows, I seek to show how postdramatic theatre – theatre that has abandoned the temporal logic of Western drama - can enhance our understanding of time ecology by analyzing the different ways in which the German composer Heiner Goebbels and French scenographer Philippe Quesne use deceleration to create complex timescapes that avoid binary oppositions between slowness and fastness. To do that, I concentrate on the dramaturgical structures of *Stifters Dinge* (2007) and *L’Effet de Serge* (2007), two works which, though never blatant in their aims, are motivated by distinctly environmental ends, particularly with respect to how a ‘decelerated’ theatre might reconfigure modernity’s regime of temporality and consequent horizon of expectation

***Stifters Dinge*– Deceleration and The Time of the Other**

In works such as *Ou bien le débarquement désastreux* (1993), *Landscape with Distant Relatives* (2002) and *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004), Heiner Goebbels has consciously sought to trouble human exceptionalism by confronting the audience with ‘forces beyond man’s control’; the hope being to disclose ‘the presence of a justice long-deferred’ (2015, 5 -6). Importantly for this essay, Goebbels’ ethico-poetical practice of eco-theatre is dependent

upon a shift in temporal consciousness. In the appositely titled essay ‘Real Time in Oberplan: On *Stifters Dinge* – A Theatre of Deceleration’ (2015), Goebbels explains that the objective behind the performance was to place the spectator in proximity to what he refers to ‘as the time of the other’, a suitably oblique phrase that, in Goebbels’ lexicon, refers to a set of variegated temporalities that resist Western forms of measurement and calibration:^{vi}

We are powerless against other things, strange things: this is where our sense of time no longer takes effect ... you could call it, perhaps a little loftily, the time of the other. It is rather the unfamiliar time, the duration of which we cannot estimate, as it follows other rules and other powers: those of nature, gravity, mechanics, arts, or even the rules and powers of other cultures and traditions. (32)

Three points are worthy of note, here. First, Goebbels’ interest in making spectators subjects to time as opposed to subjects of time, in proposing, that is, a form of radical temporality that troubles human sovereignty; second, his insistence that ecology – and thus the question of justice – is not simply about nature, but is bound up with respect for indigenous peoples, without, for all that, abandoning the possibilities offered by Western technology; and third, his insistence that the artwork is always already ecological, on account of its strange, non-reified temporality - its ability to escape any kind of temporal schematization. For Goebbels, the artwork’s immanentist ecology means there is no need to use it for mechanistic ends by fashioning an environmental message as we see in various forms of ecoactivist art and/or in standard theatrical practices of ecomimesis.^{vii} The more effective approach is simply to allow the work to operate autonomously, to exist as an ecological force field in and by itself. There is no distinction between abstraction and reality, in Goebbels’ eco-aesthetic. As he has it, the artwork is a thing (*ein Ding*), ‘a strange stranger’ (Morton 2011, 14), something that palpitates and affects.

In *Stifters Dinge*, ecological performance is dependent on a practice of deceleration. Like media critics such as Paul Virilio (1989), Michael Hardt (1997), Jonathan Crary (2014), Bernard Stiegler (2014), Goebbels realises that first analogue and now digital technologies have equipped those of us in the first world with a mediatised body, a perceptive apparatus pre-programmed for speed, wired for immediacy. To subvert this body, to attune it to the artwork's ecology, requires, then, a certain degree of rhythmic reformatting. We need, in other words, to be made sensitive to the different speeds of those human and 'more than human' frequencies and durations that modernity has caused us to abandon or to fail to perceive at all. Theatre has the capacity to do this by insisting on 'presentness', by the very fact that, within its walls, spectators are constrained to undergo a process, in which, as Clov says in Beckett's *Endgame*, 'something [that is, time] is taking its course' (1990, 107; citation modified)

In order to facilitate this process of deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*, Goebbels erases, as far as possible, the physical presence of human bodies on the stage, creating what he calls 'a no-man's theatre' (2015,16), a theatre where Western drama's traditional narrative investment in the time of the hero is called into question.^{viii} In the absence of characters and stories, spectators are invited to place their attention, instead, on the non-human objects and material processes that compose the *mise-en-scène* (projectors, screens, lighting banks, the performance space itself). Deprived of the capacity to empathise with the actor's emotive expressivity, what theatre historian Joseph Roach might call 'the player's passion' (1985), the performance catapults its audience into unfamiliar territory. The aim of this decelerated estrangement is pedagogical: Goebbels wants us to experience new temporalities, to 'produce a drama of perception' (2015, 2). One of the ways Goebbels does this is by transforming his whole performance into a 'time-image' (Lehmann 2006, 157). Critically, this is not an image of time – a clock, a river, a digital display - but, more accurately, an image that temporalises,

a work that ‘weathers’ spectators, making them coeval with the temporal passage of the performance itself. In this weathering, we are invited to renounce the linear chronology of modernist notions of history as well as the abstractions of punctuality (the idea that the space between a series of points can be measured), and to experience time as something multiple, concrete and durational, ‘a flurry of spells and counter spells cast by objects themselves’, as Timothy Morton says (Morton 2013, 93).^{ix}

