

## ARTICLE

## In search of absence: Creation strategies in scenic works of Heiner Goebbels

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**Abstract**

The present study examines Heiner Goebbels' intermedial strategies in selected stage works, with particular attention to the role of absence as a central aesthetic and creative principle. From the perspective of intermedial studies, it investigates the creation strategies developed by the composer and theater director Heiner Goebbels (b. 1952, Germany) in his scenic works, and, in particular, in three of them: *Landscape with Distant Relatives* (2002), *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004), and *Stifters Dinge* (2007). Taking absence as an aesthetic premise, as a creative strategy that allows for the emergence of everything that is not seen, heard, or perceived at first instance, the procedures that give rise to Goebbels' scenic realizations are examined, and how his being a composer influences his way of directing the scene, of "composing" the scene.

**Keywords:** Intermediality; Stage production; Aesthetics of absence; Composed theater

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**1. Introduction**

This paper examines the creative strategies employed by Heiner Goebbels (b. 1952, Germany) in his theatrical works. Focusing on three of his productions—*Landscape with Distant Relatives* (2002), *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004), and *Stifters Dinge* (2007)—it investigates how Goebbels, as both composer and theater director, drawing on his background in sociology, transfers compositional strategies typically associated with music to a broader field of creation that extends beyond sound alone.

The study approaches this subject through the lens of production methods and material awareness, which Goebbels himself identifies as central to his work. To this end, it incorporates Goebbels' own reflections from a previously unpublished interview conducted in Giessen in 2017, alongside a comprehensive bibliographical analysis of his writings and existing scholarship on his work.

Goebbels' trajectory situates him within a tradition of contemporary composers who have explored theater as a form of artistic creation, including Mauricio Kagel, Georges Aperghis, and Robert Ashley, among others. While it is common for a composer to contribute music or sound design to a theatrical production, it is less common for such involvement to culminate in a full transition to stage directing, as in the case of Goebbels.

In the early stages of his career, Goebbels actively engaged in the avant-garde theater scene, collaborating with several major figures, including Heiner Müller and Robert Wilson. These experiences eventually led him to direct his own stage productions. Today, he is internationally recognized both as a composer and as a theater director.

Regarding his musical influences, Goebbels notes that alongside classical music—ranging from Bach to Hanns Eisler—popular music, rock, and free jazz have significantly shaped his musical imagination. As he himself explains: “This is how I learned a certain freedom, primarily in the way of performance, non-conducted performance, and definitely the freedom in creating music together as a group, which is really the most important thing about rock music.”<sup>1(p11)</sup> This openness and eclecticism have become defining traits of his work as both composer and theater director.

Such eclecticism also informs his approach to staging, which often appears “orchestrated,” as if the performance itself were a musical composition: light responding to the rhythm of music, or an actor’s voice treated as a polyphonic element in the manner of a Bach fugue. Goebbels integrates the multimedia dimension radically into his productions, exemplifying what Roesner, in *Composed Theater*, describes as “a shift in activity during the process of making theater, a dramaturgical quality, a new perspective in creation.”<sup>2(p11)</sup> Central to this paradigm shift is the emphasis on “creation processes that bring the musical notion of composing to the theatrical aspects of performing and staging.”<sup>2(p11)</sup> Heiner Goebbels’ stage productions challenge the conventional questions of contemporary performing arts: What are we seeing? To which discipline does it belong? What does it mean? Rather than seeking to resolve these questions or articulate explicit statements through his works, Goebbels presents a constellation of elements on stage as devices, creating a space in which the audience can construct their own responses.

The central argument of this paper is that Heiner Goebbels transfers musical compositional strategies—rooted in his training as a composer and his interdisciplinary career—into the theatrical domain, rendering his productions “composed” works in which the creative process, material awareness, and multimedia configuration redefine the notion of staging and generate new modes of audience reception.

## 2. Distancing, fragmentation, and absence

“Absence can be understood as avoiding the things we expect, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, and the things that are usually done on stage.”<sup>3(p5)</sup>

The theatrical work of Heiner Goebbels is part of the theatrical line developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Bertolt Brecht and continued by Heiner Müller, in which “art is never an end; it is a portal through which ideas must be experienced and combined to stimulate consciousness, promote action, and generate change.”<sup>4(p62)</sup> Brecht sought to break with what he called dramatic theater to produce a

rupture with the linear Aristotelian characteristic through epic theater. This, whose main characteristic is distancing, removes “the obvious, known, and familiar aspects from the action or character [to] provoke astonishment and curiosity around it.”<sup>5(p83)</sup> In relation to the spectator, epic theater “no longer seeks to intoxicate, fill with illusions, makes one forget the world, or reconcile with one’s fate. Theater now presents the world to the spectator so that they may take hold of it.”<sup>5(p85)</sup> Thus, theater becomes a means not only to understand the world but also to transform it. Theater now seeks to empower the spectators, making them social and political actors who, through the tools provided by theater, change their environment and, consequently, the world.

As a continuation of Brecht’s epic theater, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave way to what Hans-Thies Lehmann called “post-dramatic theater.” This does not mean that other forms of theater-making were displaced or replaced, but rather that the term applies to “a theater that operates beyond drama, in a time after the validity of the drama paradigm in theater.”<sup>6(p17)</sup> Fundamental to this transition is the work of playwright Heiner Müller, who updated Brecht’s distancing concept with the idea of fragmentation:

His texts resemble more the concept of an essay than a play itself. He breaks with dialogues, with action, with connected scenes. His works are constructed rather from quotations, words, ideas, and fragments in the form of a collage, overlaying different stylistic elements, both literary and theatrical, such as anachronisms, analogies, allusions, epigraphs, self-quotations, rhizomes, associations, and theater within theater; among others, always following a logic of images, where he does not impose a single sense and development of action, but leaves open the possibility for the spectators to develop their own interpretation, their own judgment.<sup>7(p45)</sup>

Both Brecht and Müller, from a strong critical stance toward the role of theater in society and its role in its transformation, are simultaneously making theater and reflecting on it in a passionate artistic quest: “The theater is only interesting when one does what one does not know. Only then does something new emerge.”<sup>8(p11)</sup> Distancing the action or character and fragmenting the writing of the theatrical text are strategies to achieve a new theater that, in turn, serves as a means of removing the social foundations of the West.

