PERFORMING THE PAST
Winter 2001
Final Paper Assignment

Length: 8 pages
Final Draft Due: Thursday, March 15

You have a choice between two kinds of essays in this assignment: performance analysis or analysis through a secondary reading. You may respond to any one of the prompts below. Consult the midterm paper assignment for how to proceed with different kinds of prompts (some require close “readings” of a performance, some require comparison, some just plain analysis, and some offer a choice). The documentation and format guidelines from that assignment also apply to this one. Please also include your prompt number somewhere on your final draft.

Performance Analysis
1. Analyze one “moment” from Life Is A Dream that performs the past in some way. How do the various elements that comprise that moment work (together or against one another) to perform exactly which “past”? Feel free to understand a “moment” as anything as brief as a few seconds of action (the time it takes to complete a gesture or to enter the stage space) or as long as a French scene (what happens between one entrance and the next exit) -- but nothing longer than that. Remember to relate your analysis to the performance as a whole.

2. In this century especially, the wealth of information (and clichés) about other cultures that has been transported into the “West” has invited many artists here to apply that information to the style of their performances. How might you, for instance, use elements of kathakali in The Tempest, or of wayang in Life Is A Dream? What might be some of the advantages and drawbacks of such an approach? Who might your audience(s) be, and how does that affect your interpretation? Are there ways of framing the performance so that style also has something to say about theme, or so that the exchange between different cultural elements really functions as an exchange and dialogue, not just as a one-way appropriation or as a collapse of one culture into another? Answer these questions NOT one-by-one in your essay but with a unified thesis that articulates how the various elements of your imaginary staging of your chosen play for your chosen audience(s) introduce style and theme and/or cultural elements into dialogue.

3. When speaking of performance, medium matters. The Life is Dream performance we have seen is strictly stage performance, seen live; the wayang and Akropolis (e.g. Grotowski) excerpts we saw were live stage performances, videotaped more in less in situ; the Mahabharata performance we saw was a stage performance that had been re-staged, though not with substantial alterations of the actors’ movement or speech, for film: The Matrix performance was composed entirely for and through the medium of film. Taking any two of these performances, consider the way in which the media of their presentation (to us) affected our perceptions of the performances. In cases where
there was a transposition of media (e.g. from live to tape) what was altered, what was gained, and what was lost? In cases where there was no change or transposition, imagine if there were: what would be changed, gained, lost? As much as possible, bring your discussions of the two performances into contact with one another; that is, do not give a pair of mini-essays. The idea of this prompt is to get you thinking about the way that medium shapes performance. Again, be sure to unify your essay with one thesis that argues a point about the impact of medium on the two performances.

4. Analyze one element or compare two elements (see “Matters of Performance” and/or “Sign-Systems” handout for lists of elements) from any of the following “performances”: Brook’s *Mahabharata*, Grotowski’s *Akropolis*, *Life is a Dream*, or *The Matrix*. Use your comparison or analysis to argue a point about the work as a whole.

*Analysis through secondary texts*

5. Even though we have read only brief selections from Stanislavski, Artaud, and Grotowski, it is clear that each in his own way finds one of the keys to improving contemporary performance “in the past”; curiously, though, each seems to have a very different kind of “past” in mind. Taking two of these three theatre visionaries, explain the kinds of “past” to which they appeal; discuss whether or not their appeals seem at all compatible; consider how these appeals function or fail to function in one of the performances we have seen (note: do not discuss the Grotowski-directed performance if you are discussing the Grotowski essay).

6. Both *Life is a Dream* and *The Matrix* deal with characters (Segismundo and Neo) who undertake a journey into knowledge reminiscent of the Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s *Republic*. Explain in some detail how either *Life* or *The Matrix* re-perform thematic elements of the Allegory of the Cave. You might also consider how they use some of the props and set elements found in Plato’s allegory: prisons, caves, screens, shadows, puppets, light and dark, fire, etc. In other words, consider how artists translate abstract themes into concrete elements of performance, or how the choice of so-called “concrete” elements is predicated on traditions of “abstract” notions embedded within them.

7. How would Montaigne and Retamar stage *The Tempest*? Choose one scene and compare and contrast these authors’ dramaturgical approaches to it. Make sure to argue a point about *The Tempest* and/or these authors’ essays through your comparison. Consider various elements of performance mentioned in the “Matters of Performance” and/or “Sign-Systems” handouts.

8. Choose an analytical position from any of the following secondary texts we have read: Thucydides, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Montaigne, Retamar, Plato, or Machiavelli. Use that position to perform a close reading of a passage or moment from Brook’s *Mahabharata*, Grotowski’s *Akropolis*, *The Tempest*, *Life is a Dream* (play or production), or *The Matrix*. (Reminder: if you wrote about Rousseau or Nietzsche in the first paper, you must choose a different work for this essay.)