

A Theatre of Subtractive Extinction

Bene without Deleuze

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«I'd like to be Watson. [...]
Watson doesn't understand a fuck, whenever he acts he does it at random.
He is inactive even in the action that runs him.
Being unable to enjoy the inorganic (it looks like it is not possible),
maybe Watson is the thing that has so far been able to bewitch and enchant me.
The most complete insignificance.
Have you seen the vacuous faces they foist on the various Watsons,
while all the other actors are always a bit hypertensive?
Yes, I'd like to be Watson»
Carmelo Bene

«Si proviamo con la vita
quotidiana e si vedrà!

Al lavoro del piacere
senza remora e decoro
il piacere del lavoro
basta qui sostituir!»
S.A.D.E.

1.

In the introduction to *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze singles out Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as two thinkers of repetition who have introduced radically innovative means of expression in philosophy by elaborating an anti-representational notion of movement. These authors invent a philosophy that directly proposes itself as a theatrical philosophy, a philosophy in the guise of theatre. For Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, it is a question of “producing within the [philosophical] work a movement capable of unsettling the spirit outside of all representation; it is a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition”.¹ Such movement should therefore be contrasted with Hegel’s “abstract logical” movement, a “false movement”, which is itself represented in that it dialectically relies on opposition and mediation. While Kierkegaard and Nietzsche intend to set philosophy as such in motion *as* a theatre of “immediate acts”, Hegel is unable to go beyond the much simpler idea of a philosophical theatre: he cannot

¹ G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 8, my translation.

“live”, as a philosopher, “the problem of masks [...] the inner emptiness of masks”.²

Deleuze’s interest in the anti-representational power of theatre as real movement re-emerges punctually ten years later in *One Less Manifesto* (1978), the text he dedicates to the controversial Italian dramatist Carmelo Bene. For Deleuze, Bene’s irreverent interpretations of theatre’s great figures, Shakespeare in particular, promote a theatre of “non-representation”, that is to say, “unleash [...] an always unstable non-representative force” that presents without representing, “renders a potentiality present and actual”.³ In this later article, Deleuze stresses, however, the importance of the *subtractive* method adopted by Bene’s pursuit of the real movement of anti-representational theatre. On the one hand, *Difference and Repetition* identifies the “essence” of (theatrical) movement in nothing other than repetition: “The theatre of repetition is opposed to the theatre of representation, just as movement is opposed to the concept and to the representation which refers it back to the concept”.⁴ On the other hand, *One Less Manifesto* assumes that the perpetual motion of what Deleuze repeatedly calls here “continuous variation” – also understood in terms of “lines of flight” and the “power of a becoming” – is initiated and sustained by subtraction.⁵

Deleuze observes that Bene’s adaptations invariably begin by subtracting an element from the original work they critically interpret. For instance, in his *Romeo and Juliet*, Bene does not hesitate to “neutralise” Romeo: this amputation makes Shakespeare’s original work oscillate but, at the same time, it allows Bene to develop the character of Mercutio – who dies very early on in Shakespeare. Beyond mere parody, subtraction thus paves the way to the gradual constitution *on stage* of an otherwise mostly virtual character, un-represented in and by the text. More importantly, according to Deleuze, such constitution challenges the very notion of representation inasmuch as what we witness on stage is an unrelenting process of deformation, an anamorphic movement. This is especially clear in Bene’s *S.A.D.E.*, where the prosthetic character of the slave tirelessly “seeks himself, develops himself, metamorphosizes himself, experiments with himself [...] in relation to the deficiencies and impotencies of the master”.⁶ The de-formed subjectivity of the slave – who in vain keeps on changing his dresses and masks in order to stimulate the sexual apathy of his master – is subordinated to and dependent on movement and speed. In the end, the subtractive creation of the Benian character amounts to a perpetual de-formation that avoids representation precisely insofar as it follows a line of continuous variation.

² *Ibidem.*

³ G. Deleuze, “One Less Manifesto”, in T. Murray (ed.), *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 241-242, p. 256, p. 254, my translation.

⁴ *Difference and Repetition*, p. 10.

⁵ “One Less Manifesto”, p. 247, p. 255, my translation.

⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 240.

2.

Moving from these premises, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I aim to question Deleuze's tacit replacement of repetition with subtraction as the key notion in his account of anti-representational theatre, and especially to see whether his own interpretation of this notion is appropriate to understand Bene's work. Second, I intend to problematise the way in which such a shift toward subtraction runs parallel to a *politicisation* of Bene's theatre – the title of the final and most crucial section of *One Less Manifesto* is, significantly enough, "Theatre and its Politics". Here, Deleuze seems more interested in investigating philosophically the politics of theatre rather than focusing on theatre as philosophy and philosophy as theatre as he did in *Difference and Repetition* – where his main concern was "a theatre of the future" that is at the same time "a new philosophy".⁷ I shall argue that Deleuze politicises Bene's theatre in an untenable way; I shall also show how an analysis of the philosophical presuppositions of such a misleading political interpretation throws some light on the reasons why Deleuze shrinks away from the notion of repetition in *One Less Manifesto*.