In the 2012 durational version of the performance produced by Artangel and sited in the underground bunker of Ambika P3 on Marylebone Road, London, the temporal (re)training offered by Goebbels in *Stifters Dinge* is in operation from the very beginning of the performance. On entering the cavernous, industrialised space, spectators are greeted by an intermittent and discordant soundscape composed of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds: the ‘hum’ of the building, the mechanical noises of machines, the intermittent chords of an atonal piano and a scratchy, analogue field-recording of an incantatory chant from Papua New Guinea. Left to our own devices in the ‘meteorology’ of the performance (Toop 2004, 3), we acclimatise ourselves further to the space, noticing, perhaps, how the weak light from three plastic water-tanks reveals a stage that has been divided into rectangles and covered with a linen-like material. As we scan the room further, we might also make out, hovering above the floor, at the very back of the hall, a strange, hybrid sculpture made of steel cylinders and naked trees, in the middle of which are positioned five battery-powered pianos, whose lids have been removed to expose their skeleton-like keys, their machinic otherness.

After an indefinable period of time, two stagehands, dressed in black, emerge from the wings, mix a white substance into two large sieves, and proceed to sprinkle what looks like salt crystals into each of the rectangles. As the room ticks and reverberates, coming alive we might say, the sound of running water is heard, and the rectangles slowly fill up with

liquid. The banks of LED lights framing the stage illuminate the salt that is now dissolving in the water. The space glows white, with patterns of straight lines crisscrossing the rectangles.

As the performance progresses in its disjointed, mechanised way - screens descend from the wings, machines turn and groan constantly, panels tick and beat - further layers of sound and image are added to thicken the initial sparse matrix. The middle section, for instance, starts with a recorded text from Adalbert Stifter's nineteenth-century novella *Die Mappe meines Urgrossvaters* (*My Great Grandfather's Portfolio*), overlaid with a section from Bach's Italian piano concerto and accompanied by a large projected image of Jacob Van Ruisdael's painting *Swamp* (1660) that slowly dissolves. This is followed by acousmatic excerpts from three 'found' texts by Claude Lévi-Strauss, William Burroughs and Malcolm X, and a section-by-section analysis of the animals in Paolo Uccello's beautiful canvas *The Hunt in the Forest* (1470). As the sound of Malcolm X's voice dies out, the hybrid sculpture is brilliantly illuminated, before moving inexorably forwards towards the audience in an artificial haze of mist and rain, the pre-programmed pianos – or should we say pianolas? - appearing to play themselves in a menacing rendition.

The final sequence of the piece starts with a loud droning noise filling the auditorium, which then segues into a heterogeneous soundscape, composed of fragments from a Greek folk song, a minimalist piano score, and the hissing sound of steam rising. As the piano plays and the Greek voice sings its melancholic song, the water in the pools turns white and starts to bubble and foam, dispensing small puffs of dried ice into the atmosphere. The effect for the spectators is mesmerizing, as our attention is captivated by the irregular, rhythmic pulsing of the milky substance that transforms itself into a gas, and which appears to dance to the music. In the eight-hour durational version in London in 2012 (the full performance repeats after 4 hours), audience members were free to wander about the stage after the finale, allowed

to inhabit a world that had been set to a different beat and encouraged to experiment with their own internalised sense of lived time.

In *Stifters Dinge*, Goebbels utilises the simultaneous quality of live performance to create a time-space where everything happens at once and in multiple ways. But differently from the logic of a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* that aims to harmonise the disparate sign-systems of theatre into a shared moment of collective transcendence, *Stifters Dinge* functions as a ‘chronotopia’, in which supposedly incompatible timescales and rhythms assemble and coalesce in impossible configurations. ^xIn doing so, the spectators’ ability to identify with and thus lose themselves in a single object - a unique time frame - is placed in doubt. To concentrate, for instance, on the meaning inherent in the recorded texts of Stifter, Lévi-Strauss, Burroughs and Malcolm X, is to stop listening to sounds and music. Equally, one is forced to avert one’s gaze from the paintings. In this saturation of perception, this purposeful overdetermination of time, one becomes aware that the temporality of objects does not conform to the appropriative logic of anthropocentric time-keeping; on the contrary, each element or ingredient in the performance – be that a sound, movement, image or recorded voice– has its own autonomous duration which combine to create what Gilles Deleuze, in an essay on Samuel Beckett’s television plays, defines as ‘inclusive disjunction’ (1995, 26). There is no single ‘time of the other’ in this impossibly multiple totality. Instead we are confronted with a number of variegated and dynamic temporalities that score and crisscross through each other, pausing and pulsing, repeatedly. Such heterogeneous convergences reconfigure the image of Henri Bergson’s dominant notion of duration. In *Stifters Dinge*, time is anarchic. Instead of moving relentlessly forward like a snowball or dissolving like sugar in water, as Bergson would have it, the performance moves in all directions at once. The duration of the mechanised screen that slowly scans the surface of *Night Hunt*, for instance, is radically different from the temporality of the painting itself, which, to cite Georges Didi-

