CHAOS THEORY AND ROBERT WILSON: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
WILSON’S VISUAL ARTS AND THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES

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WILSON’S VISUAL ARTS AND THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES

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This dissertation explores the formal elements of Robert Wilson’s art, with a focus on two in particular: time and space, through the methodology of Chaos Theory. Although this theory is widely practiced by physicists and mathematicians, it can be utilized with other disciplines, in this case visual arts and theater. By unfolding the complex layering of space and time in Wilson’s art, it is possible to see the hidden reality behind these artifacts. The study reveals that by applying this scientific method to the visual arts and theater, one can best understand the nonlinear and fragmented forms of Wilson's art. Moreover, the study demonstrates that time and space are Wilson's primary structuring tools and are bound together in a self-renewing process. Each image is not the death of time and space but its own simulation, individual and singular. The study identifies some of the parallels between Wilson’s art, Chaos Theory and Postmodernism, specifically, their orientation towards chance and indeterminacy and their shared idea that nature and reality are unpredictable, because life itself is open to the unexpected and therefore always fresh and new. The dissertation ultimately seeks to promote communication across disciplines.
Dedicated to my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Anwar-ul-Haq, my husband

Mian Manzoor Ahamd and son Muhammad Arslan Manzoor
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Introduction

Robert Wilson is best known for his multidimensional interest in the theater and visual arts. His artistic expression is not confined to a single genre. He is at once painter, sculptor, designer, architect, playwright and theater director. His theater and art are perhaps best understood as an assemblage which transcribes space and time in an unusual way. Objects, sounds, words and media are used merely for their functional value, while they describe an eternal sense of time and space. Everything seems to be meaningless in content, the space is open, and plots do not have any temporal evolution. The complexity of Wilson’s artifacts comes out of nonlinear and chaotic forms, which contradict reason, and one finds it difficult to perceive the hidden reality behind them. Since the overall effect of many of Wilson’s artifacts is more like a collage, it is hard to perceive enough stability that can prevent chaos and clear up the way to see order. The collage-like treatment negates an apparent order and controls the perceptive ability of the viewer. In order to explore this chaos and order that is binary in Wilson’s art, one needs to comprehend his understanding of time and space. His drawings, sculptures and theatrical performances are not simply abstract and geometrical shapes but actually, in his own words, “constructions in time and space.”

This study explores the formal elements of Wilson’s work with a focus on two in particular: time and space through the methodology of Chaos Theory. Although this theory is widely practiced by physicists and mathematicians, it can be utilized with other disciplines, in this case the visual arts and theater. By unfolding the complex layering of space and time in Robert Wilson’s art, it is possible to perceive the hidden reality behind these artifacts.
Chaos Theory provides a method of analysis for the utterly heterogeneous simultaneity of space and time. It observes events as they happen in a person’s daily experience. In his introductory speech to *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* in 1969, Wilson elaborates on the simultaneity of his work: “someone running and someone sitting, another making small talk, someone pouring drink, someone dancing, people doing ritualistic activities.” In this statement he mentions several activities being performed at the same time as they can happen in one’s life, where no one knows what is going to happen next nor what is going on around him or her. Everything seems to be constructed by chance within a determined space and time. The artist, however, glimpses the sense of direction before he starts, as he maintains, “I am a visual artist, I think spatially … I have no sense of direction until I have a sense of space.” The sense of direction which Wilson wants to glimpse before he starts shows a determinacy, but the outcome of this determinacy is actually indeterminate, because the events are products of chance and therefore nothing can be anticipated. Chaos Theory interprets “the idea that nature and reality are open to the unexpected.” The theory provides a method to comprehend such utterly discordant simultaneity of space that is observed through time.

In order to appreciate the paradigmatic revolution of time and space brought by the science of chaos, it is significant to know that in Sir Isaac Newton’s mechanics, space was considered an empty void without any change. Time was perceived as a sequence of uni-directional moments; therefore, there was no uncertainty about the order of events. Everything was determined and preconceived, because Newton imagined that the universe is predictable and works like a machine or clock. He demonstrated that it is possible to “predict the state of the universe at any future moment.”
Based on Newton’s and other physicists’ discovery that all underlying laws and causes are discernable, it was possible to draw future events by following their path from past to present. Aristotle, Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler and several other thinkers and physicists shared this mechanical route in order to explore the physical world and nature. For them, reason was the only solution to support the logic and findings of the physical world. By disqualifying the weaknesses of human knowledge, scientists and thinkers promoted the idea of universal determinism, which maintained that everything is pre-determined. The emphasis on pre-defined space and time was so rigid that it became almost impossible to maintain any theoretical limitation to the rational mind and its relationship with the physical world. Paying close attention to the methodological implications of the Newtonian paradigm, N. Katherine Hayles maintains:

