Filming Nothingness

Invisibility, Ineffability, and the Inviolable Absence of God in Carmelo Bene's Hamlet[1]

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> To the memory of Umberto Artioli,
> who was my Laurea thesis advisor in 2004
> and whose distinguished scholarship and charismatic personality
> triggered my interest in drama studies and Carmelo Bene's oeuvre.

The theatrical and cinematographic works by Italian playwright, director, and actor Carmelo Bene (1937-2002) are marked by their philosophical significance. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the international debate in Europe was strongly influenced by French post-structuralism and Derridean deconstructive criticism, Bene overstepped the limit of logocentric language by escaping from the metaphysical assumptions that – according to Derrida – dominated Western thought and were impossible to elude (*Acts of Literature* 49).

Beginning with the similarities and differences between Bene's aesthetic and Jacques Derrida's and Giorgio Agamben's philosophical inquiries into the essence of language, the essay examines the distinctive *techniques of* the television film *Amleto da Shakespeare a Laforgue (Hamlet from Shakespeare to Laforgue,* 1974). A close attention is paid to the (dis)functions of linguistic and cinematic codes (such as verbal, body, and audiovisual language) and how they interfere with the construction of meaningful, consistent interpretations. Finally, I investigate the phenomenon of ineffability, in its theory and practice, by drawing a parallel between mystical experiences and Beneian performances.

Bene's works are based on the demolition of the common functions of codes and their traditional stylistic features and devices. His theatre negates the written text as the fulcrum of the show insofar as any play script, having lost its sense of immediacy, is "already dead." Bene abhors the traditional theatre, which revives written literary

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texts and offers a weakened version of them. On the contrary, he aims to give birth to *il teatro dell'irrappresentabile* ("the unperformable theatre"), where unpredictable and incommunicable theatrical acts take place by systematically violating the integrity of scenic illusion. The texts on which each work is based are completely altered and turned into "critical essays" rather than expressions of a new interpretation. Such essays are critical adaptations or, in Derridean terms, respectful countersignatures, which, in order to be inaugural, need a partial betrayal of the original work (*Acts* 69). Accordingly, Bene asserts that,

> non è legittimo mettere in scena i classici, […] erano grandissimi poeti. […] Ma mettere in scena oggi il loro teatro, comunque lo si "rivisiti" o lo si "riscriva", significa cadere nell'equivoco.
> (Bartalotta 13)
> (It is not legitimate to stage classical authors, […] [since] they were notable poets. […] The attempt to stage their theatre nowadays – no matter how one re-writes or represents it – can only result in misunderstandings.)[2]

In other words, to avoid re-presentation of the original work is crucial. However, the only way to stage something original is to transform already existent works instead of creating completely unedited works (which would still be contaminated by logocentrism).

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida aims to demonstrate the crisis of Western philosophy, which from Plato to Heidegger has allotted the utmost importance to oral speech to the detriment of writing's autonomy. Spoken language has been considered a vehicle of presence and consciousness – or a living presence of consciousness to itself (self-consciousness), since consciousness identifies itself with the sound of voice, with the act of speaking. The Platonic concept of consciousness can be described as an inner silent voice, whose resonance would allow man to acquire self-awareness. Hence, Western philosophy proves to be "phonocentric" and metaphysical.

The critical point debated by the French philosopher is the relationship between φωνή *(phonè)* and writing. In his view, Western philosophy has been founded on this dualism, the internal spiritual expression (the place of truth) and the corporeal expression, the dualism of the word's meaning and its material component. But Saussure's linguistics, which describes every sign as formed by the associative link between its intrinsic components (signifier and Signified), underlines that the ensemble of "s" and "S" are both differential systems, and that even their relationship is differential. As a result, we come across an aporia: one needs to possess a signifier to articulate a meaningful word (and even to conceive the idea of a particular object), but, at the same time, one should already know the meaning (Signified) of that word to deter-

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[2] English translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

mine the appropriate signifier, whose reverberation makes the expression and the communication of the signified possible. Thus, the "line of demarcation" between "s" and "S" is impossible to define because of its continuous oscillatory motion.

This line is what Derrida calls *différance*, which is both the essential condition of the possibility of saying and something that can neither be said nor identified. Every "attempt to say" is perpetually deferred and in this moment the speaker inevitably encounters the arche-writing – that is the trace of a trace, the untraceable absent origin that makes language possible and present. From this realization, Derrida infers that no full meaning is possible. Carlo Sini clarifies that arche-writing is the invasion of the act of writing into φωνή, an act of writing which precedes speech; there is no speech before writing and we speak as written texts (*La fenomenologia*). Therefore, the speaker, as well as the writer, is inscribed in an original arche-trace which "speaks" before him/her by endlessly deferring the meaning.