It is doubtless the case that, in *One Less Manifesto*, Deleuze returns to theatre in order to develop his earlier critique of dialectical opposition as mediation and dwell on the notion of anti-representational "immediate acts". According to him, "Bene's theatre never develops itself in relations of [...] opposition", it shuns the representation of conflict, "regardless of its 'toughness' and 'cruelty'"; any relation of opposition would indeed necessarily lead him back to a traditional "system of power and domination".⁸ Such system is precisely what Bene politically subtracts from the stage: or better, it is that which in being subtracted supports relations of variation that are anti-oppositional. The pre-emptive neutralisation of master characters, the representatives of power, causes the emergence of a continuous variation in minor characters – epitomised by the slave in *S.A.D.E.*. More concretely, this anti-oppositional variation corresponds to the continuous hindrances by which Bene's handicapped minor characters are defined in the act of their de-formative creation (for instance, "costumes limiting movement instead of aiding it, props thwarting change of place, gestures either too stiff or excessively 'soft'").⁹ We could argue that continuous variation – for instance, "the costume that one takes off and puts back on, that falls off and is put back on"¹⁰ – is itself repetitive, that repetition as real anti-oppositional movement still silently informs Deleuze's reading of Bene. As such, the notion of subtractive continuous variation would be nothing else than a specification of the "multiplication" of the "superimposed masks" with which, according to *Difference and Repetition*, Nietzsche fills in the "inner emptiness" of the "theatrical space" of subjectivity.¹¹ The "gesture in perpetual and positive imbalance" that, for Deleuze, effectively captures

⁷ *Difference and Repetition*, p. 8.

⁸ "One Less Manifesto", pp. 248-249, my translation.

⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 248.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ *Difference and Repetition*, p. 9.

continuous variation in Bene's theatre, clearly echoes the "gestures which develop before organised bodies, masks before faces, spectres and phantoms before characters" of what *Difference and Repetition* calls a "theatre of repetition".¹² Having said this, we should nevertheless bear in mind that Deleuze's discussion of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in the very same introductory pages explicitly deems repetition to be incompatible with the operation of subtraction, understood here in terms of extraction. Quite bluntly, for Deleuze, one must not subtract/extract anything from repetition – repetition as "something new" – given that "only contemplation, the spirit that contemplates from the outside, 'extracts'"; one should "act", not subtract/extract, if one wishes to undo representation.¹³ Without entering into the manner in which these passages could hint at the presence of a presumed turning point in Deleuze's thought, I would like on the contrary to further complicate this apparent inconsistency assuming – beyond terminological confusion – a substantial continuity in his work of the decade 1968-1978. It is precisely because, as we have just seen, we could easily speak of an anti-representational theatre of subtractive repetition and repetitive subtraction with regard to *One Less Manifesto* that Deleuze's avoidance of the term repetition – never mentioned in the entire article – becomes all the more intriguing and significant.¹⁴

3.

Among the virtues of Deleuze's interpretation of Bene's theatre is the way in which it characterises it as an anti-historical theatre of the immediate.¹⁵ For Bene, what is immediate – the time *aion* – is the act that suspends the actions of history – the time *kronos*. Theatre must be anti-representational insofar as it needs to recuperate the anti-historical elements of history. As Bene has it, "the history we live, the history that has been imposed on us, is nothing other than the result of the other histories that this very history had to oust in order to affirm itself".¹⁶ The principal task of theatre is therefore to "wage war" on history. Theatre must stage the "historical possibilities" that are unmediated by history, and these may well include the potentialities of a written text (for instance, the life of Mercutio). Such staging is literally ob-scene, Bene says, since it lies "outside the scene", outside the representations of official history and its literature, in spite of being materially put on stage.¹⁷ In other words, Bene's theatre intends to remain non-performable [*irrapresentabile*], and in this way avoid representation, while nevertheless creat-

¹² *Ibidem.*, p. 10; "One Less Manifesto", p. 248.

¹³ *Difference and Repetition*, p. 6, my translation.

¹⁴ In other words, I shall henceforth deliberately leave aside the fact that, in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze uses the verb "to extract" [*soutirer*] to signify a notion of subtraction that is mutually exclusive with the notion of subtraction as expounded in *One Less Manifesto*, and focus exclusively on the way in which subtraction/extraction is understood in the latter text.

¹⁵ See "One Less Manifesto", p. 242, p. 254.

¹⁶ A. Attisani, M. Dotti (eds.), *Bene crudele* (Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa, 2004), p. 90; see also pp. 20-21.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 90.

ing a performance [*spettacolo*].¹⁸ Deleuze is thus correct in emphasising that Bene's characters – first and foremost the slave in *S.A.D.E.* – are in continuous variation precisely because they do not “master” their role on stage. “The slave hinders and impedes himself in the continuous series of his own metamorphoses, because he must not *master* his role of *slave*”.¹⁹ As Bene himself has it in his introduction to *S.A.D.E.*, far from being a parody of Hegel, this play “mortifies”, “liquidates and un-puts on stage” the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave.²⁰ In not mastering himself as slave, the slave *does not represent* “the reverse image of the master, nor his replica or contradictory identity”.²¹ Like Deleuze's philosophy, which condemns Hegelian creation since it “betrays and distorts the immediate”²² to the extent that – as summarised by Peter Hallward – it “concedes too much to history”,²³ Bene's theatre of immediate acts against actions refuses dialectical mediation and the notion of history that goes with it.