The spectator was no longer allowed to indulge uncritically (and practically without consequences) in experiences simply by identifying with the

dramatic characters. The way they were presented subjected the themes and events to a process of distancing, the distancing necessary for something to be understood. When everything is “obvious,” understanding is simply not possible.<sup>5(p45)</sup>

Both Brecht and Müller criticize the role of theater as a means of representing reality, surpassing the linearity of dramatic theater, and each, through their particular aesthetics, involves the spectator in the process of creating meaning.

In this context, it is possible to see how Goebbels, situated in the post-dramatic stage of theatrical development, updates the concepts of distancing and fragmentation, giving rise to “absence” as an aesthetic principle. With absence, the author aims to continue the distancing from linearity, a search initiated by Brecht and deepened by Müller, leaving aside the known and the obvious and offering surprise to awaken the spectator’s curiosity.

The aesthetic premise of absence in Goebbels can be understood as a political stance toward artistic creation and the role of art in society. In the author’s words:

When we trust that people in the audience, the spectators, will use this for their own education, not in the sense of education, but even involving a change in their lives. Or when they say: I did not know this was possible, to see the world differently, something in the world that you have not thought was possible. This can already be a political starting point (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017).

His aesthetics constitute a political stance by focusing not on what happens on stage but on what happens in the audience, by trusting in the autonomy and independence of the spectator, and “by creating art in a socially responsible way.” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). In this sense, we find again a continuity in Goebbels’ work with his predecessors Brecht and Müller, who also took a clear political stance in their respective artistic works, both in terms of content and production methods.

In Goebbels’ work, absence can be understood as the opposite of “intensification,” a concept that refers to the over illustration of a character, action, place, etc., and which he avoids in his works, considering it an element that has already been exhausted in the Western theatrical tradition and that limits the possibilities of interpretation by the spectator. Over-explaining, linearity, and emphasizing are common characteristics of intensification that Goebbels seeks to avoid in his stage works.

The aesthetic principle of absence in Goebbels can be understood as:

- The disappearance of the actor/performer from the center of attention, the stage, and even the theater itself;
- The shifting of the spectator’s focus to a collective protagonist;
- The separation of the voices of actors and musicians from their bodies and instruments, respectively;
- The polyphony/autonomy of elements;
- The abandonment of dramatic expressiveness;
- An empty stage, literally, or the absence of a message or story in the work;
- Not telling a story in a narrative sense, or at least not in the Aristotelian way;
- And, returning to the epigraph of this section, “absence can be understood as avoiding the things we expect, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, the things that are usually done on stage.”<sup>3(p5)</sup>

In short, we can understand absence as “the presence of the other, as a confrontation with an unseen image or an unheard word or sound, an encounter with forces beyond man’s control, that is, out of our reach.”<sup>3(p6)</sup>

### 3. Absence on scene, presence in audience

The aesthetic premises of distancing, fragmentation, and absence, each with its particular characteristics, have in common the goal of leading the viewer from identification and intensification, characteristics of dramatic theater, to participation in a condition of post-dramatic theater. Regarding this point, Brecht asserts that epic theater “turns the spectators into observers but arouses their activity; forces them to make decisions; it provides them with knowledge; the spectators are confronted with an action.”<sup>5(p46)</sup>

In Rancière’s terms, “this capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations.”<sup>9(p17)</sup> The spectator is considered a co-creator of the work and is given the task of creating meaning. The drama does not occur on the stage; “the performance only happens through the imaginative power of the audience.”<sup>3(p42)</sup>

Paradoxically, it is possible to observe that, in multiple and varied ways, in Goebbels’ works, absence is staged while also generating a presence in the audience. This presence can be understood as a space, a realm, a gap through which the spectator can access their own interpretation of the work, without the staged elements dictating what to think about it, but instead providing means that enable a personal reading of the witnessed scenic event:

In all of his works, (...) Goebbels explores a variety of strategies that open up the text for the listener in a fashion that echoes Brecht. The listener is no

longer a consumer but rather an active participant in the creation of meaning.<sup>10(p225)</sup>

Goebbels takes as an important motivation for his work a phrase by Gertrude Stein, “Anything that is not a story can be a play.”<sup>3(p5)</sup> With this, he seeks to avoid the Aristotelian linearity inherent in dramatic theater, leaving aside the structural formula of introduction, development, climax, and resolution, which has become exhausted in contemporary theater. This idea is materialized in his stage works, in which various material media deliberately coexist, linked carefully, unexpectedly, and surprisingly by the author, “not in a symbolic way, I never use them to mean something else” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). This statement becomes a manifesto for artistic creation, trusting the spectators and granting them the opportunity to make their own interpretations of what they observe and hear.

It is possible to find in Goebbels' stage works an awareness of the material, focusing attention on the signifiers that compose these elements rather than on the meaning that the material carries. The latter is left to the interpretation of the spectator. His concern is not about telling a story, addressing a specific topic, or giving an opinion about it. Instead, his interest lies in the tensions that arise between the staged elements—resorting to theatrical means, such as light, scenography, text, music, and actors' bodies—and in the gaps that these tensions create. These gaps make it possible for the spectators to access their own interpretation of what the work stages.

In each piece, Goebbels presents a reflection on the creative procedures, addressing a problem specific to contemporary arts: the possibility, if it ever existed, of transmitting content is exhausted. It is not surprising, therefore, that having come from music and a composer's training, Goebbels transfers to the performing arts a problem specific to contemporary music. Much of contemporary music, especially avant-garde music, having surpassed tonality, focuses its attention on the sound itself and begins to listen to it, to use it, not in terms of its capacity for signification, but in terms of its physical qualities, which are staged as compositional material and explored in juxtaposition with other extra-musical elements. The concern is not about what the sounds represent and what is sought to be transmitted through them, but rather in the means of production of the work.