Carmelo Bene seems to agree with the main assertions of this philosophical position, albeit coming to a different conclusion. He agrees that man is the prisoner of langua-ge. In fact he claims that linguistic experience is something impossible to define. If one tries, one will reach the unsolvable and insurmountable impasse of defining the nature of language through language. When man presumes to manipulate language, then he realizes that the content of his speech is inevitably filtered and distorted by the linguistic code.

This is where Bene and Derrida start to diverge. The French philosopher concludes that *différance* operates at the origin of language: it is "something which was never spoken and which is nothing other than writing itself" (*OG* 44). In the difference between speech and writing, the cancellation of ἀρχή (*arché*) – the deferral from the origin – becomes manifest. Such discovery about the nature of language leaves its discoverer nothing but the haunting remark about the "ineradicable presence" of *différance* (arche-trace). S/he can only perform the paradoxical aphorism, "[…] what cannot be said above all must not be silenced, but written" (*The Post Card* 194), which Derrida takes from Wittgenstein, overturning it in the opposite sense in *Envois*.

On the contrary, in Bene's view, artistic creation can elude the metaphysical trap of logocentrism. Bene seeks a primordial φωνή, prior to any dialectic, logical system or code, even before the mediation of rational subjectivity. Indeed, Bene contends that every real creative action springs out from the suspension of thought and the emptying of the mind, which allow the performer to transcend the limitation of language and the obstruction of subjectivity. "What cannot be said above all must not be silenced," but said by an anti-language capable of *saying the unsayable*. In the light of the inani-ty of every semantic code, the Italian actor intends to revive an unknown Voice, new and age old at the same time, a pre-Euripidean and pre-Platonic sound, able to escape from the tyranny of "phono-logo-centric" language. It is the "Voice" that Agamben mentions in his criticism of the Derridean concept of metaphysics:

Although we should certainly pay homage to Derrida as the thinker who has identified with the greatest rigor – developing Lévinas' concept of the trace and Heidegger's concept of difference – the original status of the *gramma* and of the signifier in our culture, it is also true that he believed he had opened the way to the surpassing of metaphysics, while in truth he merely brought the fundamental problem of metaphysics to light. For metaphysics is not simply the primacy of the voice over the *gramma*. If metaphysics is that reflection that places the voice as origin, it is also true that this voice is, from the beginning, conceived as removed, as Voice. To identify the horizon of metaphysics simply in that supremacy of the *phonè*, and then to believe in one's power to overcome this horizon through the *gramma*, is to conceive of metaphysics without its coexistent negativity. Metaphysics is always already grammatology and this is *fundamentology* in the sense that the *gramma* (or the Voice) functions as the negative ontological foundation. (*Language and Death* 39)

According to Bene, this is the echo of the archaic Voice, never heard before, out of time and coming from an elsewhere that has never been. It is the echo of a prenatal condition. Bene, who yearns for the contemplation of this "primal void," aspires to stage "the unthinkable," the "life of the immediate": it is a flow of mysterious echoes and sounds that can be generated through the overcoming of the logic development of the plot, upsetting the chronological perception of time and demolishing the barriers of language.

It is necessary to clarify that the previously mentioned Beneian "critical essays" are not acts of writing but new plays or films derived from original works of other authors. Many of his theatrical, cinematographic and audiovisual works restage Shakespeare's dramas, but they do not represent the original plots which are radically modified. By destroying conventional narratives, Bene creates a-temporal and a-historical "artistic events." Many parts of Shakespeare's scripts are expunged, some characters are eliminated, others lose their identity and the sense of their role. The characters' discomfort also affects their ability to communicate with each other: words become surreal sonic reverberations, so that dialogues are incomprehensible and the whole meaning of plays progressively disappears.

In the light of this process of alteration, in the essay *Un manifesto di meno* (*One Manifesto Less*, 1978), dedicated to the Italian actor, Gilles Deleuze considers Bene's oeuvre as a theatre of subtraction (*Sovrapposizioni* 86). It represents a striking example of a minor theatre that rejects the institutionalized forms of representation and thinking with a minor use of language (95), which systematically denies the conventional codes of verbal language.