Huberman's notion of art time, is effectively 'polychronistic and anachronistic', a jumbled assemblage of flickering tenses (2013, 37).

By making the duration of the work dependent on the interplay of human and 'more than human' temporalities, Goebbels provides us with what Barbara Adam terms a 'timescape' or 'chronotop', a performance that 'indicates the full temporal complexity of specific culture-nature intersections in their in/visible and im/immaterial expression' (1997, 81). In this way, Goebbels affects *un détournement* of digital technology's temporal logic. For whereas the digital age fulfils, all too well, modernity's desire to obliterate difference and impose a homogenous temporal order, in the computer generated systems of *Stifters Dinge* the times of nature, culture and technology are intertwined and interdependent. All impact upon each other, without, for all that, being reduced to the same frenzied rhythm or mobilised to move in a unilinear direction. Within the cyborgian or steampunk refrains of the performance, modernity's singular and continuous notion of temporality is put decidedly 'out of joint'. Here time, as Michel Serres has it, 'percolates' like a storm or weather system, subject to its own internal rhythms and eruptions:

Colandar comes from the *Latin colare*, to filter, and this filter or percolator supplies the best model of time. Sudden explosions, quick crises, periods of stagnant boredom, burdensome or foolish regressions and long blockages, but also rigorous linkages and suddenly accelerated progress, meet and blend in scientific time as in the intimacy of the soul, in meteorology as in river basins. [...] If the time of a planet and the time of a river can have such subtlety, what about historical time? (2013, 160-1)

The ecological logic inherent in *Stifters Dinge's* 'percolated' dramaturgy of time is underscored, albeit in counterpoint, by the apocalyptic theme that runs throughout the four spoken recordings. The text read out by the actor Bill Patterson from Stifter's text, for

instance, recounts the increasingly anxious reactions of a young boy and his friend Thomas, who are haunted by the strange cracks and groans of an ice storm, as they make their way, by horse and sledge, through fields of snow. As they listen to the ‘splintering of twigs and branches’ and ‘dull thuds’ of tree trunks falling in ‘depths of a nearby forest’, the narrator realises that ‘boundless nature’ cares little for human time keeping. It works chaotically, and according to a rhythm that they are unable to discern or control. Like the spectators of *Stifters Dinge*, they are left helpless, exposed to the strangeness inherent in what Goebbels’ ‘time of the other’.

A more explicitly critical perspective on Western temporality is evoked in the three remaining texts. In a French radio interview recorded towards the end of his life in 1988, Claude Lévi-Strauss castigates Western modernity for violently suppressing the time of ‘nature’ and other cultures. Likewise in a reading from his experimental novel *Nova Express* (1964), William Burroughs attacks a self-obsessed social and economic system that steals the future, the ‘very ground from unborn feet forever’. And in a sample from a speech given in Oxford in 1964, Malcolm X talks of how the only ‘yardstick’ – the ‘yardstick of time’ – helped the European coloniser to subjugate the planet and its people for its own ends. Tellingly, however, Malcolm X does not give in to fatalism. In the last line of the excerpt, he is at pains to point out what *Stifters Dinge* performs: namely, that our awareness of ‘time has changed’.

In keeping with Goebbels’ commitment to obliqueness, to composing with what Walter Benjamin terms ‘the left hand’ (2009, 51), *Stifters Dinge* offers no didactic solution to the questions of justice that it raises. His preferred strategy is to delaminate or counter-pose form and content, to enact a new time ecology in the patient unfolding of the performance itself, in the way, that is, that it reconfigures modernity’s regime of temporality in the here and now of the auditorium. The objective here is not to communicate environmental

information but to produce ecological experience, to actualise ‘new ways of attending and perceiving’ (Bailes 2007, 47). Martin Harries is surely correct when he notes how the performance ‘aspires to the condition of the storm’ described in Stifter’s narrative. ‘It imitates the force of a natural event that alters our perception of the formerly familiar world and suggests that that familiar world can become chillingly, if also beautifully, alien’ (Harries 2012, n.p.).