“Music has reached that moment in its history where it aesthetically explores its own structures, systems, and forms of construction, as these are uniquely its own. Music would have arrived, therefore, at the history of self-awareness.”<sup>11(p301)</sup>

This, which could be understood as “music in itself,” Goebbels translates to the realm of the stage: “Theater as a ‘thing in itself,’ not as a representation or a medium to make statements about reality, is exactly what I try to offer.”<sup>3(p2)</sup>

What is absent in his works? The absence we witness in Goebbels goes beyond what is not on stage and even transcends what actually appears in it. Sometimes, it is very evident, as in *Stifters Dinge*, where we are faced with the absence of human actors on stage. The absence of actors, a storyline, a focal point, etc., can be understood as the presence of another and ultimately, as giving rise to the viewer's subjectivity, which is ultimately responsible for interpreting the experience.

Here, we can see the great influence of John Cage on Goebbels' work. The importance of Cage's work for Goebbels was already demonstrated by the staging of *Européras 1 and 2* for the Ruhrtriennale in 2012, where he was able to bring the original spirit of Cage's work to the stage. Hence, great was the importance of this work that later, in 2018, the scenic materials of *Européras 1 and 2*, designed by Klaus Grünberg, were reused in *Everything That Happened And Would Happen*, a work by Goebbels that imagines different pasts, presents, and futures of the European continent and its identity.

In 4'33" (1952), Cage proposed the absence of the accustomed “musical” sound in a concert hall, and proposed in the work the absence of the usual “musical” sound in a concert hall, and set a specific listening time. “Of the four characteristics of musical matter, duration, that is, time, is the most fundamental. Silence is not heard in terms of pitch or harmony: it is heard in terms of duration.”<sup>12(p81)</sup> The work makes it possible to listen to silence, and it gives it time and place in the experience of the work. This consequently generates surprise, discomfort, and noise in the audience. It is this noise that finally composes the sound of the work, a work written only by silences. In this case, the listeners will each hear a different work, as they will fix their attention on what moves their subjectivity, motivated by the scenic and musical performance and by the sonorous context.

Later, a similar event happened with Goebbels: in his works, there is no theme, no storyline, and even no actors, but a wide range of theatrical elements put into action, serving as stimuli for the interpretation that each spectator can make of the work. Even for Goebbels, the spectator becomes an object of art, another element that composes the work, treated and considered as another theatrical medium.

A common point between the aesthetics of both creators, Cage and Goebbels, is “to invite the audience to

have new experiences, to travel through a new country, or to get lost in the forest.”<sup>13</sup> The absence in Cage, such as sound, control over materials, and sonic narrativity, is analogous to the main absence of representation that, despite the contradiction in language, is presented and staged in Goebbels' works. Each absence, by exposing the lack of an element, in turn, makes other materials, other senses, present. Cage, through the absence of sound in *4'33"*, brings into action the extra-musical context of the occurrence of that manifestation. On the other hand, in the case of Goebbels,

When the stage is empty in *Eraritjaritjaka*, or when the center of the stage is empty in *Eislermaterial*, it means that the acoustic presence of the musicians of the music is stronger. It is a relationship between what you see and what you hear (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017).

Expanding the analogy between music and theater, we can see how the works of Cage and Goebbels, despite the temporal differences, are products of similar and contemporaneous processes in the development of each respective discipline. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both music and theater underwent a significant shift in their aesthetic tendencies: Music abandoned tonality, focusing on sound as “zero material and object to be treated,”<sup>14(p30)</sup> and theater on the other hand, moved away from the Aristotelian linearity of dramatic form, giving rise to the post-dramatic, an aesthetic that reinforces “the autonomy of scenic art with respect to drama,”<sup>16(p17)</sup> and where “the focus is not on the drama but on the restructuring of artistic forms that highlight the scenic media, including music, over the literary media.”<sup>15(p77)</sup>

These independent processes led to a fundamental break in their respective fields, responding to the concerns of the new century, which saw the exhaustion of Romantic aesthetics and its technical procedures. What was being left behind was not just a way of doing things but also a way of understanding and observing the world. These revolutions, led by Arnold Schoenberg and Bertolt Brecht, respectively, gave rise to new music and new theatrical aesthetics, which, once the tragic events of the first half of the century were overcome, allowed for the emergence, for example, of musical works composed exclusively of silences or theatrical works without actors.

Goebbels' stage works are presented to us not only as theater but also as music, installation, performance, and ultimately as a scenic-sonic event, which “occurs only in the process of execution through the actions of all those who take part in it.”<sup>16(p75)</sup> These works can be approached from various disciplines. More importantly, they can be

assimilated as taking place between disciplines, occupying those vertices, inhabiting the boundaries between one discipline and another, and giving them concrete presence in their works. Just as Goebbels shows an interest in the tensions that arise between the elements that are part of the work, it is possible to observe that this interest extends to the tension, contradiction, superposition, and juxtaposition between the staged disciplines. It is these tensions, both between elements and between disciplines that give rise to the gaps through which the viewer's subjectivity accesses an interpretation of the work. With no story, at least not in the Aristotelian sense, and no one telling a story, the viewer is called upon. In that sense, Goebbels understands them as objects of art, to actively participate in the work and create a unique and personal interpretation of the experience.

#### 4. Stage polyphony

Exploring the works of Heiner Goebbels means delving into the boundaries of theater, music, performance, and even the limits of art itself. Is a theater piece without actors possible? Can we even consider it? Is music just another actor? Or can we conceive of an actor's body being used on stage as a “theme” in a Bach fugue? These are some of the many questions that Goebbels' stage works generate and that need to be addressed when studying them.

What happens when actors leave the theater for which we paid a fee to see them in person, and yet, through a screen, we witness their departure from the stage, their exit from the theater, getting into a car, driving home, and engaging in domestic activities, just like each of the spectators who are witnesses of that abandonment will likely do after the show? This situation, taken from the work *Eraritjaritjaka*, illustrates one of the many ways in which Goebbels presents absence on stage, in a constellation of elements forming a complex scenic counterpoint that opens up a gap for the viewer's subjectivity to interpret the experience there, both sonically and visually:

I think that when we are on stage as composers, directors, set designers, and costume designers, our role is to create a space where the audience's imagination can flourish. It is not about the quantity of fantasies we possess; rather, it's about establishing a space where imagination can find a place (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017).