The irresoluble antithesis between the written text – emblem of temporality and memory – and the "immemorial Voice" – emblem of the epiphany of the a-temporal primordiality – calls for an innovative technical stratagem: *la scrittura di scena*, which could be translated as "writing on the scene." This process reduces the prominence of the dramatic text and relegates it to a secondary role: it is no

longer the necessary tool, just one of the tools, only a scenic device. The structure of the text is destabilized by omissions, cuts, transpositions, and interpolations of other works, and its meaning is manipulated and overturned. Bene remarks that *la scrittura di scena* is "un levare di scena, un sottrarre, un amputare pezzi dell'opera originaria, e un aggiungere evocando quelle zone testuali estromesse dall'opera" ("both a process of subtraction, which maims the original text, and a process of addition, consisting in evocating the occulted possibilities of the work;" Saba 22). With regard to such an alteration envisioned by Bene, Gilles Deleuze underscores: "In every aspect, truth is a matter of production, not of adequation. It is a matter of *genitality* [that is, the potential of the mind to engender the act of thinking in thought; *author's note*], not of innateness or reminiscence. […] To ground is to metamorphose" (*Difference* 192). Furthermore, Deleuze notes that the operation of variation and violation of the conventional rules of representation stimulates unexpected proliferations (*Sovrapposizioni* 86). He is persuaded that Bene's performances are not a result of interpretation – in the sense of a symbolic system overlapping the original text – but derive from a subtraction of sense. By denying the narrated to the narration, Bene allows new expressive potentials to emerge. Deleuze argues that "non c'è bisogno di un Amleto in più, ma di un Amleto sottratto a se stesso, che è come dire un Amleto in meno" ("it is not necessary to have one more Hamlet, but a Hamlet subtracted from himself, that is the same as saying one Hamlet less" 85).

However, Lorenzo Chiesa convincingly argues that, while Deleuze's reading is undoubtedly insightful, its political implications eventually misinterpret Bene's ποίησις (*poiesis*). Deleuze is correct in regarding Bene's theatre as "the anti-historical theatre of the immediate" and identifying "subtraction with the method by means of which Bene's theatre achieves the suspension of actions and the subsequent emergence of acts" (*A Theatre of Subtractive Extinction* 179,180). Nonetheless, Chiesa continues, the misunderstanding arises since,

> Deleuze reads Bene through a vitalist notion of subtraction, one that aims to achieve an "intensive variation of affects" as the "one and the same continuum" by excluding any negation whatsoever. This kind of subtraction where every elimination and amputation always already unleashes a proliferation of "potentialities of becoming" without any intervening negative gap is as such inapplicable to Bene. As a matter of fact, one of the most recurrent motives in Bene's writings is the idea that the human being is an excremental living abortion.[…] For Bene, the individual body exclusively pursues its de-individuation since life is nothing other than continual putrefaction. [Therefore] [his] theatre […] that undermines the field of representation by subtracting itself from it intends to promote the "freezing of the species. (181)

Chiesa further illustrates his point by stressing that,

> For Deleuze, variation must never cease: as he points out in *One Less Manifesto*, "it is necessary that variation never stops varying itself"; Deleuze thus indirectly admits that subtractive variation is after all a form of endless repetition. On the contrary, for Bene, variation eventually stops at the point of extinction: repetition as subtraction is only possible within the domain of the signifier and its theatrical distortion. […] Bene attempts to elaborate an anti-representational theatre where creation is *only* possible as subtraction toward *de*-individuating extinction. (182-183)

Having clarified this, we can now see how the rejection of the literary text is followed by the refusal of the "theatre of the subject," toward the very disappearance of individuality. In Beneian plays and films there are not characters but just actors' bodies, namely, "parti integranti della partitura audiovisiva, consistenti in un concatenato insieme di voci, parole, rumori, sguardi, gesti, colori, luci, vesti" ("integral parts of the whole audiovisual score which consists in a harmonized ensemble of voices, words, noises, looks, gestures, colors, lights, dresses" 21). The emptying of textual meaning and the annulment of the concept of identity are not goals, but critical steps to achieve artistic expressions, which Bene considers an epiphany of the primordial.

To this end, it is necessary to allow the suspension of thought, as to show that supposed meaningful words are just pure sounds. In the film *Amleto di Carmelo Bene, da Shakespeare a Laforgue*, this process is completed through technology and the actor's technique. Bene conjures up a sophisticated sound instrumentation – a system of integrated phonic technologies (microphones, acoustic boxes, monitor, audio spies managed by an electronic computer) – which allows dubbing, resonance, and amplification of the actors' voices (19). Thanks to this technological support, the actor can optimize his vocal ability. As a matter of fact, the complex system of amplifications allows the sonorous expansion of the voice and its objectivation, due to a sort of "Hindu vocal technique" that Bene has experimented and practiced.

It is crucial to remark that Brahman religion, since its dawn, assigned sacred value to "the word," especially "the spoken word" (*vāc/vacas/vacana*) (Radicchi 55). That is confirmed from the etymology of the word *Brahmans* (*Brāhmaana*), the name of the priestly caste members. The term derives from the combination of the word *Bráhman* – which denotes any Vedic verse – and the monosyllable *Om,* which, as symbolic code of the inexpressible (*Aśabda-Bráhman*), introduces invocations. This aspect fascinated Bene, who learnt the afore-cited vocal technique. It is based on a particular use of the diaphragm, which makes it possible to produce a notable quantity of microtones. In this way, the actor emphasizes his tone-color as his vocal spectrum. That does not mean that vocal volume and strength increase. Rather, the voice of the speaker is characterized by an expansion of its dynamics. Furthermore, the vocal emission becomes atypical: the vocal cords are kept firm by uttering palatal notes, in complete apnea.

