Historical Intermediation in Theatre of the Real: The Theatricalization of History in The Wooster Group’s *Rumstick Road*, The Tectonic Theater Project’s *The Laramie Project*, and Milo Rau’s *Five Easy Pieces*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Milo Rau’s *Five Easy Pieces* (2016), seven child actors re-enact archived interviews and testimonies relating to the crimes of child murderer and paedophile Marc Dutroux in Belgium. As the child actors step into adult roles in these re-enactments, a recording of their adult filmic doubles re-enacting the same scene is projected at the back of the stage at the same time. In this contemporary moment, the re-presentation of ‘the real’ characterizes much of theatre performances. In these performances, found, pre-existing material from historical archives are reworked and incorporated in a verbatim manner into performance in what Carol Martin terms the ‘Theatre of the Real’. However, as the re-presentation of found material is doubled in performances like *Five Easy Pieces* through remediation – which new media researchers Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define as “the representation of one medium in another” (45) – where does testimony lie?

According to Martin, “While theatre of the real may portray tragic events, more often than not, it attempts to intervene in tragedy’s mindset of inevitability. Staging and replaying what has already happened creates the occasion for summary, examination, containment, and revision” (70). Indeed, what theatre permits that real life does not is its ability to transform and re-present existing events. Theatre of the Real, in particular, revisits the past and gives performers, spectators, and any other contributors a space to engage with historical events that otherwise would have remained inaccessible except through historical archives. However, this premise implies that there is a difference between engaging with history through representations of it in historical archives, and through archived material that is
re-presented and remediated in the theatre space. Because of this distinction, the terms ‘representation’ and ‘re-presentation’ in this paper are distinguished by the ‘re-’. The two terms are used interchangeably, but in instances where ‘re-presentation’ is used, it is to emphasize the idea of return and repetition connoted by the prefix ‘re-’. According to performance theorist Elin Diamond, the “re-” is “a doubling or repetition within the sign, a means of displacing its unitary authority”, and suggests “temporality, history, and politics, marking the desire to reconfigure, reinscribe, resignify” (31). Diamond’s argument highlights how Martin’s idea of “replaying what has already happened” and “interven[ing] in tragedy’s mindset of inevitability” is an attempt to not just revisit history, but re-witness it and change the way it is represented by re-presenting it.

Theatre company The Tectonic Theater Project and its founder Moisés Kaufman are particularly interested in this attempt to change the way history is re-presented: “Tectonic refers to the art and science of structure and was chosen to emphasize the company’s interest in construction – how things are made, and how they might be made differently” (Mission). *The Laramie Project* (2000) follows Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project’s investigation into the death of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard in the town of Laramie as a result of a hate crime, through interviews with people of the town and journal entries of company members documenting their research experience (Kaufman 484). In the play, selections of the collected material were devised into performance using what Kaufman terms ‘moments’: “a unit of theatrical time that is […] juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning” (487). Unlike *Five Easy Pieces*, in which a single individual’s testimonial is represented in each scene, *The Laramie Project’s* Moments are extracted from different lines from different sources of found material and put into a single scene regardless of whether these sources agree or disagree with one another. In Brechtian fashion, these Moments are
then re-enacted by performers, who ‘transform’ into different characters onstage within sight of the audience, with a narrator introducing each character as the performers ‘become’ their characters.

_Five Easy Pieces_ (2016), a collaboration between the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) and Belgium’s CAMPO arts centre, takes on a more confrontational approach and engages seven child actors ages 8 to 13 – Rachel Dedain, Maurice Leerman, Pepijn and Willem Loobuyck, Polly Persyn, Elle Liza Tayou, and Winne Vanacker – to re-enact found material, split into five ‘easy pieces’. The found material comprises individual testimonials and interviews from different parties associated with the serial crimes of Marc Dutroux. Like Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project, the IIPM has an interest in changing the way history is re-presented, but with a focus on the multimedia treatment of it (About). _Five Easy Pieces_ begins with the child actors gathered onstage, waiting for director and adult figure Peter Seynaeve seated behind a table to begin. Seynaeve begins the play by addressing the child actors individually, asking them about their family background and ambitions. A video camera set up in front of the table projects a close up of Seynaeve’s face onto a screen at the back of the stage as he conducts this interview. This same camera also projects the child actors’ faces on the screen as they re-enact the found material in each Piece. This live relay of the child actors’ re-enactments onscreen, at moments in each Piece, is replaced with grown up filmic doubles of the child actors re-enacting the same scene.