Because interactions were unidirectional, the dominant mode by which systems were related to one another, and hence the dominant mode of analysis, were causal. Because the physical world consisted of discrete bodies separated in space, analysis of systems could be carried out through interlocking series of discrete logical steps. Because systems were already inherently discrete, there was no problem in separating the observer from what he observes. And… because the physical world existed ‘out there’ independent of the observer, it was determined and infinitely knowable. There were no theoretical limits to how much the rational mind could understand about the physical world….

These assumptions provided enough flexibility to establish such theoretical grounds in which mind itself was a separate entity from the object. Mind was considered so
powerful that it was even able to judge a thing before it virtually happened. Because of such an understanding of the human mind, scientists insisted that there is no limit that can be imposed on the rational mind. The mathematician Pierre Laplace points out that the mind is capable of perceiving everything happening in nature and therefore able to pre-conceive the future of anything.\(^7\)

Today, of course, such assumptions of predetermination and predictability are challenged. For instance, in our contemporary world, it is difficult to believe that the world simply exists without the interaction of the observer. Moreover, there is no pre-conceived relationship between the rational mind and the physical object that can be maintained only by means of mathematical equations of motion as was possible by Newtonian equations. Newtonian thought has presented an inescapable linear interaction between events and objects, arguing for a decisive and inevitable universal order. Robert Wilson’s art resists the consequences of linear time and space and escapes the measure-for-measure logic of Newton. In his artifacts, time and space are void of any potential for reasoned observation. This is where Chaos Theory can assist in analyzing different paths of time and space. But before the application of such a methodology, it is important to view Wilson’s art generally and to see how he interprets time and space in his visual artistic creations and theatrical performances.

Robert Wilson is acknowledged as one of the most creative artists in the spectrum of the visual arts and theater. He successfully fuses the two and in doing so he traverses the traditional genres of drama, visual arts, performing art, video, film, music and dance. Such an approach confers more independence to the representation of time and space, while at the same time augmenting the importance of each element, such as line, color,
texture, volume, shape, sound and dialogue. Although his artistic vision is highly rich in its execution, it may appear complex for some, because of its intermixing and collaboration of diverse fields and media.

Wilson’s artifacts foster new meanings and relationships by resisting the continuum of time and space. He explores time and space by employing fragmented, nonlinear patterning and by juxtaposing objects without any reasoned connection. In this way he achieves new relationships between the micro and macro worlds. But from where did such a fragmented and illogical juxtaposition of time and space come? To answer such a question, one needs to explore his personal and professional life. In the following chapters, three major ideas will be addressed: (1) What are the circumstances that shaped the art of Robert Wilson? (2) What do the parallels between Wilson’s arts, Chaos Theory, and Postmodernism signify? (3) How does the implication of Chaos Theory as an analytical tool help one to understand time and space in Wilson’s art?
Chapter 1
I
Robert Wilson and His Art

Wilson was born on October 4, 1941 in Waco, Texas. His father was a successful lawyer and belonged to a wealthy family. His mother, on the other hand, was raised in an orphanage. Confronting the contrasting nature of his parents, Wilson never found comfort in sharing his emotions with them. His mother was a quiet and expressionless person, who according to Wilson never revealed her emotions and feelings to anyone. Wilson found his father dominating and his mother “powerful in her silence.” After the death of his father, his mother found it difficult to take care of her six children and thus “farmed them out” for better care. Under such circumstances Wilson never felt that he was part of his family. This made him reluctant to work during the daytime. He usually worked at night, hiding from others. It is noteworthy that the strong contrast of dark and light, night and day in his theatrical performances, and the use of charcoal for sketches and drawings seem to echo his own world, a very personal world. Metaphorically speaking, one sees a battle between light and dark, between dominant and subversive, and, more specifically, between order and chaos.