Such a technique gives the auditors the impression that the actor's voice does not come from the mouth, as if it were not emitted from the oral cavity. The phenomenon can be described as a sort of ventriloquism, a voice without a body, a dispossessed voice. Only by using this vocal utterance can the performer profitably amplify the natural voice and extract an "extra-human" sound from it. This vocal, technical, and technological system of amplification is defined by Bene as a "counter-technique of voice," which is essential for the approach of the void and the flowering of the "uncreated."

With the adoption of this "counter-technique," the actors' bodies become "automatic machines" and they only maintain an organic appearance. The amplification increases the perception that body and voice are separated. Varied games of sounds interrupt the natural correspondence between characters and their own voice; the latter can speak dissociated from the body, refusing to give expression to the labial movement of the actors and leaving them aphonic. The single voice can be replaced by another voice (previously associated to a different character) or by a choir of multiple voices. In such a case, the afore-mentioned "variation" concept is to be intended as a continuous word inflection produced by a polyphonic voice. Not only the phenomenon does affect the intonation; it also concerns syntax and meaning, and even the extra-linguistic sphere: actions, passions (*Sovrapposizioni* 96). Variation, as the tool of the voice's emancipation, is the prerequisite to activate the phenomenon of *décalage* ("time lag"), that is, the asynchrony between the body language made of gestures and the sonorous language made of words.

A further evolution of such oppositions destroys any residual possibility of representation and meaningful communication. In the above-mentioned Hamlet film, body and words become totally independent entities: the audiovisual idiosyncrasy between body and voice creates "an optic image of sound" and "an oral image of the body" (Saba 31). Indeed the voice, now separated from body, almost resembles a visual perception, acquiring "tone colors." The diction of every word seems to belong to a melody that, like a score, leads different tone-color ranges. On the other hand, the visible image of the body assumes a language endowed with own morphemes and syntax (interrupted gestures, jammed actions, body disarticulations). Thereby, the ear is not the only passageway of listening: the eye has to practice over the vulgar visibility, in order to listen to this bodily orality. Bene declares:

> Non solo l'orecchio è ascolto, ma l'occhio è ascolto. [...] Qualcuno mi domanda: "ma perché lo giri anche per la televisione? [...] La televisione si vede!" Non è vero, si ascolta: una poggiatura del capo, una frantumazione del gesto, una disarticolazione del corpo. Deleuze mi ricorda che noi *siamo* un corpo: non è vero che *abbiamo* un corpo, in quanto noi non siamo. Il teatro è questo dis-essere, è questo malessere d'essere *osceno* in scena. Il teatro è quanto è *osceno* – dall'etimo *o-σκηνή*, cioè fuor di scena – pur essendo in scena: quando mi si vede in scena, mi si sta ascoltando in realtà.

("Carmelo Bene." *Fuoriorario*)
(We listen with the ears, but one can also listen with the eyes. [...] Someone asks me: "Why do you shoot television films? [..] One can see television!" It is not true, it can be listened to: a movement of head, a shattering of gesture, a disarticulation of body. Deleuze reminds me that we *are* a body: it is not true that we *have* a body, because we are not [a being but a becoming; *author's note*]. Theatre embodies this dis-being, this discomfort of being *obscene* on the scene. Theatre is what is *obscene* – from the etymon *o-σκηνή*, which means "outside the scene" – even though it happens on the scene: when someone sees me on the scene, they are listening to me actually.)

Both visual and acoustic languages, upon their becoming autonomous, obey the same law: the rule of obstacle: "Per essere in balia dei significanti, per frequentare la lettura come non ricordo, bisogna prepararsi a finire nella macchina attoriale. Bisogna cioè complicarsi la vita, crearsi una serie di handicap, a dispetto del testo" ("In order to be under the rule of signifiers, and make reading an experience of forgetfulness, it is necessary that the actor becomes an 'actor machine.' It is necessary to make things more complicated, to create a series of handicaps, in spite of the text" *Sovrapposizioni* 100).

As a consequence, not only are the voice and the body dissociated and use unrelated expression systems, but each system also loses its logical coherency, so that the voice turns into an incomprehensible a-logical vocal emission, while body movements are perceived as awkward parodies of actions. The body is troubled, slackened, as it is hindered by loose and cumbersome costumes. On the other hand, the lines uttered by the characters, even when they can be understood, do not follow any logical order, and lose therefore their full meaning. Words progressively become *flatus vocis,* which is simple reverb beyond their signified.