The Wooster Group’s _Rumstick Road_ (1977), directed by Elizabeth LeCompte, takes on a more personal story of actor and writer Spalding Gray’s personal negotiation with his mother’s suicide. Gray, a storyteller-performer, was known for his monologue works, and was interested in testimony and recording, particularly that of his personal life. In _Rumstick Road_, LeCompte and the Wooster Group theatricalize Gray’s personal testimonies by
collating found material comprising photographic slides, letters, and audio recordings of interviews and phone conversations, and re-presenting them in experimental fashion. The play is split into four parts, and the stage is split into three separate spaces. The spaces stage left and right resemble rooms of a house. In the room stage left, there is a tent, with a window that can be opened outwards upstage. The room on stage right is an empty space, but a space where many of Gray’s photographic slides are projected onto the wall at the back of the room. Centrestage is a technician’s booth, which is dim for a large duration of the play. Even though the technician’s booth is unlighted, spectators are still able to see that the audio recordings of interviews and phone conversations are played from this room. The three rooms onstage are connected by doors that lead to a passage upstage, which can only be seen from Mylar mirrors fixed on the doors. Unlike The Laramie Project and Five Easy Pieces, the found material in Rumstick Road is not only re-enacted by the performers, but also re-played from the technician’s booth.

The different ways these performances engage with found material, whether Brechtian, multimedia, or experimental, brings us back to the question of where testimony lies in Theatre of the Real’s re-presentation of history. Does the fragmentation of representational forms provide a critical distance of assessment in revisiting history, or does it make it unclear what exactly to “intervene” in? Does “interven[tion]” occur in the re-enactments rehearsed for the stage, the remediation and repetition, or the live relays onscreen? How do spectators respond, and how are they implicated as witnesses in the process? To address these questions, I will explore how Theatre of the Real functions as an intermediate site that enables those in the present to connect with and intervene in history. Through my findings, I will argue that Theater of the Real’s intervention in history through the re-presentation of the past theatricalizes the way history is constructed in the archives.
2. RESTORED BEHAVIOR AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

When examining representation in performance, it is worth considering performance theorist Richard Schechner’s ‘restored behavior’, which refers to “strips of behavior” (35) that “can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed” (36) as they are re-presented in performance. According to Schechner, these strips of behavior contain the necessary performance knowledge required to re-present any situation in performance. In other words, performance lies in the restoration or re-presentation of these strips of behavior (35-6). Schechner goes on to argue that restored behavior allows “the chance [for individuals and groups] to rebecome what they once were” or “what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become” (38). Schechner’s claim here suggests that there is a sense of incompleteness, as the “re-” in “rebecom[ing]” signals a desire to repeat the past for a second chance at engaging with it.

However, like all forms of re-presentation, real events and situations cannot be portrayed accurately. At the end of the third Piece in Five Easy Pieces, for instance, spectators could only watch as Seynaeve tells Rachel to take off her clothes for the camera, “just like [they] did in rehearsal” (Five). Seynaeve’s line suggests that the rehearsal represents a version of the Piece that spectators do not have access to except through the repetition of it during the live performance itself. However, Rachel’s struggle to repeat her actions “just like” in rehearsal in front of spectators watching as well as the video camera recording her exposes the limits of re-presentation. There is a limit to what can be re-presented, and this is to a large extent dependent on what re-enactors are capable of, or are able to do.
In addition, certain things like death – an ontological state – is something that cannot be brought about by acting. The deaths *The Laramie Project, Five Easy Pieces*, and *Rumstick Road* performances engage with, for instance, have happened and can only happen once, and therefore cannot be repeated or re-enacted. They remain, to many of those involved in these performances – be it the interviewees, the performers, or the spectators – a missed encounter, and one that is and will remain inaccessible. What is accessible, however, is the memory of those directly and indirectly involved in the events of the past, and any documentation of these events in historical archives. ‘Revisiting the past’ through re-enactment and re-presentation is therefore not a visit to the actual events and situations of the past per se, but to a version of the past that is only suggestive of the original.