In his expansion of the historical field to include the time of the ‘environment’ (here the climate), it might appear that Goebbels is somewhat conventionally drawing on the thinking of the historian Fernand Braudel. In his influential 1949 text *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (1996), Braudel attempted, for the first time, to give ‘nature’ an agential presence in the world of human affairs *contra* the then dominant human-centered historiographies of Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood. But for all the surface similarities between Braudel and Goebbels, there is an important difference to note. For whereas Braudel sees the time of nature as an example of *longue durée*, a slow moving, almost unchanging affair of cycles and repetition, *Stifters Dinge*, by contrast, posits it as something fragile, threatening and unstable. In doing so, Goebbels’ performance is reflective of the new temporality that anthropogenically-induced climate change has brought into existence, a time of sudden shifts, chaotic rifts and tipping points. This is not slow time but heterogeneous time – unpredictable, arrhythmic, volatile.

In the respect to which it allows its audiences to experience a plethora of entangled human and ‘more than human’ temporalities, it is tempting to see *Stifters Dinge* as offering an indirect response to Michelle Bastian’s call for the development of ‘new clocks’, better able to respond to the chaotic rhythms and tempi of global warming and species extinction. For what the performance makes apparent – and indeed allows us to live through– is the extent to which the ‘crisis of climate change’ has fundamentally altered Western ideas of

‘nature’ and ‘culture’. In the age of the Anthropocene, it is untenable to consider ‘nature’ as a relatively stable entity whose eternal cycles are at odds with the world-making pace of human history. Rather the time of ‘nature’ is unpredictable and non-linear, subject to dynamic phase shifts that know nothing of equilibrium and balance. Ironically, as Bastian has shown, the time of the earth is currently moving much faster than the ability of humans to cope with it. In addition to highlighting the scandalously inadequate pace of governmental responses to global warming, the warped temporalities of climate change have important consequences for the role of history – the discipline that has traditionally organized time into different periods and provided human existence with a futural project or *telos*.

As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in his influential text ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, to practice history at a time of environmental crisis is necessarily to embrace paradox and fragmentation. We are required to affirm our identity as a single species or geological agent without ever losing sight of our ‘suspicion of the universal’ (Chakrabarty 2015, 248). To seek to resolve this tension, this negativity, is, Chakrabarty claims, out of the question. As the recorded excerpts from Lévi-Strauss, Burroughs and Malcolm X show all too well, homogeneity leads only to catastrophe. A more effective solution is to follow the example of *Stifters Dinge* and to produce a performance in which the immiscible times of ‘nature’, different cultures and Western technology overlap while always insisting on their incommensurability. The result is a new form of environmental performance, one which realises that the ecological charge of theatre is not so much found in what it represents but in its ability to disclose multiple ways of being in time that escape unhelpful binaries between ‘nature’ and history, human and ‘non-human’, and fast and slow. Pedagogy here is not about providing yet another ecological message; it is about producing complex chronographies that dissent from modernity’s simplistic and unidirectional narratives.

Such a theatre is inherently eco-poetical in its orientation but in a way that departs from extant dwelling-based versions, such as Jonathan Bate's, that privilege a return to some authentic concept of nature (2001). In *Stifters Dinge*, ecopoiesis is cyborgian and prosthetic, a 'nature culture' assemblage that blurs the distinction between the artificial and the real, and which harnesses the pre-programmed algorithms of digital time to disclose the existence of an interpenetrating series of cosmic, seasonal and elemental temporalities. Paying attention, as *Stifters Dinge* does, to these anarchic temporalities allows for new ways of being on the earth that are better able to respond to change and transformation while simultaneously transforming unhelpful and outmoded ideas of 'nature' and 'climate'. Looked at these from perspectives, *Stifters Dinge* undoes any attempt to separate ecopoetics from ecopolitics. What it demands and strives to bring about is a shift in temporal perception. In doing so, *Stifters Dinge* offers a radical departure from Western modernity's frenzied investment in a monolithic notion of progress that has not only resulted in climate change but has left us helpless to react to its disastrous impact on all forms of life on the planet.^{xi}

Philippe Quesne: Boredom and Climate Change

Similar to *Stifters Dinge*, *L'Effet de Serge* by Philippe Quesne and Vivarium Studio approaches ecological matters through a temporal lens. However, whereas Goebbels uses the simultaneous happenings of different events and processes to produce a sense of temporal excess, Quesne's strategy is essentially subtractive, grounded, as it is, in a logic of repetition that aims to dilate the present, to leave us with 'dumb eyes' – eyes that have been bored, despectacularised.^{xii} As I have pointed out in a previous article on the company (2013), Quesne's anti-heroic brand of eco-theatre is characterised by a decelerated rhythm that allows the audience to observe, with a relaxed gaze, the on-stage world as if they were looking

through a microscope. Hence the name of the company –Vivarium studio – a vivarium being an enclosed glass container for the scientific study of organisms in their habitats. While *L'Effet de Serge*, in its commitment to languid, repetitive sequences with minor variations, is very much part of Quesne's longstanding practice of eco-dramaturgy, there is nevertheless a fundamental difference between it and his other work. For unlike earlier productions such as **Des**

constructed as a strangely discomfoting hybrid space, positioned somewhere between a workshop and a home.