The polyphonic texture introduced in Goebbels' work can be understood as a result of his musical background and as a way of thinking about theatrical creation influenced by this condition. His musical essence permeates his stage work, and when he creates a theater piece, he is essentially

composing. The concept of “Composed Theater” refers to the creative process and the performance of works that are determined by compositional strategies and, in a broader sense, by compositional thinking.<sup>17</sup> Here, we can consider a basic musical creative principle: to compose means to make decisions. And when expanding this idea to intermedial arts, composing involves listening, reading, interpreting, observing, and directing. It also involves mediating, which means highlighting and making visible and audible the modifications of the material characteristics of the elements that constitute the work, blurring disciplinary boundaries.

In this compositional approach, one must be attentive and open to the structures of the different media involved in the work. Reading a text, for example, is not merely deciphering its meaning but also understanding its syntax and construction. The same applies to visual, scenic, lighting, and bodily materials. It is about composing and directing while taking into account and analyzing the structures of the media that converge with music in the creation of the work, thus enriching the creative process with the constructional forms of all the media involved.

In the case of Goebbels, his creative process begins with experimental workshops, in which each participant—set designers, lighting designers, costume designers—engages in group brainstorming and improvisation based on the question that gives rise to the work. “Most of the things you see – not hear, but see – are created in the first three or four days of these experimental workshops, where everybody can, “sort of,” do what he or she wants.”<sup>18(p117)</sup>

I try an open process in which every light technician or wardrobe assistant can easily make suggestions, and everyone in the crew always has a fair chance to make the best out of his field (light, sound, stage, costume, musicians, performers, etc.). It ends up being very precise, of course, because the combination of all these media can only work properly with precision.<sup>1(p10)</sup>

Based on the ability to decide, listen, read, interpret, observe, and direct, the composer becomes a medium that orchestrates the materials and conceptually transfers between the elements that constitute the work. The composer, along with all those involved in the creative process, its realization, and reception, can be seen as instruments that make visible and manifest the process of convergence and intermedial modification.

An intermedial work refers to an artistic manifestation where different media converge and blend in their creation. The concept of media represents “the material and sensitive dimension of communication,”<sup>19(p23)</sup> and

“the way we receive a message is conditioned by it.”<sup>15(p73)</sup> From an intermedial perspective, the concept of media is understood in three dimensions. First, it is seen as a tool:

“Physical media” are the means by which any medium’s complex signs are produced, such as the body; flute and percussion instruments, the Moog synthesizer; oil on canvas, brush and ink on paper, marble, wood, the video camera, voice, typewriter, pen, paper, parchment, skin, etc.<sup>20(p30)</sup>

Second, as a discipline: music, theater, dance, literature, film, etc. Third, as a cultural context, which refers to “the environment that surrounds artistic manifestations not only at the moment of their expression but also before, during, and after their process of creation.”<sup>21(p93)</sup> Intermediality is characterized by observing creative processes and the concrete manifestations resulting from these processes through a network logic, in which media as material tools, disciplines, and cultural contexts interact and influence one another in multiple directions.

Understanding intermedial works in this way and considering media in these three dimensions, the previously described approaches to composition make complete sense during the creative process. These processes lead to works that are not conceived as finished products but rather as potentialities in which the process of creation, its manifestation, and its reception by the audience are all integral parts. They are not independent stages but are intimately interconnected, like tension fields that feed back into the process,<sup>22</sup> resist each other, and unleash potentiality in the creative exercise.<sup>1</sup> The work, as the material concretization of the creation-production process, offers certain materials, and it is the spectators who are responsible for its interpretation, thereby completing the

<sup>1</sup> In “The Fire and the Tale” (2016), Agamben refers to the tension between potentiality and impotence, between the power to act and the power not to act, when discussing the act of creation. According to the Italian author<sup>22</sup>, potentiality is a suspension of the act, as it involves the possibility of developing or not developing a certain capacity. The creative act, the poetic act, the production, is the action where the potentiality of not doing is abandoned, and the question arises regarding what emerges from this impotence once the power to act is activated. What is suspended in the creative act? What is abandoned when a potentiality is put into practice? These are the questions that animate the creative processes addressed in this study, enabling us to consider the role of all those involved in the stages of creation, interpretation, and reception as agents who suspend the possibility of not doing when they participate as co-protagonists in the creative process. As Agamben mentions, drawing from Deleuze, they unfold an act of resistance and liberation of a potentiality.

creative potentiality of the work. In the words of Agamben, it is an act of resistance to death that gives rise to the work.<sup>22</sup>

The scenic polyphony in Goebbels is structured, in the manner of a Bach fugue, by different voices, many of which may not be evident at first glance but are implicitly present: the members of the artistic team, the elements and disciplines at play, and the presence of the audience.

I also work on the polyphony of the media, their contrapuntal function, and look for the rhythm of a performance, the chords of the colors – since colors also have a very strong acoustic resonance when they come to life.<sup>18(p114)</sup>

Each constituent part of this counterpoint contributes to the construction of the work as a creative force. It is not limited to what is presented or absent on stage, but it relies on the interpretation of the audience to complete its formation as a voice in this polyphony. “Spectators see, feel, and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers, or performers.”<sup>9(p13)</sup>

The simultaneous presence of scenic voices in Heiner Goebbels' theatrical work can be understood as the author's personal quest for sounds, images, and experiences that he has not previously heard, seen, or lived. In that sense, Goebbels, as a composer, “feels more connected to unheard sounds or approaches that open up his imagination to what music could be, rather than feeling part of the world of new music” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). This concern, stemming from his experience with sound and music, extends to the other media—tools, disciplines, and cultural contexts—that are part of his scenic works, thus experimenting with new possibilities for creating a polyphonic texture. Through this approach, he grants the spectator—as a voice that is part of the contrapuntal construction—the possibility to interpret the experiences within the work.

## 5. Reading as a form of composition

The creative strategies in Heiner Goebbels' theatrical works are as numerous and varied as his works themselves. Goebbels sees each new piece as a challenge to explore possibilities that he has not experienced, seen, or heard before. In some cases, it may begin with an original idea that serves as the starting point for a new work, while in others; it may be commissioned by a specific ensemble or company. The initial motive can be diverse, but the commitment to innovation in each new work remains constant.