3. THE BODY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF REPRESENTATION

The shifting nature of performance through the recontextualization of found material and restoration of behavior suggests that in the attempt to engage with the past through performance, history is continually written and rewritten in a theatrical palimpsest. As this continual writing and rewriting does not change what is performed, but how it is performed and received, the body – of both performer and spectator – affects to a large extent how the past is revisited in performance. In *Five Easy Pieces*, for instance, the child actors’ individual personalities – which spectators get to learn through Seynaeve’s interviews in the opening scene – haunt the adult characters they re-enact in each Piece. The spectators’ ability to see both the child actor as his or her character, as well as the child actor as him or herself, is described by dramatic arts critic Bert States as “double vision” (31). According to States, “stage images (including actors) do not always or entirely surrender their objective nature to the sign/image function. They retain, in other words, a high degree of en soi” (29). “[E]n
soi”, or being “in itself”, highlights that whatever being represented cannot be detached from its instrument of representation, namely, the body. This is supported by performance art scholar José Sánchez, who argues that the “the actor can pretend to be another through the use of the word or visual masking, but he cannot be rid of his body” (152).

However, this brings up the question of whether the image of the child-actor-as-character or child-actor-as-his-or-herself is more present onstage. At the end of the first Piece, Polly holds up a gun, points it to the audience, and asks, “If I shoot, is it me or my character doing it?” (Five). Polly’s question highlights the clear tension of shared identities in the process of re-enactment. Roland Barthes outlines this tension of shared identities in his observation of the relationship between actors and the characters they portray onstage: “to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead” (31). The “simultaneou[s]ness]” Barthes points out highlights that representation in the theatre is not simply through becoming another. On the contrary, re-presentation is achieved through the expression and suggestion of another. In other words, what is re-presented of a body is only a shadow of itself projected onto someone else.

These representations involve situations performers cannot do anything about. In The Laramie Project, Matt Galloway reflects on Shephard’s death in retrospect: “I keep thinkin’, ‘I shoulda noticed. These guys shouldn’t been talking to this guy. I shoulda not had my head down when I was washing dishes for those twenty seconds. Things I coulda done’” (509). Here, the modal verbs “should” and “could” point not just to the possible actions Galloway could have undertaken in order to prevent Shephard’s death, but the lost opportunity as well. A similar comment is made at the end of the third Piece in Five Easy Pieces, where Rachel comments on the pre-determinedness of re-presentation: “I wish I could change [what happened], but I can’t because it was something that happened in real life” (Five).
Rachel’s and Galloway’s remarks suggest that the re-presentation of found material is elegiac in that whatever that is being represented in performance is based off an event that is already written in stone. However, while the events of the past have already happened and cannot be changed, the representation of these events remains something that can be altered. Theatre of the Real permits an intervention of history where archival material can be shifted around and rearranged into a different narrative.

4. TECHNOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS AND REMEDIATION

4.1 SOUND

The technician’s booth in Rumstick Road, although dim for a large duration of the performance, represents a place that contains the found archival fragments that are to be re-presented in the performance. Its position centrestage spatially fragments the stage, but also fragments how the same archival material is represented in each room. Take “House Dance” in Part 2, for instance. In the scene, an audio tape recording of Gray’s interview with his paternal grandmother Gramma Gray is layered with a Johann Bach violin partita as a single soundscape. Through this single soundscape, different representations of different events of the past are connected in a dialectical montage. Stage left, Gray stands with his back facing the audience, staring in the distance out the window. At the same time on stage right, the figure of Gray’s mother, Elizabeth Gray, standing in front of the photographic slide of the house from “House Slide”, throws her body back and forth along to the soundscape.