From this description, one could be excused for thinking that *L'Effet de Serge* is a play without ecological value, a performance that reduces drama to its 'zero degree' by constructing a stage where nothing of note happens (see Déchery 2011, 127). However, to assume, from its content alone, that the performance is devoid of ecological significance is to ignore the sophistication of Quesne's strategy. In *L'Effet de Serge*, Quesne – and here again we see the parallels with Goebbels' postdramatic aesthetic - does not use the artwork to represent or articulate an alternative ecology; rather, the artwork is an alternative ecology on account of its commitment to the present, its deconstruction of dramatic time.

To grasp the significance of this move, it is crucial to consider the work's title, which in French offers a somewhat obvious and immediately recognizable pun on the phrase *l'effet de serre* – the greenhouse effect. By naming his piece *L'Effet de Serge*, Quesne encourages an ecological reading of Serge's performances, in the same way that a cartoonist or illustrator might frame an image with an extra-diegetic caption. That is to say, he actively invites the spectators to interpret the work from a viewpoint that is not immediately visible within the structure of the work itself. What I am effectively suggesting here is that the playful parallax inherent in Quesne's titling inevitably asks us to consider the nature of the relationship between Serge's actions and global warming, to think about what distinguishes an *effet de Serge* from *un effet de serre*, in other words.

Prompted by this ostensibly indexical and allegorical mode of captioning, there are (at least) two possible ways of reading the work. Either, one can respond critically to Serge's micro-actions, seeing them as futile attempts to 'carry on regardless', a form of denegation which has been endlessly debated and analysed by climate change experts and psychoanalysts

such as Mike Hume (2009) and Sally Weintrobe (2012). Or – and this to my mind is the more useful option – one might regard them as performative interventions, designed to counter the speed of an accelerationist regime that has mortgaged the future ‘before it has actually been lived’ (Miguel de Bestegui, 2009,172). Approached in this way, it becomes possible to argue that Quesne’s attachment to deceleration - to what the dance critic Andre Lepecki calls a ‘slower ontology’ (2006, 45) - is an attempt to investigate a type of experience that, to date, ecocriticism has largely ignored: that is, the distracted attention that accompanies boredom, a non-productive form of temporality defined by G.W.F Hegel as ‘bad infinity’, time which refuses to be sublated in the name of some supposedly higher historical end or *telos*. But how to account for the ecological significance of boredom? A generative response presents itself by looking at the ideas advanced by Martin Heidegger

In a radical revision of his early definition of boredom as a fall into inauthenticity, a manifestation of ‘they’ world, Heidegger argued in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (2001) that ‘profound boredom’ is the originary ontological mood of *Dasein*, the ‘fundamental attunement’ that defines human being. For Heidegger, profound boredom, as opposed to other forms of boredom, is characterised by two, basic structural features: ‘being left empty’ (*Leergelassenheit*) and ‘being-held-in-suspense’ (*Hingehaltenheit*). By leaving us in suspense, profound boredom, Heidegger argues, shuts down our horizon of expectations and thus delivers us over to an empty present, which refuses to conform to our desires. In profound boredom, the object of satisfaction – indeed any object at all – has deserted us. In its wake, we are left with an abyss of time that roots us, immanently and painfully, to an always shifting and heterogeneous here and now.

For Heidegger, boredom is a humiliation for human subjects. We lose our names, our identities, the very ground of our being trembles:

It is boring. What 'it'? That it that we mean when we say ... it's thundering, it's raining. It – that is the title of the indeterminate, unknown... It – one – not for me as me, not for you as you, not for us as us, but for one [*einem*]. Name, status, occupation, role, age, and fate as mine and yours falls away from us. More clearly, precisely this 'it is boring for one' lets all this fall away... In this way we become an indifferent no one. (Heidegger 2001, 203)

When we are bored we are no longer masters of time. Inversely, time is now something that happens to us, an agitation – an 'it' - that get holds us of and leaves us in a permanent state of distraction, cutting off from both the past and future. We want to move but have nowhere to go, victims of what Steven Connor calls 'slow going', a condition in which time moves through us, weathering us like rocks (2014, 116). In boredom, there is nothing to capture our attention, no more 'more' – and it is exactly here, I want to argue, in this abyssal temporality that the ecological potential of boredom is found. Abandoned as we are by things, boredom makes human time coeval with the time of earth. It subjects us to the weight of gravity, denying us access to 'escape velocity', the metaphysical desire, which, for Paul Virilio, lies at the heart of modernity's obsession with speed and progress (2003, 119). Boredom counters 'dromological pollution' by immobilizing us and suspending the present, disclosing an 'it' that equalises and which shows that to exist is to not so much be in time as to be of time.