This commitment to innovation is brought to life on stage through a creative strategy closely tied to the

reading behavior. Beyond being a musician and a theater director, Goebbels is an avid reader, and it is evident how his way of composing—encompassing his attitude and the activities he undertakes when directing his theatrical works—is guided by reading the texts that form part of his works. These readings are not solely focused on meaning; Goebbels is also interested in the literary material and syntactic structure of the texts, their construction methods, their rhythms, and how they possess a musical dimension:

I can try to enlarge the view of the architecture of the text; to read the text with a magnifying glass. My interest is to share my observations with the reader or with the listener or, looking behind the authors' way of writing, to show some of their writing strategies, to be able to understand more levels than just the overall semantic one.<sup>1(pp5-6)</sup>

This strategy of reading as a form of composition is an attempt to “find within the texts – not in their meaning, but in their syntax – indications of how to make musical decisions” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). Goebbels uses texts—and the voices that bring them to life—as sonic and musical materials. He is interested in the acoustic realization of language. It is common to find different languages in his works, which reflects his interest in the sound of those languages beyond the comprehension of their semantic content. For example, in the work *Stifters Dinge* (2007), there are texts in English, Spanish, French, and in one of the original languages of Papua New Guinea. These texts are acoustically presented: we do not see the source of sound emission; they are pre-recorded and played during the performance, which directs attention to the sound of the voice and the languages themselves beyond their semantic content.

The acousmatic disembodiment of the voice and language aims to concentrate the audience's attention on sound, in contrast to the scenic elements at play. These polyphonic relationships between media can manifest as tensions, contradictions, interpolations, or complementarities. The interpretation of these contrapuntal relationships is left to each member of the audience. The work presents these relationships and connections without closing them off to a precise meaning but rather seeks to open up the audience's perception, listening, and imagination. In Rancière's terms, “this capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations.”<sup>9(p17)</sup> Hence, Goebbels' understanding of the spectator as the creator of the work.

Whether in his purely musical works or his theatrical works, one can observe Goebbels' need for extra-musical elements. Even when he creates “music within music,” “the

strategies of creation draw on elements outside of music to seek musical indications from them" (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). In this sense, literature is an important extra-musical element in his works, and the act of reading this "human artefact," in Wolf's terms,<sup>23</sup> becomes a transversal strategy that runs through his entire body of work.

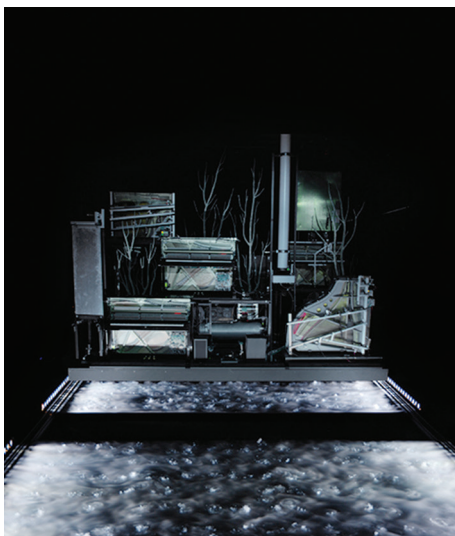
Next, we will examine the specific strategies in each of the three works chosen as objects of study: the deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*, the spelling out of elements in *Eraritjaritjaka*, and the decentralization of action in *Landscape with Distant Relatives*. While these strategies are observed as primary in their respective works, they are intertwined with the previously detailed strategy of reading as a form of composition. It is possible to hypothesize that this strategy serves as the main creative approach in Heiner Goebbels' theatrical works and that specific strategies are developed for each work.

## 6. Creation strategies

### 6.1. Deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*

*Stifters Dinge* premiered in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2007. The work was created by a team led by Heiner Goebbels in his role as composer and theater director (Figure 1); Klaus Grünberg was responsible for lighting and set design, Willi Bopp handled the sound, and Hubert Machnik took care of programming. They were joined by a group of collaborators responsible for the installation and technical aspects of the theater.

This work, defined by Goebbels himself as a performative installation, as a composition for five



**Figure 1.** Picture of *Stifters Dinge*. Reprinted with permission from <https://www.klausgruenberg.de/stifters.htm>, Klaus Grünberg, 2007.

pianos with no pianists, and as a performance without performers, emerges from the question posed by Goebbels and his team of collaborators as a working premise: "Will the spectator's attention hold even if one of the essential assumptions of theater is suspended—the presence of an actor?"<sup>23(p5)</sup> This scenic experiment, which pushes the aesthetics of absence to its limits by removing human presence from the stage, gives rise to an installation populated by objects that take on the role of the vacant protagonists left by the absence of actors. Thus, pianos, stones, pools, water, smoke, and so on, become the participants and content generators of the work. "The things on stage, the means of the theater, and the design elements themselves become protagonists as soon as there is an absence of performers."<sup>23(p28)</sup>

Music and performing arts unfold, take shape, and are constituted in time. The structure and form of each work are determined by how the resources that are part of them are managed temporally. In this sense, it is not surprising to observe how Goebbels, both as a composer and a theater director, employs a temporal element as a creative strategy in *Stifters Dinge*: deceleration. This tool aims to heighten the audience's perception by allowing things to happen without a linear dramatic progression. The work functions as a continuous sonic and visual device that, instead of creating temporal expectations, surprises with unforeseen events. The temporal management of the elements is not aimed at creating a dramatic narrative, which is characteristic of traditional theater, but rather at arranging the elements not only as tools but also as artistic partners and forces,<sup>18</sup> becoming protagonists of the action and generators of visual and sonic content.

This actorless performative installation incorporates literary texts by Adalbert Stifter and William Burroughs, interviews with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Malcolm X, and field recordings of indigenous people from Papua New Guinea and Colombia. The title of the work, *Stifters Dinge* (Stifter's Things), is derived from the texts of Austrian author Adalbert Stifter, a representative of the *Biedermeier narrative movement*<sup>2</sup>, and Goebbels takes elements from Stifter's syntactic construction to derive creative strategies for this particular work. "He slows down, decelerates the narrative tempo, and at the same time heightens our attention."<sup>23(p27)</sup> Stifter's characteristic of describing the settings where actions take place with great patience and meticulousness is adopted by Goebbels as a creative strategy. Deceleration becomes a translation of this literary

<sup>2</sup> Artistic and literary style developed in Central Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly ornamental, emphasizing the influence of Romanticism and landscape painting.

writing strategy, now functioning as a working tool in the construction of the stage realization.