A further merit of Deleuze's reading lies in his identification of subtraction with the method by means of which Bene's theatre achieves the suspension of actions and the subsequent emergence of acts. As we have seen, Deleuze tracks down the subtractive method in Bene's pre-emptive elimination, or neutralisation, of the representatives of power (and history) – for example, the master's impotence that supports the basic plot of *S.A.D.E.*. In the introductions to his plays as well as in his numerous theoretical writings, Bene repeatedly acknowledges that, for him, staging a performance corresponds to a “removing” from the scene.²⁴ He even often uses the very term “subtraction”: for instance, he concedes that “a man of theatre who practices anti-theatre [...] subtracts”.²⁵ Similarly, what is truly ob-scene in theatre is “by definition what subtracts itself from the concept”, *in primis* the historical concept of stage representation;²⁶ in other words, the staging of the anti-historical elements of history always depends on subtraction.²⁷ Having said this, the problem is that, according to Bene, subtraction should aim at what he succinctly defines as an “intestinal and visceral zero”.²⁸ Is this subtraction toward the inorganic, which I will call a subtraction toward *extinction*, compatible with Deleuze's use of the notion of subtraction in *One Less Manifesto*? I would suggest that it is not, despite Bene's display of unconditional admiration for Deleuze in general – “Gilles has been the greatest thinking machine of this century”²⁹ – and his grasp of theatre

¹⁸ See *Ibidem.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ “One Less Manifesto”, p. 248, my translation; see also p. 240.

²⁰ C. Bene, *S.A.D.E.*, in *Opere*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2002), p. 275. See also C. Bene, G. Dotto, *Vita di Carmelo Bene* (Milan: Bompiani, 1998), p. 320.

²¹ “One Less Manifesto”, p. 240; see also p. 248.

²² *Difference and Repetition*, p. 10.

²³ P. Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 100.

²⁴ C. Bene, *S.A.D.E.*, p. 275.

²⁵ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 149.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 31.

²⁷ See *Ibidem.*, pp. 234-235.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 149.

²⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 326.

in particular – “the author of *Difference and Repetition* is *naturaliter* a lucid connoisseur of theatre”.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³²

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: “Life ends there where it begins. Everything is already written in the fetid state, not the foetal one. What remains is only flesh that is going off”.³³ For Bene, the individual body exclusively pursues its de-individuation since life is nothing other than continual putrefaction: the apparatus of representation – which ultimately serves the reproduction of the human species to the detriment of individuals – prevents most people from acknowledging this state of affairs before they reach a terminal state. (“They need a metastasis to realise it. They do not feel in metastasis any earlier, when they ‘flower’”.³⁴) Against such perverted dissimulation, obscene theatre as the *o-skenè* that undermines the field of representation by subtracting itself from it intends to promote the “freezing of the species”.³⁵ In this context, Bene elaborates an original notion of porn: porn is ob-scene, but not erotic. While on the one hand, following Schopenhauer, the sighs of lovers are actually the whimpering of the species, on the other, porn is “what cadaverises itself, what makes itself available as mere object. In porn [there] are only two objects that annihilate themselves reciprocally. Can you imagine two stones copulating? It gives you an idea”. For this reason, Bene concludes, there is no desire in porn: the two must be clearly distinguished; correcting a suggestion made by his friend Klossowski for which “porn is the beyond *of* desire”, Bene concludes that porn is rather “what exceeds desire” and is thus unrelated to it.³⁶

It seems to me impossible to reconcile the porn aspirations of such an ob-scene theatre of inorganic de-individuation, and eventually extinction, with the philosophical prominence that Deleuze grants to desire. In *One Less Manifesto*, he curiously never associates the “intensive variation of affects” set free by Bene’s subtractive theatre to desire, yet, it goes without saying that this very variation inevitably implies “an immanent conception of desire with no aim outside its own active deployment and renewal, an affirmative force”.³⁷ Deleuze is at his best when

³⁰ C. Bene, *Sono apparso alla Madonna*, in *Opere*, p. 1166.

³¹ “One Less Manifesto”, p. 249, p. 251.

³² *Ibidem.*, p. 242, my translation.

³³ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 7, p. 9, pp. 18-19.

³⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 14, p. 36.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*, pp. 34-35.

³⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 35. As an example of what should *not* be taken as porn, Bene refers to Lewis Carroll’s little girls and their “morbid mental perversions” (*Ibidem.*, p. 16).

³⁷ A. Schuster, “Is Pleasure a Rotten Idea? Deleuze and Lacan on Pleasure and Jouissance”, in D. Hoens, S. Jöttkandt, G. Buelens (eds.) (London: Palgrave: forthcoming, 2008). With regard to Deleu-

he accounts for Bene's subtractive method in terms of the continuous variation of gestures and language dictated by apraxia and aphasia. In Bene's plays, an aphasic work on language converges with a work of obstruction on things and gestures. "Costumes never ceas[e] falling off [...] one must always surmount objects instead of using them" while, in parallel, diction is "whispered, stammered, and deformed", sounds are either "barely audible or deafening".³⁸ Yet, for what we have just said about Bene's theatre of porn obscenity, Deleuze goes completely astray when he equates subtractive apraxia and aphasia with the political quest for an affirmative *ars erotica*. Without knowing it, "the initial stammering and stumbling" pursue "the Idea [that] has become visible, perceptible, the politics [that] has become erotic".³⁹ Even more problematically, given his detailed analysis of *S.A.D.E.* in *One Less Manifesto*, Deleuze remains strangely silent on the telling conclusion of this play, which, in my opinion, should be taken as a paradigm of Bene's theatre. The slave continually varies his hindered camouflages to aid the transgressive situations he simulates to stimulate an erection in his master, yet such transformations, such subtractive development, are ultimately aimed at *his own* extinction. The extinction of the master as master, his decision to close down his firm and go bankrupt in order to finally work and enjoy – as Bene has it, "only Work can give Monsieur some sort of erection"⁴⁰ – is actually followed in the finale by the literal cancellation of the slave. Taking off his make-up, the slave actually "cancels his face" while reading the following words: "Thou shalt stop making a spectacle of yourself" [*Non darai piu' spettacolo di te*].⁴¹ This sentence must be mumbled, Bene specifies, "in the guise of a funeral service or a lullaby for the void". The play then ends.