In addition, the relationship between vision and sound reflects and multiplies the relation between body and voice. The fixity of cameras characterizes the show. Cameras do not investigate the space, which vanishes conceptually as well as visually. They do show and record the rhythmic appearance and disappearance of images. Space is therefore denied and the volumes are explicitly forced to respect the dimensions of the screen: when the bodies try to move, in order to affirm their dynamic nature, they are physically expelled from the shot which cuts them out through a process of *décadrage* ("off-centering"). The actors must severely limit their movements: they always face the same point while performing in front of the television camera. The stationary shots never shoot them from the back, in profile or in three-quarter view, to the point that they give the impression of entering the camera's field of view as if they were filming themselves not to be cut off the frame.

This continuously sought frontal look is not only the heritage of theatrical performances, but also something more: the actors' empty bodies appear when their dispossessed voices call them from a visual and existential elsewhere. The vocal sound

summons bodies to the fleeting apparition and then seems to control their "apraxic" gestures, before bodies suddenly disappear into the screen again. The flow of images follows a specific musical rhythm.

Hence, as the vision inexorably vanishes, the editing is subordinated to the sound and the audio becomes the fulcrum of the film. That is also inferred by the analysis of the technical strategy. The microphones are hidden so close to the actors that they emphasize at the most the quality of the acoustic effects. In a first phase, the actors perform the dialogues which are recorded as audio tracks.

Secondly, the sound, lifeblood of the whole process, controls both the composition of the images and the shooting phases by establishing times and giving voice to the actors: they are voiceless marionettes who follow the playback of their lost voices, by "singing" with the body, as in a ballet. Seemingly moved by a sound coming from elsewhere, they are en-chanted as snakes, that is to say, "chanted within" and subdued by a hypnotic Voice which gives rhythm to their somnambulant gestures. During the shootings, the actors experience the same feeling of estrangement felt by their characters. There is no pretense, there are no shortcuts. The strategy works so that the actors and their characters seem like incorporeal boxes of resonance of an unknown sound, extraneous to them.

As a result, the audio is always acousmatic.[3] In the case of the soundtrack music, the sound is non-diegetic (sound-over) – i.e., a sound that originates from outside the narrative, a sound "whose source is neither visible on the screen nor has been implied to be present in the action."[4] Only the audience can hear it. On the other side, the sound of the characters' voices, normally sound-in – "a sound presented as originated from a source within the diegetic world and within the frame"[5] – seems to be a constant sound-off, meaning a sound belonging to the diegesis but coming from outside the frame.

 This way, when we listen to the voices of characters who are present in the frame, oddly the sound of their voice does not seem to originate from their oral cavity: the voice does not belong to them; it is only an anomalous phonic vibration which echoes meaningless signifiers. In both cases we are dealing with un-visualized sounds, never sound-in. The sound and the temporal dimension only emerge from the screen and that is confirmed by the absence of camera movements whose presence would give the perception of spatiality.

Finally, the rhythm of sound controls the vision, which progressively becomes impossible: when the screen darkens the images, the vision is reduced to "absolute blackness," a dark presence, which is the shade of the incumbent absence. Otherwise,

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[3] That is, it refers to a sound that is heard without its source being seen.
[4] "Diegetic and non-diegetic sounds." Filmsound.org. n.p. Web. n.d.
[5] "Diegetic and non-diegetic sounds." Filmsound.org. n.p. Web. n.d

the vision becomes blinding in a "total white," in the dis-veiled absence which takes over the screen. The actors' bodies are enslaved to the rhythm engraved by the play-back. They are no more than dazzling surfaces able to reflect the lights as real points of audio-visual connection and disconnection. In fact, the viewer's eye becomes tired and exhausted and is denied any possibility of watching and seeing. This entails the dissolution of both the subjectivity of audience and characters on the screen, as well as the disappearance of the images and even of the audio-visual language. The sound spreads over the ruins of the vision.

In synthesis, Bene's film is a claustrophobic labyrinth for any effort to logically grasp its sense, which, as in a mirror house, is endlessly deferred by the continuous drifts of meaning. Indeed, no witnessing of this artistic event is possible, because it is an a-temporal and a-logical emanation of the primordial, where everything is reabsor-bed in the whirlwind of the eternal return. Man can only place himself in the power of "the signifiers," lapsing into a listening experience.