*Stifters Dinge* presents self-reflection as a working tool, revisiting the construction methods of each medium: literature, music, and stage. Stifter's literature pays attention to objects and elements of nature, which are translated on stage through a contemplative attitude of observation. Deceleration is brought to life in *Stifters Dinge* through various actions: the slow ballet of curtains, the filling of pools, and the almost imperceptible color change in a projected painting, accompanied by a meticulous description of an avalanche, among others. Stifter writes his imagery like a landscape painter, and Goebbels does the same on stage.

The aforementioned textual materials are present in the work through archival material. The voices are not performed live but pre-recorded and played through speakers. On the other hand, all musical and object sounds are produced live through mechanical and/or computerized automated processes. This inversion challenges the traditional format of theater, which typically features live voices and recorded sounds. It becomes another way of making absence present on stage by questioning the premises of theater and unsettling its constituent elements.

The rhythms of listening and seeing collide with each other: focusing on one means losing the other. The voices become disembodied, their source unseen, demanding utmost attention to their discourse. Choosing to focus on the voices means missing out on the details of what is happening on stage, and vice versa. The work heightens attention in one medium at the expense of the other, thus turning the audience into active participants by offering various options for their focus of attention. The work is therefore constructed within each spectator, according to the emphasis they have placed on the various elements that make up the piece. In this regard, Goebbels quotes Brecht to affirm the idea of "using theater not to make statements, but to offer experiences."<sup>13</sup>

In *Stifters Dinge*, one can observe Goebbels and his team's quest to invert hierarchies, avoid the familiar, and displace the order and use of theatrical elements. "I wanted to assemble things on stage which remains strange to us."<sup>33(p32)</sup> A change in light that becomes a sonic event, pianos that play autonomously, the friction of stones creating a continuous sound, a disembodied presence of human voices—all these actions are aimed at redistributing power, hierarchies, and the balance of weight among the elements. By treating all theatrical elements as independent and complementary voices, akin to a polyphonic composition, the realization of a musical conception of stage devices becomes evident.

This is made possible through what Goebbels himself recognizes as a way of working in a musical manner:

A keyboard was used to direct like a composer. Probably, this musical approach represents a way of working; probably all the decisions (when to emphasize a light or when to move something) go through my body as a director as much as they went through my body as a keyboard player in the rehearsals of this piece.<sup>18(p118)</sup>

In this way of directing through musical action, it is natural for time management to become the primary strategy of creation in this work. Ultimately, it is a search for the time of the other,<sup>8</sup> embracing a completely different kind of time.

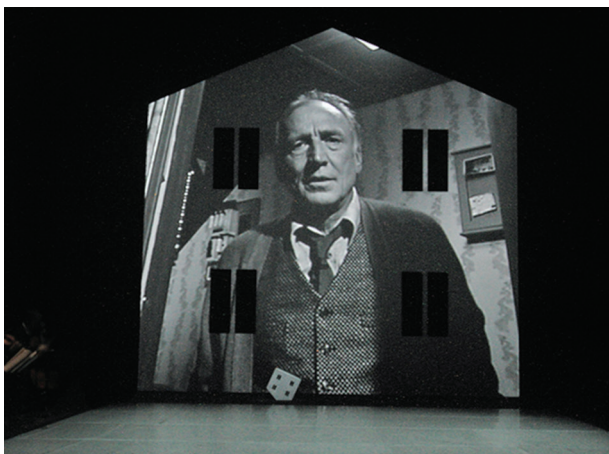
The phrase from Stifter, "I have never seen anything like this before,"<sup>13</sup> is taken as a working premise by Goebbels in this piece, expanding the aesthetic experience through the various elements brought to the stage. The literary phrase is extrapolated to the scene in a quest to offer spectators previously unexperienced images, sounds, and actions, opening up their imagination and allowing them to interpret what they witness in their own way.

## 6.2. Spelling out elements in *Erartitjaritjaka. Museum of Phrases*

The title of the work corresponds to a poetic expression of Australian Aboriginals, which can be translated as "full of yearning for something lost."<sup>8</sup> Goebbels became familiar with this word through the special enthusiasm it aroused in Elias Canetti, the author of the texts that are incorporated in *Erartitjaritjaka*. The subtitle of the work, "Museum of Phrases," helps to approach the treatment that Goebbels gives to Canetti's texts. Rather than a narrative construction, the work presents disconnected quotes from Canetti, mirroring his own approach in his texts. Once again, we observe a literary strategy being translated to the stage.

The work premiered in 2004 in Lausanne, Switzerland. It features texts by Canetti and music for the string quartet by Shostakovich, Mossolov, Lobanov, Scelsi, Bryars, Ravel, Crumb, Bach, and Goebbels. On stage, it involves the participation of actor André Wilms, who has collaborated on numerous works by Goebbels as well as the Mondriaan Quartet. Goebbels serves as the director, Klaus Grünberg handles the set design and lighting, Florence von Gerkan is responsible for the costumes, Bruno Deville oversees the video, and Willi Bopp is in charge of sound.

As already mentioned, motivated by reading and the multiple re-readings of Canetti's notebooks, Goebbels creates this theatrical work with the premise of staging



**Figure 2.** Picture of *Erartitjaritjaka*. Reprinted with permission from <https://www.klausgruenberg.de/erartitjaritjaka.htm>, Klaus Grünberg, 2004.

the possibility of encountering something new each time the play occurs (Figure 2). The intention is to generate a pleasure of the imagination,<sup>13</sup> just as Goebbels experienced with Canetti's reading. Although Elias Canetti is a German-language author, the play presents his texts in a French translation, firstly because the actor performing the play is French, and secondly, because the production and commission of the play corresponded to the Theater Vidy in Lausanne, in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. This decision also reflects Goebbels' interest in the sound materiality of language beyond its semantic content. While it is important to understand what the text says, it is even more important to put the language into action as a sonic medium tool.