By having fragments of representational forms – the throwing of the body, the staring in the distance, the partita and the tape recording – juxtaposed against one another through a dialectical montage, LeCompte crafts an image that means something more than its parts. The room stage right becomes a musical manifestation of Elizabeth Gray’s madness. As music is
culturally specific, the German Bach partita represents how Elizabeth Gray’s state of mind is a concept foreign to Gray. The soundscape functions as an overarching device that connects the two rooms together, and informs Gray’s actions in the room stage left as a representation of his internal struggle with his mother’s madness. Here, the soundscape functions as an aural conjunction that can fragment different perspectives, and can connect these separate perspectives together at the same time. Like the walls that demarcate the three different rooms in Rumstick Road, sound paradoxically separates and connects different ideas. The dialectical montage created by the soundscape functions as a metonymy for Gray’s personal negotiation with his mother’s madness. Furthermore, as sound can take you to a specific place in a different way than an image, the soundscape becomes a metaphorical substitute for the physical house Gray and his mother lived in.

4.2 PHOTOGRAPHY

According to theatre studies researcher Greg Giesekam, the multiple layering of different forms of representation creates a collision between the systems of performance and media. By re-presenting something by laying one instrument of representation against another form of representation, the contrast between the two systems of representation calls into question their reliability and accuracy: which is true, and which is false (Giesekam 81)?

In making his argument, Giesekam does not acknowledge that these different systems of representation also complement and authenticate one other. Photography, for instance, “authenticates” (Barthes 107). Unlike other forms of historical records, photographs are floating signifiers not limited by or consigned to a specific narrative until a caption is assigned to them. In Rumstick Road, the photographic slide of the house spectators are presented with may not necessarily be the image of the actual house on 66 Rumstick Road. If
a photographic slide of a different house had been projected onto the wall, spectators would still believe that it is the house Spalding refers to in the narrative he assigns to that slide. Spectators may question the authenticity of Spalding’s narrative because they were not there in person to witness it, but the laying of different systems of representation against one another authenticates the narrative and makes it seem believable.

By making spectators believe that the slide of the house projected onto the wall is 66 Rumstick Road, it calls spectators into becoming witnesses to this version of history re-imagined by LeCompte and The Wooster Group. Here, spectators are not only presented with Gray’s re-presentation of events, but are also invited to witness LeCompte’s and the Wooster Group’s version of Spalding’s history. Unlike photography, which “authenticates”, Theatre of the Real bears witness to history in different ways. Theatre of the Real, through the re-presentation of found material, creates a version of history that allows performers and spectators to not just simply be imitators and voyeurs, but to participate as demonstrators and witnesses. By representing a version of history that invites access and intervention, Theatre of the Real facilitates historical intermediation. In other words, Theatre of the Real functions as an intermediate site that enables those in the present to connect with and intervene in history.

4.3 CAMERAS AND SCREENS

If Theatre of the Real facilitates historical intermediation, how has it changed with the different developments in representational forms in the theatre over the course of thirty, forty years? In Rumstick Road in the 1970s, the split of the visual and the aural modes of representation draws an obvious connection to the fragmentary nature of representation. However, in the 2000s, fragmentation no longer centers on the form of the representation, whether visual or aural. In The Laramie Project and Five Easy Pieces, the act of
representation itself is fragmented; multiple versions of a single re-enactment are juxtaposed against each other as they are remediated across one or many screens onstage. But the same way the different fragments of representational forms in Rumstick Road forms a dialectical montage, the layers of remediation in these two more recent performances present a montage of multiple viewpoints.