4.

At this stage, it should be clear that the concept of continuous variation is insufficient to adequately understand Bene's anti-representational theatre. Subtraction cannot be confined to the initial elimination of the representatives of power – for instance, the reduction of the Sadean master to an impotent "masturbatory tic" – nor, conversely, can it be fully exhausted by the positive un-mastered becoming of minor characters that benefit from such amputation. Rather, Bene's subtraction amounts to a negative and finite becoming toward extinction as de-individuation. For Deleuze, variation must never cease: as he points out in *One Less Manifesto*, "it is necessary that variation never stops varying itself";⁴² 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

ze's aprioristic equation of lack and negativity with impotence, Schuster further asks himself a crucial question: "Why not view lack as something 'good' and plenitude, positivity, chaotic multiplicity, etc. as the real terror?"

³⁸ "One Less Manifesto", p. 248.

³⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 251, my translation.

⁴⁰ *S.A.D.E.*, p. 325. See also p. 343.

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 349.

⁴² "One Less Manifesto", p. 254, my translation.

as subtraction is only possible within the domain of the signifier and its theatrical distortion. There are no intensive forces, no becoming, at the level of the inorganic porn, the ideal goal of theatre that would also correspond to its demise.

In both *One Less Manifesto* and the dense pages he dedicates to Bene's cinema in *L'image-temps*, Deleuze seems to finally acknowledge that Benian subtraction is always oriented toward extinction when he dwells on what Bene himself calls "the 'secret' of dis-grace".⁴³ Deleuze proposes that Benian subtraction corresponds to the "operation of grace" as dis-grace: we escape representation, "we saves ourselves, we become minor, only by the creation of a dis-grace", a series of corporeal (aphasic and apraxic) deformities.⁴⁴ Disgraceful subtraction as the "power to disappear" gives us a body that is no longer visible – that is, represented – and eventually leads us to the achievement of the "Schopenhauerian point [as] the point of non-desire [*non-vouloir*]"⁴⁵ Here Deleuze does not discuss the way in which aphasic and apraxic subtraction can be regarded as both the becoming invisible of the body and – as previously noted – the becoming visible of the Idea. But even more problematically, he then suggests that the dis-graceful point of non-desire is followed in Bene's characters by a "starting all over again" [*repandre tout*].⁴⁶ I must say I find this conclusion utterly unconvincing. While it may well be the case that, even for Bene, life as continual putrefaction knows no extinction, for what we have seen, how could his theatre aim at a new beginning? What about the *o-skenè* of inorganic porn as the "freezing of the species"?

In the chapter of *Out of This World* he devotes to the concept of creative subtraction, Peter Hallward has elegantly shown that, for Deleuze, the path of extinction – entirely dependent on the intervention of grace in mystics such Eckhart – should at all cost be opposed to that of subtractive individuation.⁴⁷ Only the latter can be truly creative: as Hallward has it, "creation would cease to be creative if it collapsed into extinction".⁴⁸ I would suggest that, in stark contrast to this position, Bene attempts to elaborate an anti-representational theatre where creation is *only* possible as subtraction toward *de*-individuating extinction. The trajectory of the slave in *S.A.D.E.* perfectly exemplifies how repeated subtractive acts are indispensable to actively reach *de*-individuation. Yet, moving beyond theatre, complete *de*-individuation – the obscenity of porn – remains asymptotically unreachable before natural death occurs. Precisely insofar as *de*-individuation should be an active process toward the inorganic that must not be reduced to the vague idea of natural death – remember, "life ends where it begins" – but will anyway be passively imposed on us by death, all we can do to be creative is to accompany putrefaction. As Bene writes, "we are shit, no metaphor intended. The important

⁴³ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 222.

⁴⁴ "One Less Manifesto", p. 243; see also p. 249.

⁴⁵ G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), p. 191. It is worth noting that Bene recurrently praises Schopenhauer in his writings: "My permanent educator is called Arthur Schopenhauer" (*Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 23).

⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 190, my translation.

⁴⁷ See *Out of This World*, pp. 84-85.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 84.

thing is to know it. Taking cognisance of this [*prendere atto*] and flush the toilet, that is, transforming into act [*trasformare in atto*”].⁴⁹

Passages like this should avert us from confusing Bene’s subtraction oriented toward de-individuating extinction with Deleuze’s subtraction oriented toward the virtual. When Bene speaks of life as a “mis-deed” that continually “escapes itself” and in which “what matters is never realised”, he is not in the least hinting at the virtual, an underlying creative power of life that would be enclosed by the representational apparatus of the actual. For him, life is rather a misdeed in the sense that, again, “life is your own death that plunges down on you hour after hour”.⁵⁰ Even if we sympathise with Hallward’s argument according to which the essence of the Deleuzian notion of creation lies in the process of counter-actualisation, there remains an insurmountable difference between Deleuze and Bene on this issue. Both authors believe that only the actual can counter-actualise, that is to say, counter-actualisation does not depend on a sudden emergence of the virtual. However, if on the one hand, for Deleuze, counter-actualisation is, as Hallward observes, creative “like everything else” – and “counter-actualisation will thereby become indistinguishable from the virtual” – on the other, for Bene, *only counter-actualisation is creative*.⁵¹ Bene himself perfectly captures this subtle but crucial point when he specifies that what is ultimately at stake in flushing the toilet that we are – or counter-actualisation – is the issue of *creative defecation*. In opposition to any “vitalist artifice”, any “daydreaming about a flesh that is different from that available” – any anti-Oedipal body without organs, we may add – we should readily admit that we are nothing other than black holes and attach a “*creative paternity to defecation*”.⁵²