The creation strategy of this particular work involves the independent presentation of each medium that is part of the piece, resembling a spelling out of elements "The music, the string quartet, the lighting, the film, the expansion of space: at first the black space, then a white rectangle, a small house, a big house, the outdoors, the indoors."<sup>3(p18)</sup> Each of these media tools is introduced one by one, adding up in a counterpoint that will only be completed toward the end of the work. This strategy allows each presented element to be appreciated in detail, focusing attention on its specific characteristics and qualities. "Only later will these individually introduced parameters be interlaced with each other."<sup>3(p18)</sup>

This creation strategy is Goebbels' way of translating a phrase by Canetti onto the stage: "You notice some things only because they are not connected to anything."<sup>3(p17)</sup> The disconnection between the media in the work is meant to allow the audience to focus their attention on each element. Gradually, the piece weaves a contrapuntal structure by incorporating the various media on stage, diversifying

attention and expanding the possibilities for interpretation in the audience. Absence is brought into play in this case through the strategy of spelling out elements, avoiding the common forms of superposition and interrelation of media found in dramatic theater. In particular, absence is practiced in *Erartitjaritjaka* when the actor leaves the stage. Through a screen, we see them exiting the theater and driving to an apartment in the city where the work is being presented. There, they read the newspaper of the day and prepare a meal in perfect rhythmic synchronization with the music performed on stage, Maurice Ravel's String Quartet in F Major.

We did not try to find appropriate music afterwards to accompany that; we tried to provide him and his structure of movements and activities a sort of musical energy, and tried to follow the musical form, one which is driven by aesthetic compositional aspects. This also means "directing as a composer" (here, like Maurice Ravel).<sup>18(p19)</sup>

This represents a precedent and rehearsal of what Goebbels would later accomplish three years later in *Stifters Dinge* by completely subtracting human presence from the stage and delving deeper into directing the scene from a musical conception.

The absence of the actor on stage opens up new forms of perception in the audience. The theatrical space expands to an outside that surpasses the physical limits of the theater. At the same time, the theatrical medium expands as a discipline using real-time video as a scenic tool. The boundaries of physical space and disciplinary space blur, generating new ways of accessing the theatrical event and allowing the audience to question what they are experiencing: when the actor leaves the stage and the theater, does the play continue? Is it really happening, or is it a stage trick? What am I seeing: the mediated image of the actor in real-time or a recording? Goebbels constantly makes us doubt what we are observing.

A clear example of this is when we see the actor preparing food in the apartment, and we witness that the rhythm with which he cuts the onion on a cutting board perfectly matches the tempo of the live music performed by the string quartet on stage. When witnessing this, there is no doubt that both events are happening simultaneously. Toward the end of the play, when the actor appears through one of the windows of the house façade that makes up the set design, Goebbels once again makes the audience doubt the simultaneity of the events. The intention is to constantly play with the audience's perception and generate continuous questioning of what is presented on stage.

In *Erartitjaritjaka*, various media tools (instruments,

scenic elements, video, spaces, etc.) and media disciplines are employed independently and not interconnected, just like in Canetti's texts, which include music, theater, literature, film, and visual arts. Each element is complex in itself; each one communicates and signifies. This combination of media in the play provokes a collapse of meanings in the audience, hence the idea that the drama resides in the audience, not in the play. The multimedia scenic device presents a series of significant materials. Goebbels and his team of collaborators, as creators, trust in the audience's ability to read the elements at work and interpret the intermedial relationships existing between them. The meanings of the play are not determined by those who create it, but by those who construct in the imagination of each spectator based on their particular interests and the focal points on which they have fixated their attention during the presentation of the device.

Unlike other works, in *Erartitjaritjaka*, Goebbels primarily uses music by other composers, all of which are for the instrumental formation of a string quartet, a chamber ensemble representing the tradition of Western written music.

The inclusion of Bach's *Contrapunctus IX* from *The Art of Fugue* responds to a sonic reason. The ascending octave interval that initiates the music is similar in its sonic qualities to the expression *là-bas* (there) being used in the text that, simultaneously, the actor is enacting. There is a phonetic proximity between the sound of language and the sound of the musical work. In German, the original language of Canetti's texts, *là-bas*, corresponds to *Dort*. Here is a clear example of the importance of language sound for Goebbels. The choice of Bach's music would not have been possible if Canetti's text were in German. The translation into French, along with its sonic quality, provides new possibilities for the creation, composition, and direction of the work.

The text is incorporated as an additional voice to Bach's music. The transparent structure of the contrapuntal procedure, which is the fugue, allows for the addition of new voices in the polyphonic construction. In this case, the text in the actor's voice complements the instrumental voices of Bach's fugue, and in turn, the musical work enriches and acquires an unprecedented sonic richness through the addition of a new voice, this time human, to its fugue-like fabric.

The inclusion of Bach's fugue toward the end of the piece serves as a recapitulation of the creative strategy used by Goebbels in *Erartitjaritjaka*. The fugue is characterized by a gradual inclusion of each of the voices that compose it in previously unexplored registers. Only once all the voices have been presented does the first exposition of the

fugue become complete. This is analogous to the process of unveiling elements carried out by Goebbels in the play. Each medium is presented independently, occupying an exclusive and particular space on the stage: sound, lighting, text, body, scene, etc., and in the construction of meaning through the audience's interpretation.

### 6.3. Decentralization of action in *Landscape with Distant Relatives*

This opera for ensemble, chorus, and soloists—an actor and a baritone—is the oldest of the three works that are part of the subject of study in this research. It was premiered in 2002 in Geneva, Switzerland, featuring musical composition and stage direction by Heiner Goebbels and a group of collaborators, including Klaus Grünberg, who stands out for his set design and lighting (the only member of the team present in all three works studied); Florence von Gerkan in costume design, and Franck Ollu in musical direction, among others. The work was composed for the Ensemble Modern from Frankfurt, Germany, an important contemporary music group with whom Goebbels had previously collaborated on *Black on White* (1996).