There are three dramaturgical devices by which *L'Effet de Serge* purposefully suspends the passing of the present in order to create a condition or mood close to boredom. The first occurs at the very start of the piece, when Gaëten Vourc'h, dressed incongruously in a space suit, wanders across the stage describing, with the help of a hand-held microphone, the objects in Serge's apartment (his books, comics and DVDs), before telling us, in advance, that the topic of the performance we are about to witness, *L'Effet de Serge*, is about time, or, more accurately, 'its passing'. Vourc'h then leaves the stage only to reappear two or three

minutes later, dressed in everyday clothes and announces that he is now ready to play the character of Serge. Irrespective of the obvious Brechtian parallels, something else is at stake in this *détournement* of drama's codes. The ambition is not to engage spectators in an act of concentrated, critical analysis, as epic theatre purports to do, but to establish a sense of temporal coevalness between actor and audience – to create a form of presentness, in which the time of the stage corresponds to the time of the real. By removing both the *agon* and *dénouement* from theatre, the spectator in *L'Effet de Serge* is constantly and deliberately made aware of the very thing that dramatic theatre, in its concern to entertain or divert us, is horrified by: an empty present, a real time temporality where nothing happens

The presentness produced by this estrangement of the actor is reinforced at the end of each of Serge's micro-performance, when a voice over signals that a new timeframe, a different Sunday, is on the verge of coming into being. But, instead of being accompanied by a black-out, the lighting sign or cue that conventionally signifies the passage of time in dramatic theatre, the voice-over merely shows Vourc'h sitting, in full view, at a table, doing nothing, and getting ready to repeat, with minor variations, the same actions and behaviours that he had performed a mere minute or so ago. Through this reversal of the temporal rules and conventions of drama, Quesne produces a paradoxical temporality. Here time does not change, as the voice-over instructs; on the contrary, it only seems to produce more of the same, to give birth to an interminable seriality, an endless recurrence.

Quesne's third technique borrows its logic from what Lionel Abel has defined as metatheatres (1963). Literalizing the dramatic experiments of modernist playwrights such as Luigi Pirandello and Jean Genet, *L'Effet de Serge* is structured as a 'performance within a performance', where we watch the invited guests observing the same performances as we do. The presence of the guests, most of whom are non-professional actors, recruited locally by the host theatre, creates a *mise-en-abyme*, a mirror held up to a mirror. In this mirroring, there

is no longer a temporal gap or delay between performers and audience that we are somehow required to either fill in or repress; their reality is our reality, so to speak. Like us, they fidget, get bored, and allow themselves to get distracted. To watch them is not be captivated by what Eugenio Barba has called the *bios* or charisma of the professional performer. Rather, it is to be left to one's own devices, to perceive them in a state of what Walter Benjamin has termed 'distracted attention', a mode of relaxed perception in which we 'notice the object in incidental fashion', as something mundane and habitual that shares our present in the most understated of ways (Benjamin 1969, 240).

In its insistence on distraction, *L'Effet de Serge* transforms itself into what Pamela M. Lee, in an essay on Andy Warhol's films of the 1960s, calls 'a duration machine' (2008, 27), a performance that, by refusing all action and suspense, throws us back on our own resources and returns us to the reality of an impossible present, a boring time that we are unable to fully inhabit or master. At this point, two additional questions arise. What ecological work does boredom do exactly in *L'Effet de Serge*? And how does it manifest itself?