Wilson started his higher education in business administration at the University of Texas, Austin. In 1962 after three years of study Wilson dropped out to move to New York. There he was drawn to the artistic achievements of the avant-garde. He completed his B. F. A. in 1965 from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. By 1968 he established his own theater company in New York, called the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, named after his dance teacher, Bird Hoffman, in Waco, Texas.
He expanded his artistic activities from New York to Europe and then to other countries, where he was highly praised. One of his heroic scale productions, which provided him international fame, was his play *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE: a story about a family and some people changing* (1972, fig. 1). The play lasted for 168 hours, narrating the story of a family, and was staged at an arts festival in Iran. About 5,000 actors, 2,000 Iranian troops and 5,000 soldiers were engaged in the production.  

Although Wilson started his career as an artist in the 1960’s, it was not until 1971 that he had his first show at Willard Gallery, New York. His drawings and sculptures were usually based upon his theatrical designs. In another exhibition in 1974, at the Musée Galliera in Paris, the relationship between his visual arts and theater is so close that it is hard to make distinctions between them as a conventional genre. For instance, his Paris exhibition was related to his opera *Deafman Glance* (figs. 2, 3,4). The opera was originally created in the late 1960’s but premiered in Paris in 1971. As Jamie James comments, “Just as the theater designs begin life as drawings, they in turn spawn finished drawings and limited graphic editions for gallery exhibitions, as well as sculptural works based upon props and set furniture.” The works independent of his theater pieces are sculptures like *Memory/Loss* (figs. 5,6) and the installations executed for the hundredth anniversary of the Paris department store, Galeries Lafayette. Critics suggest that this sculpture established his reputation as a visual artist, after he won the Golden Lion at the 1993 Venice Biennale.

Robert Wilson is also known for a series of metal chairs, which are designed to honor any heroic or historical figure, such as Einstein, Queen Victoria (fig. 7)
Stalin (fig. 8) and Madame Curie. On one occasion Wilson says, in the representation of these furniture sculptures “there is a kind of history.” It is the historical aspect of these chairs that in the design and collection one can see an unexpected juxtaposition of primitive and modern that allows one to view these artifacts afresh.

Wilson’s *Hanging Chair* (fig. 9) is considered his first furniture sculpture. In one of his interviews with Dorine Mignot he denies that his furniture sculptures were created as theater props. Wilson states: “My background was in the visual arts … the work I did in the theater was a continuation of the work I was doing as a visual artist.”

Wilson exhibited his furniture sculptures as well as his drawings at the Musée Galliera in Paris in 1974. Four years later, another exhibition was held at the Galerie Folker Skulima. In the catalogue of this exhibition Roland H. Wiegenstein comments on the functionality of Wilson’s furniture sculpture: “They are prototypes, whose purpose is to fulfill, yet simultaneously to disclaim, their function (of providing something to sit on, or at)…. The manifest purpose transcends itself and is transformed into art, into an artwork.”

Wilson gradually began to fuse his theatrical and visual arts skills. His 1980 exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati has been seen as a “meeting ground of painting and theater.” In his review of the Cincinnati exhibition, Craig Owens suggests that Wilson’s exhibition presents “a series of profoundly arresting tableaux that engaged the viewer directly, without reference to their theatrical origin.”

After the Cincinnati exhibition, Wilson held another grand exhibition in 1987 at the municipal gallery in Stuttgart, Germany. The original title, *Memory of a Revolution* (figs. 10, 11), was changed to *Environment* in the catalogue. The project was
co-exhibited by a piece, entitled Baden and Württemberg in the Age of Napoleon. His next exhibition was a group show titled Energiéén. The show was held at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum in 1990. Here his furniture sculptures were incorporated with a sound and light environment that was originally executed for his production of the Johann Strauss’ opera Salomé at La Scala in Milan. Describing the idea of a sound and light environment accompanying his furniture sculptures, Wilson said, “In maybe some sense, it has something to do with theater too.”

Almost a year later Wilson held another exhibition, this time displaying pieces from the last twenty years of his life, including furniture sculptures, drawings, paintings, as well as his video works. The exhibition toured the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Entitled The Night Before the Day, the exhibition according to Danzker: “… was a metaphysical journey from innocence to experience, a tour de force in brilliant white through gray to black, divided into a prologue and three acts.”