While this opera includes texts by various authors such as Giordano Bruno, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Henri Michaux, and Gertrude Stein, as well as references to Nicolas Poussin and Leonardo da Vinci, the initial motivation and the non-musical element that sparked the creation of this work was Poussin's painting *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (Figure 3). The reading as a form of composition, identified in this research as Goebbels' primary creative strategy in his stage works, is expanded here to encompass the reading and interpretation of the pictorial image. In this case, the creative strategy takes inspiration from Poussin's work, which is characterized by meticulous detail in all planes of the image and a decentralization of the focus of action.



Figure 3. Poussin's painting of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Reprinted from <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/nicolas-poussin-landscape-with-a-man-killed-by-a-snake>, Nicolas Poussin, 1648.

Poussin's artwork does not have a single exclusive focal point; instead, the viewer's gaze is drawn to various stimuli. In fact, the action that gives the work its name, although located in the foreground, is presented in a space and with a luminosity that diminishes its prominence, causing it to share attention with the other actions, landscapes, and elements that make up the image. Goebbels translates Poussin's compositional strategy to the stage, employing decentralization by presenting multiple focal points in the image, meticulous attention to detail and precision in each plane, and treating the landscape as a space with a wide variety of perspectives: left-right, foreground-background, up-down.

The struggle for this balance provokes a variety of perspectives in this opera, which again and again let the onlookers' eyes wander from left to right, from background to the front, from this scene to the next, and so on.<sup>3(p11)</sup>

The landscape, in this way, appears to have no beginning or end, allowing for various viewpoints and offering the viewer freedom of perception and observation.

The strategy of decentralizing the action is brought to the stage in various ways, for example, by conceiving a collective protagonist instead of an individual one or by presenting the musicians of the ensemble without their instruments, engaging in actions on stage, playing instruments different from their specialty, performing on stage dressed in a hood, ultimately taking them out of their comfort zone. Avoiding the center does not necessarily translate literally to the stage. The action may occupy the center while various media are being employed in other planes and spaces of the scene. This generates a need for the audience to decide where to focus their attention and gaze. The spectator is allowed to choose which of the elements that are part of the scene to use in constructing their own interpretation of the work.

The topic of the opera then – expressed in language, singing, drumming and dancing – is images that refuse to occupy the powerful and often violent center or exclude or shift it; the centering of everything is never staged but only aspired to, implied, and worked toward; eventually, the center is left vacant to be discussed, to be focused on and repossessed by us, the living onlookers.<sup>3(p12)</sup>

*Landscape with Distant Relatives* represents another exploration of absence as an aesthetic premise by Goebbels. Absence is made present in this work through the strategy of decentralizing the action, the variety of focal points and planes of attention through multiple media and

simultaneous actions, the omission of a narrative, the idea of a collective protagonist, the reassignment of tasks to the musicians of the ensemble, transforming them into more than just musical performers but also stage performers, and the distance of observation, which provides us with the opportunity to detect proximity, to discover similarities and relations.<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Coda

On reviewing the background of Heiner Goebbels' theatrical conception, one can see how his aesthetic of absence represents continuity and update of the principles of Brecht's distancing and Müller's fragmentation. Goebbels' aesthetic seeks to provide the spectator with experiences that awaken their imagination through various theatrical means. His works do not tell stories or make statements; they present themselves as scenic events with a series of visual, auditory, and conceptual stimuli, considering and conceptualizing the audience as actors who are part of the work, as they are responsible for its interpretation.

The aesthetic of absence is characterized by avoiding *clichés* and the intensification of dramatic theater, experimenting with new possibilities of seeing, hearing, and experiencing the theatrical act. As a way of translating this aesthetic premise to the stage, Goebbels employs various creation strategies, with reading as a form of composition standing out as the common working methodology in the three works addressed here. This strategy is characterized by extracting compositional and stage direction procedures from the syntactic construction of the texts, which are put into action. In the opera *Landscape with Distant Relatives*, this strategy expands to the pictorial image, extracting creation methods from a visual work to be applied in theater.

On the other hand, the particular creation strategies used by Goebbels in his different works—the deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*, the spelling out of elements in *Eraritjaritjaka*, and the decentralization of action in *Landscape with Distant Relatives*—become tools for exploring and experimenting with new possibilities of combining, overlaying, contradicting, avoiding, and juxtaposing the relationships between the media that make up each work. This is always done with the aesthetic premise of absence, that is, attempting to offer on stage unforeseen and unheard-of forms of interaction between the materials being employed. In each work, Goebbels devises specific strategies that translate reading as a form of composition, arranging materials and possibilities for combining elements that open up the viewer's imagination.

As a theatrical director, Goebbels brings his other concerns as a musical composer to the stage. As such, his creation strategies serve to organize the materials, arrange

them in time, and connect the different media that compose the work. When Goebbels states that he feels closer to unheard sounds rather than new music (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017), he acknowledges how he resorts to musical composition and theatrical direction to create pieces that offer sonic experiences. By extending the field to theater and using composition as the foundation for directing the stage, he renders resources and working strategies available to the audience for their interpretation.

I (...) consider theater as a very musical process. I firmly believe in the musical space of an aesthetics experience and rather think about the rhythm of scenes, the harmonic or contrapuntal relationship of the theatrical elements, and the different levels between a "visual" and an "acoustic" stage.<sup>18(p114)</sup>

The theatrical works of Heiner Goebbels question the basic foundations of theater by pushing the boundaries of the interdisciplinary media that are part of his works. To achieve this, he employs a musical strategy:

Heiner Goebbels takes this idea of theatrical polyphony even further by extending the musical process of de-hierarchization to virtually all constituent elements of the theater, including lighting, sound design, and video. He also reflects on this approach more explicitly as an attempt to elicit critical awareness, maturity, and self-determination in the audience.<sup>24(p218)</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Goebbels' works constantly explore new sonic and theatrical possibilities. His works consistently seek new sounds and scenic possibilities, making use of unforeseen combinations, exploring the stage, improvising, working collectively, and ultimately, defining in a precise way how the media arranged on stage interact. This is to move away from dramatic expressiveness. As Goebbels himself states, quoting Müller, "The drama doesn't happen on stage."<sup>3(p5)</sup> The drama is experienced by each spectator and is constructed in their imagination through the interpretation of the theatrical elements that are in tension within the works.

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