In Five Easy Pieces, what spectators are presented with onstage are not just the re-presentation of found material, but a multiplicity of re-presentational forms as well. On one level, the child actors perform themselves and re-enact different characters. On another level, these re-enactments are remediated onscreen through a live relay. On top of that, the child actors’ re-enactments are juxtaposed with video recordings of the child actors’ grown up filmic doubles re-enacting the same Pieces. The multiple re-presentations spectators are presented with through the presence of the live performers, the video camera, and the screen paradoxically forces spectators to split their attention as they dedicate all their attention on a single, individual part of the stage. Unlike the dialectical montage presented in Rumstick Road, the montage presented by the juxtaposition of the child actors’ re-enactments and the remediation of it onscreen theatricalizes States’ double vision. Spectators can see the child actors re-enacting the Pieces in front of Seynaeve and the video camera, and can also see the child actors as their characters in a live relay of that re-enactment on the screen. By theatricalizing spectators’ double vision, Five Easy Pieces exposes the subjectivity of representation itself. Being able to watch the live re-enactment onstage allows spectators to view representations of history as a rehearsal, while being able to watch the same re-enactment as it is remediated live onscreen allows spectators to view representations of history as filmic. Being able to watch both at the same time allows spectators to witness how representations of history are constructed in multiple ways.
Although these representational forms in *Five Easy Pieces* are presented as separate fragments, they form a direct relationship with each other as the live is remediated onscreen via the video camera. This is substantiated by arts technology researcher Matthew Causey, who argues that

The interplay between the two performance modes of mediated and live creates a conflation of the mechanisms and the products of their respective image manufacturing. The mediated and the live are neither what they were, nor are they only one or the other. (45)

Causey’s argument highlights that the live and remediated re-presentations onstage do not exist in isolation from each other. Although the multiple representational forms onstage may cause the spectators’ attention to split to different parts of the stage, focusing on only a single representational form onstage does not imply that this representational form exists separately from the others. Because of the presence of the video camera onstage, there is awareness that one representational form causes or is caused by another. This very awareness draws attention to how one version of history influences the way another version is represented.

5. PLACEMARKERS AND PERFORMANCE’S “SEMIOTIC REDSHIFT”

Performance is constrained by the limits of space and time posed by the theatre space and the length of the performance. Events have to be re-presented within the context of compressed theatrical time and space, and are thus naturally, to use Diamond’s words, “reconfigured, reinscribed, resignified”. In the original production of *The Laramie Project*, the Moment “The Fence” was performed with the actors seated on chairs. As the Moment progressed, each actor stood up and turned their chairs around, with the back of the chairs facing the audience. At the end of the Moment, the line of chairs formed an image of a fence,
in reference to the fence Shephard was tied to when he was left to die (Brown 59). When recreating places in performance, it is not the actual, literal place that marks that place. In place of the actual, literal place are placemarkers that function as a synecdoche for that place within the compressed theatrical time and space.

According to Robert Pogue Harrison, who writes on the place of human culture in nature, place is a “memory of itself” (23). In theatre, where space continually changes as productions travel, Harrison’s idea of place as a “memory of itself” becomes simply that of disembodied, dis-place-d memory. This disembodied, displaced memory haunts placemarkers, and constitutes what Andrew Sofer describes as “performance’s semiotic redshift”, that is, an invisible quality to an object that enables observers to look back in time and space (10). This “semiotic redshift” is an absence that creates presence by allowing spectators to draw a relationship between the placemarkers and the place they stand for.

However, performance’s “semiotic redshift” is refracted to a degree as placemarkers are represented onstage using different objects. The meanings associated with these objects haunt the placemarkers and the memories of the places they represent. For instance, the image of the fence created using the back of the chairs in The Laramie Project stands for not just the memory of Shephard – as the fence was where he was discovered nearly dead – but also his death, as the back of the chairs resemble gravestones. In addition, the chairs also represent the solidarity of the people of Laramie in response to his death. As a result, the chairs represent something entirely different from their original. Placemarkers onstage are thus witnesses themselves – of the memories of the past and the memories of the re-presented past.