The spectators become part of a ritual that dissolves the separation between the audience and the actors, both experiencing an ecstatic rapture. What the audience listens to is no longer an actor's voice pronouncing texts. They rather hear a "body-machine" which "is spoken to" by the unconscious through a "reading-forgetfulness" performed on stage and then recorded as an external voice. The technical process increases the perception of an extraneous voice speaking through the actors' bodies. This atypical reading does not serve the purpose of remembering the content. On the contrary, it enables the spectator and performer alike to forget the meaning of the text and empty their memory. In the end, the amnesia they both experience rescues them from the cage of chronological time. As Carlo Sini observes in the postface to the book interview, *Un dio assente* (*An Absent God*, 2006) by Carmelo Bene and Umberto Artioli, there is no distinction between memory and oblivion, since

> ricordare, riportarsi nel cuore delle cose, significa innanzitutto averle perdute [...]. Ricordarle è appunto l'ammissione della loro perdita, e di poterne celebrare solo l'eco di un suono, il soffio di una vibrazione. (171)
> (to remember, to return to the heart of things, means above all to have lost them […]. To remember them is then the admission of their loss and of being able to celebrate them only as an echo of a sound, a wisp of a vibration.)

Moreover, in *Idea of Prose* Agamben detects the same nexus between memory and forgetfulness:

> In this case, the memory that brings back to us the thing forgotten is itself forgetful of it and this *forgetfulness is its light*. It is, however, from this that its burden of longing comes: an elegiac note vibrates so enduringly in the depths of every human memory that, at the limit, a memory that recalls nothing is the strongest memory. […] It is not that what we have experienced and then forgotten now returns imperfectly to consciousness, but rather

that we enter at that point into what has never been, into forgetfulness as the home of consciousness. […] Dreams and memories plunge life into the dragon's blood of the word and in this way make it invulnerable to memory. The immemorable, which skips from memory to memory without itself ever coming to mind, is, properly speaking, the unforgettable. This unforgettable oblivion is language, the human word. (*Idea of Prose* 67-68)

Forgetfulness is a necessary step for the epiphany of "primordial events," which occur when an artist gives up on the rational pretension to investigate the mystery of reality by adopting the limited human language. The sound of the actor's voice becomes a resonance of an absence: it is a dispossessed voice, an "extra-vocality" not belonging to any subject, who disappears. The neutral, the *ça*, subdues the subject, and the spirit of the inexpressible takes possession of the self. The latter is just a medium and the actor deliberately submits to being spoken by the primal Vibration. According to Deleuze, actors and spectators of this unique and singular event achieve the state of "essere stranier[i] nella propria lingua" ("being foreigner[s] within [their] own language" *Sovrapposizioni* 97), only to become lost in the inaugural sound of the Uncreated, beyond the boundaries of logocentric language.

As Sini points out, this is none other than "l'esposizione alla straniante esperienza del vuoto" ("the exposure to the alienating experience of the void" *Un dio assente* 167). In this regard, Antonio Attisani clarifies that the self-annihilating purpose of Bene's artistic praxis does not carry any nihilistic connotations; rather, it derives from "[l'] idea eckhartiana della realtà come «deserto» e dell'esistenza umana come eccedenza e incidente della storia naturale" ("the eckhartian notions of reality as a «desert» and of human existence as a surplus and an accident of natural history" *Attore del deserto* 8). Artioli emphasizes such a connection between Beneian aesthetic experiments and mystical trance by arguing that,

> Non abitare in nessun luogo, fabbricare il deserto, sparire come creatura; la vertigine dissociatoria che caratterizza la scena di Bene è l'equivalente della notte oscura dei mistici, la notte in cui ci si affida inermi al *fascinans* e al *tremendum* dell'esperienza interiore. (*Opere* 1500)
>
> (To reside nowhere, to create *one's own desert*, to disappear as a creature; the vertigo of dissociation that characterizes Bene's scene is the equivalent of the dark night experienced by mystics, the night when one gives himself to the *fascinans* and the *tremendum* of inner experience.)

In point of fact, the ecstasy of mystics is not reached through a hypertrophy of thought. On the contrary: through meditation the great masters practice the suspension of thought. The reference – cited by Bene himself in *Un dio assente* – is indeed from the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, the 13th/14th-century Dominican friar, theologian, and philosopher known for his ascetic visions. The father of German mysticism believed that the Christian truth cannot be expressed by the dogmas of

science, which, if anything, can only be an exterior and symbolic representation of Christianity. Revealed truth lies within man, protected in the unexplored depths of his soul. We must set aside the sterile formulae of erudition, as it is not so much a question of knowledge but of belief, unveiling the truth that lies within the human interiority. Being and knowing are an inseparable whole, merging the knower into the known.

Thus, knowledge of God takes place only when man himself is (in) God – when He lives and acts within him. The soul is God to the extent it knows Him. It is certainly not a rational knowing, but "an unspeakable contemplation." When a man contemplates God, God contemplates Himself within man, who in this way becomes identified with divinity. And even each created thing is nothing other than God in its continual self-transformation. When man, however, wants to have a "where," a "when," and finally an "I," he betrays the structural essence inscribed in every creature.