In 1991 Wilson planned to display his work along with other artists. In an interview with Thierry Grillet, published in the visitor’s guidebook to the exhibition, Wilson states, “I chose pieces which would conflict with my work, and others which would complement it…. For example, you see a chair I designed for Einstein, with plumbing pipes. It has tall, vertical lines and it is shown next to a tall figure by Giacometti. There is a relationship between them.” Here Wilson attempts to create a dialogue between his art and other artists’ works.

Portrait, Still Life, Landscape, another successful exhibition, was held at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1993. The exhibition was divided
into three parts. The first section was called *Portrait*. Viewing *Portrait*, one enters a large and bright space, representing feet or roots. The second part, or act II of the exhibition, was made up of a narrow passageway with five rooms on each side. These rooms were designed with the works of contemporary and historical fine and applied artists along with ten “encounters” created by Wilson. In the third or concluding section, which was associated with the head, Wilson placed one of the nineteenth century’s best known sculptural works, Degas’ *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* in a narrow and empty space. The subject’s back was toward the audience, facing toward the sky (fig. 12). The dancer was arranged with seven bronze lizards executed by Hans van Houwelingen and an early sixteenth-century bronze crab.

Space plays an important role in motivating the conceptual force. The idea is best presented by his 1995 London environment entitled *H. G., Clink Street Vaults* (fig. 13). A former prison in London was turned into an artifact by emphasizing the space and architecture of the prison. In the vast underground chamber of the former Clink Street Vault, “Wilson created a series of tableaux in which the public traveled into the past with their invisible host, H. G. Wells.”\(^{21}\) The space is an arrangement of several unrelated objects, such as a folded newspaper, a watch, and a liqueur glass. The presence of the here and now is created by showing the remains of a meal in a dining room, where one sees the burning candles along with the muttonchops and peas stiffened on the dishes. The baroque-like dramatic effect is achieved through extreme dark and light. Natural light makes its way into the hall in such a way that it touches only those objects which Wilson wants to focus on. It augments the sadness over the dusty face of the mummy. In another place, a row of hospital beds dramatizes the severity of life. A sense
of mysticism enters into the play by means of delicate music. The contrast between dark and light, death and life, is so profound that the whole static moment turns into a spectacle of sound and movement, a dialogue between freedom and prison. Here, as with Memory/Loss, the idea is not only to recall any literary or historical figure, object or event, but also to emphasize the “architecture of the space itself.”

The use of architectural space was also taken into account in 1992, when he established his Watermill Center (a performing arts laboratory on the east end of Long Island) and renovated this unique site for his artistic goals. The renovation of the Watermill seems to exemplify Wilson’s philosophy that “everything around us informs the work we do.” He believes that his Watermill Center will never come to an end, and will always be a center for “learning and expanding possibilities.”

Another unique artistic enterprise is a series of video portraits. Wilson believes that making these videos is not a different task than being a painter: “I use the medium as a painter would,” because “there’s no little trick, no gimmick, no story…. It’s not like TV.” His camera shots create an amazing tableau, where living subjects seem to be frozen onto the wall. As Wilson explains, in one of these shots, “I just did one of the Patrice Chereau…. It’s very static, like a painting. Chereau is wearing a black suit and standing on a flaming bed of coals.”

Concerning his theatrical performances, from the very beginning Wilson has claimed the values of freedom. His Deafman Glance (1971, figs. 2, 3, 4), produced at the historic Festival of Nancy, introduced Wilson as a new American artist. By that time, the avant-garde movement was led by a concern for the expressiveness of the human body and human gesture. Wilson, however, relied on visual plasticity and constructed a drama
that was motionless but continuously evolving in its own process of time. It has been suggested by Franco Quadri that *Deafman Glance* is a play of silence: “The vocal fabric and dialogue are practically nonexistent, especially in contrast to the pronounced iron rhythm of the visual score….” The dominating aspect of this presentation is based upon the intensity of movement and juxtaposition of different speeds inside the same image. The image creates an emotional release. This effect is achieved by means of a prevailing landscape of slow processions and fragile gestures. Occasionally a running figure enters into the stage space, crossing end to end on the stage from right to left. The motion is stable and as regular as a metronome. This timing was captured in the same way in another production titled *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*.