It should, then, come as no surprise that Bene also understands subtraction toward asymptotic extinction, the only possible creative process, in terms of *addition*. The “‘secret’ of dis-grace” is nothing other than the inversely proportional relation between subtractive and additive methods: “The more you add, the more you take away. A plus equals three times minus. *Additions-subtractions*”.⁵³ With specific regard to theatre, this means that Bene’s ob-scenity cannot be limited to the continuous variation of gestures and language dictated by apraxia and aphasia. These explicitly subtractive methods are indeed paralleled and boosted by additive ones: for instance, the use of lyrical archaisms, a more general adoption of literary and poetical clichés, as well as the very privileging of classics (Shakespeare *in primis*) over the avant-garde. As noted by Giancarlo Dotto, additive grace as subtractive disgrace means that, in Bene, “a kind of abused indulgence in lyricism is reversed into the ‘deformity’ of a paradoxical and untreatable writing”.⁵⁴ Bene himself is quite clear on this point when he refuses to confine the “secret” of dis-grace to “the

⁴⁹ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 87.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*, pp. 86-87.

⁵¹ *Out of This World*, p. 87, p. 83.

⁵² *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, pp. 256-257.

⁵³ *Ibidem.*, p. 222.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 221.

Artaudian or Rabelaisian somersaults on language". Insofar as only the actual can counter-actualise, subtraction can and must also be gained by subjecting oneself to "the yoke of the *bello scrivere*, to style".⁵⁵ Lyrical additive "exasperation" is what most effectively allows us to "subtract a given topic from the banality of what is actual".⁵⁶

Here, it is important to stress that, given the overlapping of addition with subtraction *within subtraction itself*, Bene's theatre relies on an original notion of *creative negation* through repetition, one that should not be associated with any conciliatory synthesis in spite of its emphasis on extinction. The "additions-subtractions" repeatedly operated on the signifier by theatrical acts as im-mediate events "must forget the finality of [the] actions" they disrupt and, most importantly, the finality of disruption itself. Im-mediate acts carry out a form of negation that is first and foremost vain, gratuitous, and hence repeated. As suggested by Maurizio Grande, Bene is primarily interested in the "greatness of missing the aim" [*la grandezza del non andare a colpo*].⁵⁷ What is more, even though the "additions-subtractions" may hypothetically achieve organic extinction, the latter amounts to an anti-vitalist – and non-repetitive – continual putrefaction which can in no way be regarded as synthetic.

5.

In his recent article "In Praise of Negativism", Alberto Toscano has noted that while "Deleuze's vision of art qua resistance is [...] famously pitted against the negativity of lack and the dialectic", it is also at the same time "shot through by a profound destructive impetus".⁵⁸ This component emerges clearly in the treatment of Melville's *Bartleby* as a work (and a character) that unleashes, in Deleuze's own words, "a *negativism* beyond all negation".⁵⁹ Why is then Deleuze unprepared to acknowledge a negativist dimension in Bene's theatre? Why does he read Bene's subtraction as continuous variation without ever referring to negation or negativism? And, most crucially, why is such negativist variation never explicitly related to repetition? This is all the more puzzling considering the fact that, moving outside the domain of art and leaving aside the analysis of theatrical repetition

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 222.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 245. On the topic of Bene's manipulation of stereotypes, Klossowski writes the following: "Having appeared under the stereotypical aspect of the [*dramatis*] *persona*, Carmelo does not try to maintain it *as such before the spectator*, he rather tries to unveil the aspect of it that has been concealed by traditional interpretations. This does not amount to a secret that, according to the plot, the character would deliberately hide [...] but what *he cannot say or know* [...] the unexpected that the character brings with him" (P. Klossowski, "Cosa mi suggerisce il gioco ludico di Carmelo Bene", in *Opere*, cit., 1470-1471).

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 237.

⁵⁸ A. Toscano, "In Praise of Negativism", in S. O' Sullivan, S. Zepke (eds.), *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Production of the New* (London: Continuum, forthcoming 2008).

⁵⁹ G. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 71. Turning to Deleuze's analysis of Francis Bacon, Toscano adds the important specification that such negativism "requires an initial abandonment to the cliché" – which Deleuze recovers in Bacon's relation to photography as a reaction against abstract art. This could easily be related to Bene's use of lyrical "exasperations".