Here the influence of Eastern millenarian speculation can be seen, where individuality – or better, the affirmation of self – is a sin, an arrogant affront to divinity, as the Greek ὕβρις (*hỳbris*).The path of redemption requires that the creature ceases "the will to be," so as to repair the fractured relationship with its creator. It follows that only contemplation has merit – every action is deleterious, because it presupposes individuality. Mysticism preaches the "trampling" of one's own being, renunciation of the will, to become pure receptivity. Contemplation and meditation are the bridges that lead to the ecstasy of knowledge of *verbum sine verbo*, Word before words, something inaudible and inconceivable, which for the Christian mystic is God.

Yet, the method of realizing this in theatre, cinema, and television is, according to Bene, the counter-technique of voice, because the artist cannot wait for ecstasy, as mystics are allowed to do in meditation. It follows that the objective is the passage from "le sans action*"* ("*the actionless")* portrayed by the actor to "la sensation" ("feeling") experienced by the spectator, who hears the un-dramatized drama inside the actor's body – the place of hearing. Or, as Bene writes, "l'interiore dell'attore si precipita nell'interiore dello spettatore" ("the interiority of the actor precipitates into the interiority of the spectator" Bèghin 86). The sensitive display of *le sans action* pushes the spectator to the intuition of a pristine act, where thought is extraneous, to the point of delirium, in an osmotic, nearly ecstatic, interconnection.

The "extra-vocality" makes this possible, as there is no longer a speech, not even so much as the *verbum sine verbo* of Eckhart, but the musicality of the echo of silence, which surpasses the word itself and boycotts even the most embryonic forms of language, since this inaugural Sound is the event of language itself. Agamben elaborates the concept further by explaining that Voice (before words) is

> the signification of the voice that is heard […] as it is conceived by him who does not know its signification and thinks only according to the movement of the soul, which seeks to represent the signification of the voice that is perceived. No longer the experience of

mere sound and not yet the experience of a meaning, this "thought of the voice alone" (*cogitatio secundum vocem solam*) opens thinking to an originary logical dimension that, indicating the pure taking place of language without any determinate event of meaning, shows that there is still a possibility of thought beyond meaningful propositions. The most original logical dimension at issue in revelation is therefore not that of meaningful speech but rather that of a voice that, without signifying anything, signifies signification itself. (It is in this sense that we should understand those thinkers […] who stated that universal essences were only *flatus vocis*. Here *flatus vocis* is not mere sound but, rather […] voice as pure indication of an event of language […]). This gift of the voice by language is God, the divine word. The name of God, that is, the name that names language, is therefore a word without meaning.[6] (*Potentialities* 42)

By reducing words to vague "transparent" sounds Bene makes the ineffability of the linguistic event emerge. In Bene's film the lines of the script lose any meaningful value and become elements of a "verbal score" aimed at echoing the musicality of the primordial Reverberation, which is antecedent to any meaningful expression. The sovereignty of the "unrelated instant" remains, and its phonic emanations resound immemorially into empty visual shapes and disembodied images. For Bene, the melody of things is the yearned-for goal of the essence imprisoned inside each person: man is condemned by his contradictory nature to be an impotent fragment of everything; and yet his lowly being mixes with the infinite, in the painful consciousness of his state.

For this reason the discomfort of existence and the wound that cannot be healed are the viaticum for the return to the harmony of the song of the *anima mundi*. It is necessary for the human to sharpen his own uneasiness, push himself to the limit of dis-grace, neutralize himself, reducing himself to a hollow object. The void creates a space that is free from the vulgarity of the image, a removed space that exists as lack, longing, and becomes a virginal non-place, where the rhythmic harmony of the immaterial can reverberate.

Nevertheless, there is no satisfaction of desire – the void is not filled. Quite the opposite: what occurs is the death of desire within the dizziness of the dissolution of existence. The "beyond" for Bene has no salvific significance, because the existential wound is not a defect of the human being, which can be healed by divinity. Between man and the human existential wound there is the defective man. His existence should not be healed but freed from the disease of being-in-the-world (Heidegger's *Da-sein*) which infects man. Here the wound is no longer simply suffering, but becomes the passage through which one loses one's self in the ecstasy of the abyss.

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[6] Agamben also explains that "in the terms of contemporary logic, we can then say that the sense of revelation is that if there is a metalanguage, it is not a meaningful discourse but rather a pure, insignificant voice. That there is language is as certain as it is incomprehensible, and this incomprehensibility and this certainty constitute faith and revelation" (42).