In Rumstick Road, placemarkers are contained within photographic slides of Gray’s family. Unlike three-dimensional placemarkers onstage, the two-dimensional placemarkers
contained in these slides are indexical; they are signs created based on context. They can thus only bear testimony to the memories or events associated with the images. For instance, in “Slide Show” in Part 3, where photographic slides of Gray’s family are projected onto the back of the room stage right, Gramma Gray’s reactions to them – recorded and re-presented onstage – are limited to only what she can see on each slide. When Slide 7, which pictures Gray’s maternal grandmother Gramma Horton’s dining room, is projected, Gramma Gray responds with,

GG [Gramma Gray]: Christmas, ’51. Dining room at your mother’s eh …
Gramma’s. Gramma Horton’s. […] Gather around the table there. Boy, was that good turkey.
SG [Spalding Gray]: That’s it. See the turkey?
GG: See the what?
SG: Turkey
GG: No … (103)

The slide of the dining table, “set for Thanksgiving dinner” (103), enables Gramma Gray to recall images of her family gathering around the dining table, and of turkey even though she cannot see the turkey in the photograph. Place is identified by characteristics, and these characteristics constitute placemarkers that allow the observer of the photograph to look back in space and time in a “semiotic redshift”.

However, in looking back, Gramma Gray also wrongly identifies the table full of food as a Christmas dinner. If we consider theatrologist Marvin Carlson’s claim that “it is memory that supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception” (5), memory is the lens through which spectators witness Theatre of the Real’s re-presentations of history. As a result, when spectators observe photographic slides representing images of places they have not
previously encountered, what they bear witness to is a reading of the photograph through the lens of their own memories. Carlson argues from the process-making point of view that “[theatre] is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts” (2). However, from the reception point of view, re-presentation invites different (mis)readings because the lens through which different spectators witness the re-presentation is strictly individual. This informs the witnessing of history itself as something that can never be witnessed in all accuracy.

The multiplicity of representational forms in Theatre of the Real may be considered what theatre historian Joseph Roach describes as ‘surrogation’, that is, “the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins” (3). ‘Surrogation’, in other words, refers to the attempt to access the original by replacing it with substitutes. The different representations of the past in Theatre of the Real are essentially all stand-ins for the original events of the past. In “The Second Examination” in Part 3 of Rumstick Road, Gray pushes the figure of Gramma Gray on a wheelchair along a passage upstage. Spectators can only see them on the Mylar mirrors fixed on the doors that open to the rooms stage left and right. Getting access to these characters indirectly through the mirror is a metaphor for how all representations are only reflections of the original. The original can never be accessed, and even if it is possible to, we have learnt that reception constitutes an act of misreading, and there is thus no way to perceive an event in itself. As such, the original event in history is something that will always escape us.

6. CONCLUSION
Revisiting the past through re-presentation creates a version of history that allows access and intervention. This kind of theatre produces a witness more than a spectator – not necessarily the politicised spectator of epic theatre, but more of a historiographer. By enabling historical intermediation through the re-presentation of the past, Theater of the Real’s theatricalizes the way history is constructed in the archives.

In writing about *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Laramie Project*, and *Rumstick Road*, I took on a dispersive and erratic procedure and studied a combination of live performances, video reconstructions of live performances, scripts, and reviews. Theatre’s archive, like history’s, is characterized by an absence and presence. As performance, like history, is dependent on reception, what is performed is something that can never be captured in all accuracy. Whereas one performance may have video recordings, scripts, and photographs contained in the archive, another may only have a single review or paper about it. This paper itself forms a fragment of theatre’s archive, but the nature of fragmented forms tells us that they constitute something that can never quite capture the essence of the original as a whole.

Where then, does theatre live? According to Schechner, theatre is contained in the “strips of behavior”. But as Schechner observes and as we have learnt, the restoration of behavior is always subject to transformation. The way the repertoire of re-presented material contributes to the archive is informed to a large extent by the body. It affects how material is re-presented, how these re-presentations are received, and finally how re-presentations are recorded into the archive. As such, re-presentation and witnessing inform the only way performances can be archived: in fragments. Like the fragmentation of representational forms onstage, the fragmentation of theatre’s archive makes it unclear where exactly testimony lies. Like history, the different modes of documentations of performances in the archive comprise different versions of a single event. Even as it is repeated during the course of a production, it
is never exactly the same. What is performed onstage is something that will always escape us.

The only thing that remains of performance is its theatrical archaeology.
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