carried out in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze had already extensively dwelled upon the relation between creative negation and repetition in the 1962 book on Nietzsche. In this text, Nietzsche's eternal return of the same is conceived as an affirmation that *must* contain negation: indeed, "a yes that is not able to say no [...] is a false yes".⁶⁰ I would thus suggest that Deleuze's reading of Bene skilfully avoids thinking the connection between subtraction and creative negation on the one hand (as elaborated in *Essays Critical and Clinical*) and between creative negation and repetition on the other (as elaborated in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*). Insofar as Bene's anti-vitalism lies at the intersection of these two relations, their open thematisation – not to mention an analysis of their reciprocity, that is, the fact that subtraction is repetitive and repetition is subtractive – would have obliged Deleuze to assume the primacy of negation over affirmation in Bene's theatre. From this would have also followed the impossibility of appropriating it for a minor vitalist politics. We should always bear in mind that what is ultimately at stake in *One Less Manifesto*, but also in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, is in one way or another the ontological "power of a becoming" that, following Toscano, "allow[s] literature" and art in general "to issue into Life".⁶¹ Bene's rejection of a vitalist understanding of life as the continuous variation of "pure forces" – the "terrible power" [*puissance terrible*] that, according to *Difference and Repetition*, accounts ontologically for the theatre of repetition⁶² – is unquestionable. Not only, as we have seen, is life nothing other than perpetual putrefaction, but this very process cannot even be understood in terms of movement; according to Bene, conceiving of life as becoming already presupposes the adoption of the standpoint of representation. The inorganic does not move, it does not become; "everything that moves, produces itself, is vulgar", while "what is inanimate is never vulgar even if it stinks".⁶³ Thus, the negative creations of anti-representational theatre are not real movements: anti-representational theatre rather recovers "traces of putrefaction", it shows how a simple "hair, burp, or fart suffice to move from a circumscribed damage to metastasis". Everything else is just "essays on life that replace life [...] Doctor Heidegger's ontological farts".⁶⁴ In this context, it is plausible to suggest that Bene tacitly postulates a fundamental and twofold impotence that is inherent to human life as such: as we have seen, representation ultimately serves reproduction and the preservation of the species, but why is representation needed in the first place? Why can humans not simply reproduce while increasingly de-individuating themselves as organisms like all other animals? Although Bene never explicitly asks himself this question in his writings, he seems to start off from the general premise that *homo sapiens* is characterised, as a species, by a biological handicap which is itself compensated and redoubled by a symbolic handicap, that is, the apparatus of representation and

⁶⁰ G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 178.

⁶¹ "In Praise of Negativism".

⁶² *Difference and Repetition*, p. 10.

⁶³ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 88.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

language. From this standpoint, creative negation via subtraction would amount to actively giving oneself up to the anti-representational component of language, being spoken by the signifier. Such forsaking would itself ultimately achieve, outside of any predetermined finality, the extinction of the species and the abolition of representation along with it.

In order to substantiate this point, which is in my opinion crucial for a correct understanding of Bene's ob-scene theatre, we should pay particular attention to what he says about Lacan's notion of the signifier and the fact that discourse never "belongs" to the speaking being.⁶⁵ Bene's theoretical works abound with illuminating references to Lacan. In one instance, he goes as far as proposing that his entire theatrical enterprise revolves around the question of the signifier: "Ever since my early performances [...] I have put the question of the 'signifier' to myself, even before taking note of Jacques Lacan's enormous work".⁶⁶ While Bene deliberately adopts Deleuzian terminology in renaming the actor as an "actorial machine", he does not hesitate to understand the de-individuating process enacted by this very machine – its catalysis of the "vocation for the inorganic" – as, first and foremost, an "abandonment to the whims of the signifier".⁶⁷ In other words, machinic de-individuation is not a vitalist line of flight; rather, machinic de-individuation corresponds to acknowledging that we are always spoken by the signifier and, more importantly, *actively* surrendering to our predicament. (What Lacan would have seen as the impossibility of *choosing* psychosis as a way of being *fully* spoken by the signifier.) As Bene writes, since "we are *handicapped* by this mass of signifiers that we ourselves put on stage, all we can do is abolish ourselves as signified, both in the body and the voice".⁶⁸

Judging from sentences like this, Deleuze would then be correct in focusing on the centrality of aphasic and apraxic handicaps in Bene's theatre. Furthermore, it would seem to be inevitable to equate Bene's handicapped performances – in which "stammering, hampering one's saying" is seen as synonymous with "genius"⁶⁹ – with what Toscano defines as the creative "achievement of a kind of speechlessness" in Deleuze's artistic minor heroes (Bartleby, Beckett, Artaud, Gherasim Luca, etc.). However, Bene importantly specifies that such stammering and hampering indicate in the end nothing else than a vital "damage" [*guasto*]: the ingeniousness of being "at the mercy of signifiers" is therefore always already a "regression to idiocy".⁷⁰ In a rare passage that seems to be criticising precisely Deleuze's idea of art, Bene further contends that all "literature, major *and* minor, is [...] a *simulation of life* [that] avoids surgery", perpetual putrefaction. In other words, minor literature as a departure from life as putrefaction remains an "inconsiderate therapy of impotent inertia".⁷¹ In contrast, Bene prefers to understand his

⁶⁵ See *Ibidem.*, p. 334.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 138.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 138.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 146.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 146, p. 221.

⁷¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 122, my emphases.

theatre as anti-therapeutic in the wake of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Just as in Lacan's "analytic theatre [...] the anxious demands of the patient-spectator are never attended to or healed but [...] left to suffer", so in Bene's theatre the tormenting crux of human life as vital damage "is sent back to the sender and amplified to the point of rendering it intolerable. Spectators witness my gestures (apraxia) and my words (aphasia) insofar as they find there their own disguised dilemma".⁷²