Bene's ποίησις is imbued with religious sense, but in a cosmos in which sacredness does not belong to the divinity defined by positive theology, which presumes and pretends to grasp the sense of revealed truth through rational reflection. If there is a place where Bene recognizes the aura of the sacred, it is in the act of "transhumanation" into the primeval, the epicenter of negative theology.

Apophatic theology, which has a distinguished champion in Eckhart, maintains the impossibility of comprehending the divine nature of the creator, and even more so of defining it. Man, as an imperfect creature, has the unique possibility of moving closer to God *per viam negationis*. If no attribute can be ascribed to the divine nature, which is unknowable by human intellect, then the unfeasibility of the path of knowledge becomes inevitable. Apophasis is really the negation of rationality as a tool for approaching divinity and is the choice of the contemplative way of the mystic path. One must cross the boundaries of definitions and transcend the finiteness of conclusions, to lose his own being as a creation and to reach the deific state, in which man loses himself in God, who is in the final instance the Ineffable: Nothingness and Silence.

The particular predilection Bene shows for two more mystics and Christian saints underlines the relationship between apophatic theology and his aesthetic. The first is Saint Joseph of Cupertino, 17th century Franciscan, famous for his ascetic meditations and for the phenomenon of levitation. Because of his extremely poor background and his little education (a condition which Carmelo Bene finds particularly fascinating), ignorance brought the friar the gift of extreme humility and a visceral contact with the sacred – a contact unmediated by hypertrophic thought – because ascetic ecstasy often blossoms in the unrefined "holy fool," unselfconscious and ignorant.

The second is Saint John of the Cross, 16th century theologian, author of numerous tracts and poetic essays which focus on the spiritual path of the soul toward God and in God. The path consists of three gradual phases: "purification," "illumination," and "contemplation." Bene seems to recreate this tripartition when he divides creative work into the first two preparatory moments of praxis and un-design in order to reach the third – the advent of the void. Moreover, the description of the mystical experience intensifies the link with Beneian thought: God is light, according to the Christian metaphor, but in mysticism it is also darkness. To be in the presence of the divine – dark light and luminous darkness – is the same as the visual experience of staring at the sun without protection: the excess of light blinds the eye, which can only see a dark circle. Just as in Bene's *Hamlet*, vision is darkened, and darkness is the condition for contemplation of the essential, invisible to the eyes. In *Dark Night of the Soul*, night is not a symbol of sin and perdition; rather, it is a place of salvation, and darkness is the objective correlative of the rejection of the gnoseological approach to the Mystery.

Indeed, both Bene's aesthetic and Saint John's doctrine preach the liberation of man from the ambition of understanding the ultimate reality and from the obses-

sion of ownership. In this way one reaches immaculate purity, which is necessary to unite with divinity. In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the necessity of self-denial and renouncing the will is restated and made explicit:

> In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything, Desire to have pleasure in nothing./ In order to arrive at possessing everything, Desire to possess nothing./ In order to arrive at being everything, Desire to be nothing./ In order to arrive at knowing everything, Desire to know nothing. (*Ascent* vol. I, ch. 13, pt. 11)

From this perspective (that of Saint John's *nada*), one can read Bene's exhortation to free oneself from every bond. Furthermore, Bene's philosophy even abnegates freedom itself. Attaining this (eminently eckhartian) paradoxical goal means contesting one's own inclinations, continually contradicting set plans, and denying beliefs, in order to un-design one's self in the mystery of the unexpected and enjoy the actual fading of its unintelligible bloom. Or, in Eckhart's words,

> In my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, of God's will, of all His works, and of God himself, then I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature, but I am that which I was and shall remain for evermore. […] Here, God finds no place in man, for man by his poverty wins for himself what he has eternally been and shall eternally remain. Here, God is one with the spirit, and that is the strictest poverty one can find. ("*The Strictest Poverty from the 87th Sermon*")

As Attisani maintains, Bene's praxis truly performs Eckhart's ethics and its method according to which "si incoraggia un'attività ma non si indica una direzione, si accenna al senso della conquista ma non si dà l'immagine della mèta, non si delinea un dover essere ma un fare" ("one is introduced to a practice but left with no path to follow, senses the imminence of a conquest but cannot envision any real destination, does not have to observe any prescriptive norms but is asked to act [and 'go without way'; *author's note*]" *Attore* 8). Finally, in abandonment to the unwilling will of the sea of signifiers and its currents, and at a distance from every dock on the mortifying beaches of meaning and subjectivity, CB navigates the uncharted waters of the inviolable absence of God, Being without existence, the immemorial Voice of negativity, and the subtracted Presence of Bene's art.[7]

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[7] Carmelo Bene's acronym, CB, is used to emphasize the disappearance of the subject.

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