The answer to these questions is found by returning, once again, to the critical meaning inherent in the performance's title, which, as I have already pointed out, invites a reflection on how the work relates to climate change, the *effet de serre*. According to a number of environmental theorists such as Nigel Clarke (2011), Isabelle Stengers (2010) and Barbara Adam and Chris Gove, climate change has radically reordered our ideas of temporality by questioning the supposedly axiomatic line of continuity that unites the present to the future. On a volatile and dynamic planet, we can no longer assume that today's actions will work out as planned tomorrow, and that reality will actualise our desires. Our awareness of what Stengers refers to 'as 'pharmacological knowledge' (2010, 35) forecloses any naïve attempt to link cause and effect in a seamless, continuous manner. Within such a changed regime of historicity, boredom is, I want to propose, an integral element. Not because, as one

might first think, it is a symptom of our failure to act, a sign of our decadence; or even because it might ‘restore some degree of agency’ to human subjects by giving us the time and space to think (Lee 2008, 308). But rather because boredom’s suspension of movement calls the possibility of the future into question by infecting or interfering with its geometry of progress, the teleological becoming of the straight line. Like climate change, then, boredom’s dilation of the present disputes modernity’s version of futurism, its commitment to an horizon of expectation that is always already determined in advance. Unlike modernity’s subjects, bored subjects do not know what that future will be. Rooted as they are to the present, and deprived of any image or representation that might alleviate their condition, the most that bored subjects can say about the future is that it might be different from how things are now. In the emptiness of boredom, the human subject is undone, compelled to undergo the irreducible weight of time, abandoned on and to the earth, a creature of nerve and skin – all irritation.

In the extent to which it seeks to present us with an experience close to boredom, *L’Effet de Serge* is best seen as a symptomatic text, offering an oblique but accurate diagnosis of how climate change has thrown our extant models of temporality and historicity into doubt. In its deliberate cultivation of distraction, the performance ruptures modernity’s teleological investment in a blank, unmarked future, and throws us back, like climate change does, to an anxious and agitated present beset with doubt and uncertainty. Crucially, Quesne, like Goebbels, has no interest in talking about this radical transformation in the distribution of time on a thematic or discursive level. His primary concern is simply to allow us to undergo it by fashioning a ‘weak’ performance, a *désœuvrement* rather than *un œuvrement*, in which nothing happens but the eternal repetition of the same in a suspended present. Quesne’s choice of medium is key, here. As opposed to the temporal experiments of gallery-based practitioners, Quesne uses theatre’s tightly circumscribed time-frame to force his audience to

sit through the full duration of the performance. In theatre, unlike work shown in the gallery, spectators are, effectively, deprived of their agency, prevented from moving and thus turning their attention elsewhere. There is, in other words, ‘no distraction from distraction’ in theatre; one is compelled to give oneself up to the work, to submit to its pace, to accept its ‘forced entertainment’.^{xiv}

While it may well be difficult, perhaps even impossible for activist-minded ecocritics to accept, Quesne’s cultivation of boredom ought not to be dismissed as an example of resigned fatalism – an affirmation of meaninglessness in which nothing can be done. The Serge effect, as the title of the play intimates, is posited as a serious response to the policies that have produced the greenhouse effect. By refusing modernity’s future, and attuning us to the immanence of a present that refuses to conform to our desires, *L’Effet de Serge*, like *Stifters Dinge*, provides us with a form of temporal training in keeping with the needs and realities of the present. Confronted with climate change’s chaotic and anarchic weather systems, a new way of living on the earth is necessary; one in which rigid policy making and absolutist commitments are abandoned in favour of nimbleness, improvisation and weakness. We need to be able to affirm a different way of being in time, to allow the future to be properly futural, that is to say, unpredictable and capricious – something that we respond to and work with rather than dominate and exploit. *L’Effet de Serge* is a useful vehicle for enabling this affirmation; its rejection of modernity’s horizon of expectation discloses the extent to which the future is already here, in a mode of distracted attention – boredom – that roots us to the earth in a such a way that immanence, the time of the here and now, triumphs over transcendence, the time of the elsewhere, time in which the earth is always rejected for the sake of some disembodied image of the future that, of course, never comes.

Conclusion

It seems inappropriate, not to say self-contradictory, to want to provide a perfect *dénouement* to the messy, impossible business of being in time. Nevertheless, as I bring this writing to a tentative end, there is an obligation to compare and contrast the dramaturgical practices of Goebbels and Quesne. This is not motivated by an unhelpful desire to rationalise their performances in the name of efficacy, to say which one is better suited to changing behaviour patterns; rather, I am more concerned to highlight how their theatrical strategies expand the possibilities of the performance collective in ways that use different methods for the same ends. For although Goebbels and Quesne offer radically different approaches to time ecology – *Stifter's Dinge* machinic aesthetic is rooted in a logic of simultaneity, *L'Effet de Serge's* in the seemingly pointless and repetitive acts of a human agent – their practices of deceleration produce similar results. In both cases, slowing down is not a return to some proper state of being that speed disrupts; it is more accurately and helpfully approached as a mode of attunement, a way of moving beyond the homogeneity imposed by modernity's regime of temporality. In *Stifters Dinge*, decelerated time is polychronic and anarchic, producing a timescape of multiple durations, whereas in *L'Effet de Serge* it is subtractive and endless, something, like boredom, that is impossible to coincide with because 'it' happens to us.