Further evidence of Bene's unrelenting anti-vitalism can be recovered in his critique of transgression. Anti-therapeutic theatre "transgresses transgression", Bene says.⁷³ The anti-anti-Oedipal master in *S.A.D.E.* cries out "I want to *marry* my daughter!" precisely because incest without marriage transgresses nothing, it does not cure his impotence.⁷⁴ (Human) life is also damaged in the sense that it lacks enjoyment, independently of the restrictions imposed by the Law. Rather, in Bene's theatre, enjoyment is only possible *within* the limits of Law: this is the principal message underlying the master-slave anti-dialectic relation in *S.A.D.E.*. Throughout the first act of the play, the slave attempts to arouse the master's lust by involving him in a long series of simulated transgressions of the Law. Nothing works: stealing, feeling remorse for having burnt one's city, systematically destroying one's own family (committing incest and selling one's wife and daughter) are not even sufficient to induce an erection. His hand frantically moving in his pocket, the master is reduced to an unproductive masturbatory tic. In the end, it is only when a girl is persuaded to steal and then reported to the police that the master is able to ejaculate: as specified by Bene, the only sadistic act that makes the master enjoy is achieved "*in the name of the Law*".⁷⁵ Transgression is successful only when it becomes *inherent* transgression, the Law's own transgression; therefore transgression is ultimately not transgressive at all: as Lacan had already noted, the Sadean hero exclusively enjoys for the Other, that is, he enjoys as a masochist.⁷⁶ Thus, Bene's impotent libertine who can literally ejaculate only in the face of the slave disguised as policeman refutes the general Sadean fantasy of a Nature that enjoys through the continuous succession of generation and destruction imposed by the sadist on the human body. Against Sade's law of desire, against his impossible imperative to transgress the Law and enjoy always more, Bene relocates enjoyment within the dialectic of Law and desire.

How could we ever relate such an anti-vitalist notion of desire as always subjected to the Law with Deleuze's reading of Bene's "minor" theatre as the battleground of a political conflict between two forces, the power of the law (its desire) and the desiring "outside" that always exceeds it? (In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and

⁷² *Ibidem.*, p. 332.

⁷³ *Ibidem.*, p. 334.

⁷⁴ *S.A.D.E.*, p. 297, my emphasis.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 276.

⁷⁶ See especially Lesson IV of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (London / New York: Norton, 2008). The slave in *S.A.D.E.* makes exactly the same point when he sings: "Ci vuol altro al mio padrone/ per godere, lo si sa!/ Altro! Altro! Altro! Altro!" (*S.A.D.E.*, p. 302).

Guattari even more explicitly speak of artistic minority in terms of a recovery of desire *in the place* of the law: “*Where one believed there was the law, there is in fact desire and desire alone*”).⁷⁷ In other words, how can Deleuze speak of Benian theatre as a theatre for which “minority indicates the power [*puissance*] of a becoming” as distinct from a “majority that indicates the power [*pouvoir*] or *impotence* of a state”?⁷⁸ Deleuze clearly overlooks the fact that, for Bene, impotence is a precondition for *both* the master who does not subtract himself from representation *and* the slave who develops subtractively in order to attain his own anti-representational extinction. Like the master, the slave only enjoys masochistically for the Other, that is, he enjoys making anything possible to help Monsieur to come – we are told that, on this level, “the cause of his master is his own cause”.⁷⁹ Yet, while the master still needs to accept that enjoyment is always given within the limits of Law, the slave has already realised this, and uses this very realisation to subtract himself from the Law and ultimately abandon it. There is no doubt that the slave’s extinction, which is significantly enough only possible after the master has himself enslaved his desire to the Law, will at the same time put an end to his own enjoyment.

6.

In a 1976 little-known interview with Gigi Livio and Ruggiero Bianchi, Bene commends Deleuze and Guattari’s book on Kafka for the way in which it evinces that “there is no subject that delivers a statement or subject whose statement is being delivered”. At the same time, he nevertheless reproaches them for “not fully assuming anti-historicism”.⁸⁰ Although Bene does not further substantiate this criticism, here I think he is indirectly pointing at a fundamental difference between his method of creative subtraction toward putrefying extinction and Deleuze’s (and Guattari’s) method of creative subtraction toward an infinite proliferation of intensive Life. As we have seen, Deleuze correctly interprets Bene’s theatre as an anti-historical theatre of the immediate act that suspends the actions of history. The problem is that, for Bene, such suspension should affect both the past and the future: to put it simply, not only does anti-representational theatre recuperate the anti-historical elements of history – the “other histories” ousted by history – but it also prevents them from *becoming* historical. (“Everything that *is* future *is* already past, it is not the beginning of something, it is already the just after the end [*il subito dopo della fine*]”).⁸¹ In other words, in criticising Deleuze’s vestiges of historicism, Bene is also necessarily denouncing his residual teleology. As observed by Toscano, the creative resistance of Deleuze’s artistic heroes always underlies an “orientation towards the outside, the veritable teleology which governs

⁷⁷ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Kafka: For a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 49.

⁷⁸ “One Less Manifesto”, p. 255, my translation, my emphasis.

⁷⁹ *S.A.D.E.*, p. 311.

⁸⁰ *Bene crudele*, pp. 55-56.