My recourse to the word impossible is propitious, in this context: for what both Goebbels and Quesne set out to provide are embodied experiences of non-human timescales, temporalities that we undergo rather than control. Here performance is not a mere metaphor but a temporal intervention in and by itself. In their work – and this returns us to Yves-Alain Bois' questions that opened this essay - theatre has the capacity to alter our viewing habits according to a mode of praxis that renounces the European avant-garde's attachment to a dangerous and increasingly outdated futurism. For Goebbels and Quesne, the onus is not so much on doing as not-doing, in offering performances that refuse heroic actions, and which

refrain from providing ready-made solutions. Such reticence, such an embrace of weakness, should not be equated with nihilism or with a lack of ecocritical focus; indeed it might be one of the best ways we have of avoiding the paradox of non-performance, the tendency, that is, of extant models of eco-theatre to make a drama out of an environmental crisis, and, in the process, to leave modernity's regime of historicity untouched. For eco-performance critics today, the pressing task is not to generalise about postdramatic theatre's temporal praxis by draping it under a single concept, but to insist on specificity, paying patient attention to how different practitioners exploit the chronotopic temporalities of the medium to expand our current understanding of time ecology.

NOTES

ⁱ See for instance the work of David Wiles (2014), Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), Adrian Heathfield (2008) and André Lepecki (2006).

ⁱⁱ Asian theatre, of course, has traditionally had a very different relationship with time than Western drama. NMI theatre, for instance, explores the realm of ghosts and memory, and some forms of Indian performance can last for 24 hours or more, with audiences free to enter and leave as they wish. In this respect, Lehmann's interest in sketching out a new postdramatic path for theatre is only applicable to those works that self-consciously seek to dissent from the convention of Western drama.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peggy Phelan touches on the relationship between ecology, theatre and time in the essay 'On the Difference Between Time and History' (2014), but ultimately does not come good on her initial, important sight. Tellingly, and in keeping with the decentering work of ecology, this was because of a 'computer crash', which erased her original essay (114-16).

ⁱⁱⁱ I am thinking here of artists such as Lone Twin, Goat Island, Ivana Müller, Tching Hsieh, Marina Abramovic, and Jérôme Bel. If one wanted to go further back, one could also talk about the work of Samuel Beckett, John Cage, and Robert Wilson. In fact, to trace, in any detail the origins of Western theatre's fascination with new modes of temporality, one would need to return to the Symbolist roots of the historical avant-garde.

ⁱⁱⁱ I borrow this term from Sarah Sharma who, in turn, borrowed it from the media theorist Harold Adams Innis (Sharma 2014, 11).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is important here not to confuse Goebbels' notion of 'the time of the other' with that of the philosopher and theologian Emmanuel Levinas (2001). Whereas the time of the other, for Levinas, is revealed through an encounter with the face and refers, ostensibly to a mode of ethical and religious transcendence, for Goebbels, it relates to a variety of different temporalities.

ⁱⁱⁱ By standard ecomimesis, I am referring to Aristotelian/naturalist notions of representation and figuration. A different, more complex form of ecomimesis arises, when the artwork attempts to transform itself into the 'thing' that it seeks to express in ways that resist equivalence and verisimilitude.

ⁱⁱⁱ Goebbels' 'no-man's theatre' is, of course, a conceit. He has instigated a specific dramaturgy and rigorously pre-programmed the timings of lights, machines, and voices. There is no possibility of temporal deviation or improvisation in *Stifters Dinge*, and the presence of the human is everywhere within it, from both the decisions carried out prior to the staging to the prerecorded voices that are audible in the montage of 'found texts'. As such, it is more accurate to see Goebbels' concept of 'no-man's theatre' in terms of a theatre without embodied actors as opposed to one in which the human being is absent in any *de facto* sense. For more on this, see Nicholas Ridout (2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a play on Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia, an actual site that throws accepted spatial divisions into doubt. See Foucault (1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on *Stifters Dinge* and weather, see Martin Welton (2012, 126-51).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is interesting to note that all of the British and US reviews of *Stifters Dinge* highlight its ecological significance, even though events like climate change and global warming are never treated in any explicit or didactic sense by the performance.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have my friend Thea Stevens to thank for this beautiful expression.

ⁱⁱⁱ In his role as artistic director of the state-funded Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre, Paris, Philippe Quesne has worked in tandem with the sociologist Bruno Latour to organise a series of talks, colloquia, and workshops on ecology and environment. The Théâtre des Négotiations initiative that took place in late May 2015, for instance, was intended to stimulate discussions in advance of the COP21 climate change conference that took place in Paris in December of the same year.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a deliberate play on the name of the celebrated UK theatre company, Forced Entertainment.

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