⁸¹ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 219.

the mechanisms of extraction”. On the one hand “the procedural exhaustion of the possible is supposed to make possible a renunciation of ‘any order of preference, any organization in relation to a goal, any signification’”. On the other hand, such “‘becoming that no longer includes any conceivable change’ is clearly the terminus of the procedure-process that allows literature to issue into Life”.⁸²

More specifically, I would suggest that what Bene cannot accept is Deleuze’s teleology of *vitalist production* and the supposedly anti-capitalist emancipatory politics of unbridled invention that it evokes. Subtraction must be active and creative – we must indeed assume the paternity of creative defecation – yet never productive, since *pro*-duction is inherently finalistic. “*Lavorio*” should always remain excremental (“*Lavorio* is self-demolition”; “Man is born to work on himself”) and cannot be confused with “*lavoro*” (“A worker is not a man”; “Freedom means liberation from work, not occupation”).⁸³ Whether additive *or* subtractive, for Bene, production is nothing else than accumulated work, which is inevitably recuperated by the apparatus of capitalist representation. While life as such is continual putrefaction, represented life – what Bene calls “*vita quotidiana*”, everyday life – is just work. Turning to *S.A.D.E.*, it is therefore not a coincidence that, frustrated by the impossibility of attaining enjoyment through transgression, the master concludes the first act of the play with a desperate scream: “I want to live! I want to work!”⁸⁴ This also shows how Bene’s critique of production as work is at the same time a critique of work as the only possible means of enjoyment. Significantly enough, the slave introduces the second act singing “*al lavoro del piacere [...] il piacere del lavoro basta qui sostituir*”.⁸⁵ It is first necessary to replace the non-existent “work of pleasure” with the all-pervasive “pleasure of work” for the master to be later able to ejaculate in the name of the law. As a matter of fact, the slave sets up for his master the simulation of everyday sadomasochistic office life: he hires a prostitute who is said to embody “the woman-object” of the master and tellingly “lets herself be *invented*”.⁸⁶ Conversely, moving his hand frantically in his pocket, the master now becomes “prey to vitalism *tout court*”, Bene says, and treats the prostitute as a “*décor of flesh*”.⁸⁷ He starts using her as a filing-cabinet (he opens a drawer by pinching her hard on the hip; he closes it by slapping her bottom), she then in turn becomes his mail (he flips through it by disheveling her hair), his phone (he twists her wrist, a receiver, and brings it to his ear), an ashtray (he extinguishes a cigarette in the palm of her hand), a business suitcase (he ties her with a belt and drags her), an open window (he gags her), etc...

⁸² “In Praise of Negativism”. In “One Less Manifesto”, Deleuze himself unashamedly acknowledges that “becoming minor is a *goal*, a goal that concerns everybody” (p. 255, my translation, my emphasis).

⁸³ *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 70, *Bene crudele*, pp. 53-54.

⁸⁴ *S.A.D.E.*, p. 321.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 323.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 330, p. 332, my emphasis.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 325.

Would it be exaggerated to read such a caricature of late-capitalist production in terms of a faithful portrayal of Deleuze's vitalist becoming? Are we not witnessing here the becoming-drawer/mail/phone/ashtray/suitcase/window of the secretary-prostitute? After all, *In One Less Manifesto*, Deleuze problematically goes as far as suggesting that "the woman-object in *S.A.D.E.*, the naked girl [...] connects her gestures according to the line of a variation that allows her to *escape* the domination of the master"...⁸⁸ Is Bene's caricature not thus providing us with a possible concrete configuration of radical capitalist deterritorialisation as expounded in *Anti-Oedipus*? Remember, in the capitalist field of immanence there are no longer masters and slaves "but only slaves commanding other slaves"...⁸⁹ The universalisation of capitalism would achieve absolute deterritorialisation, a limit at which production would equate with immediate vital creation. Beyond this limit, to be regarded as inescapable, we would find a "nomadic or schizophrenic subject, one worthy of the end of history or the end of actuality"...⁹⁰ In this way, as Hallward has observed, what Deleuze and Guattari add to Marx's analysis of the trajectory of capitalism is "a new eschatology".⁹¹ But, in a few words, is not such an eschatological end of actuality precisely what all of Deleuze's artistic heroes – most of whom are indeed schizophrenics – have in common?

As *S.A.D.E.* makes clear, there is nothing remotely reassuring or vaguely progressive about capitalist deterritorialisation for Bene, the transformation of the traditional despotic master into a hyperactive and hypertensive office manager. In parallel, Bene refuses to accept pathological figures such as Bartleby, Wolfson, and Artaud, as ethico-political models of aesthetic resistance.⁹² The scrivener's "I would prefer not to" is just no longer effective in today's late-capitalist coercively inventive ideological constellation. One cannot simply reply "I would prefer not to" to the compulsive sadomasochistic enjoyment imposed by contemporary work: "One asks to be neglected, but it's impossible. [...] One cannot escape being *entertained*"...⁹³ Instead of Bartelby, Wolfson, and his peers, Bene can only advance the theatrically ob-scene figure of the slavish Watson, in his opinion, the closest one can get to inorganic porn, the Schopenhauerian point of non-desire. "I'd like to be Watson. [...] Watson doesn't understand a fuck, whenever he acts he does it at random. He is inactive even in the action that runs him. Being unable to enjoy the inorganic (it looks like it is not possible), maybe Watson is the thing that has so far been able to bewitch and enchant me".⁹⁴ Beyond Wolfson's aphasic stumbling through which language ultimately pursues an eschatological

⁸⁸ "One Less Manifesto", p. 249, my translation, my emphasis.

⁸⁹ G. Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 254.

⁹⁰ *Out of This World*, p. 103.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² As Grande suggests, for Bene, "going beyond Artaud means going beyond the idea of [...] the actor-martyr [and] the advent of a language-without-writing. In other words, one must carry out a process of parodistic evacuation of sense" (*Vita di Carmelo Bene*, p. 312).

⁹³ *Ibidem*., p. 82, my emphasis.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*., p. 279.

communion with the pure forces of life, Watson's impotent vacuity perfectly overlaps immediate acts with the most radical form of being acted upon by the signifier.