In Wilson’s theatrical performances, the space is not divided into points but moments. This concept of space stretches the length of the stage to an hour. The passivity of contemplation can be overcome by the active participation of the audience through physical effort. In *Overture*, a 24-hour work performed in Paris in 1972, a time comes when actors just lie down on the stage with the audience half asleep on their seats. Here one sees a total immersion of theatrical form with the spectator. According to Quadri:

[It is] a prelude to a theatrical idea: to see a consenting spectator emerge at intervals from his own lethargy, opening his eyes every fifteen minutes in order to convince himself that nothing has been changed and, from inside that heightened perception of time, noting with emotion the insignificance of gesture, changing colors, overlapping rhythm, and enduring the sound
of scream while suspended in a strange hypnotic dimension requiring uninterrupted and unconditioned participation.\textsuperscript{28}

The idea behind this slow motion is not concentrated on psychology but on behavior. Elaborating on the naturalness of time in his plays, Wilson maintains: “We are not dealing with slow motion… but natural time. The scene is aided by accelerated time, but I use the natural time that helps the sun to set, a cloud to change, a day to dawn. I allow the audience time to reflect, to mediate on other things besides those which are happening on the stage; I allow them time and space to think.”\textsuperscript{29}

In \textit{Einstein on the Beach} (1976, figs. 14, 15, 16, 17), Wilson’s theatrical style remained quite abstract, but with the reality of self-expression. The use of the numbers one, two, three, one, two, three, are sung in such a way that nothing can be related to Einstein and his theories. The same is true for \textit{A Letter for Queen Victoria} (1977), where one encounters the same type of repetition of numbering and words (figs.18,19,29), and performance of these numbers seems to devour the universe from which they are being born. In \textit{A Letter for Queen Victoria} and \textit{Einstein on The Beach}, sound reiterates and dominates, determining the movement of the scenes, and seems to restate the theme of equilibrium and creates a balance between opposite forces. The plot of \textit{Einstein} relies on the relationship between actor and stage. Actors play with different instruments, simultaneously making symmetrical gestures and contrasting movements. In the backdrop a set of lights illuminates the back of the stage, and angular and circular lines direct and animate the movements of the work. Like a trajectory of two flying pendulums these illuminated lines move, in depth and height,
horizontally and vertically, like two swings in the void “functioning as both human
containers and symbol of time.”

*A Letter for Queen Victoria* dramatizes an upper class in pseudo-operatic
costumes. According to Bonne Marranca *A Letter for Queen Victoria* cannot be viewed
as an opera in a conventional sense. Because it is “…lacking singers, its arias are
merely verbal declamation. Nonetheless, the vision of this work is operatic, structured
by themes that recur throughout the performance like leitmotifs, rather than by
conventional plot.” It has no narrative structure, no real beginning and no end to the
piece. Almost every act starts with a tableau, gradually adding more people to it.
Different objects appear during the course of time which seem to have no relationship
with the text or characters. Performers are numbered rather than named. A
juxtaposition of unrelated aspects is evident; however, the process of transformation is
continuous.

*the CIVIL warS* is a multinational production. Employing different languages,
the performance was created in six countries. The first section of the performance
premiered on 6 September 1983 at the Schouwbourg in Rotterdam. The second section
was produced at the Schauspiel Köln on 19 January 1984. On 26 March 1984, the
Rome Opera premiered the third section of the production. The American production,
which premiered on 26 April 1984, was called *Knee Plays* (figs. 20, 21) and was
produced by the Walker Art Center in association with the Guthrie Theater. The other
two sections were designed for Japan and France.

Embracing diverse nationalities and time periods, *the CIVIL warS* is a blend of
diverse elements and themes. There are also larger themes of the American Civil War
and the thirty-year Central European war. The sense of eclecticism is apparent at each and every step, because the project was based on a universal plan, which incorporates the diversity of national expression as well as theatrical experience.

*the CIVIL wars* also has a subtitle, “a tree is best measured when it is down.” Wilson uses the tree as a symbol of life. The best use of this symbol is made in the execution of *Knee Plays*. In the first play of *Knee Plays*, a man is shown sleeping beneath the tree. The man tries to come down but is chased by a lion. The man returns back up the tree and starts reading a book. In the second play, the tree is shown falling slowly to the ground. Against a brightly lit background some of the branches of the tree turn into a cabin. In the third section, the tree has been turned into a boat. In the fourth section, a huge bird appears on the sky and a boat is shown with people on board. The bird takes away a man from the boat. The fifth shows the boat stranded on rocks. In the sixth section, the boat is shot and set on fire. The boat breaks up into pieces near a cabin which floats near by. In the seventh, the cabin lands on the shore. In the eighth the boat hull is shown sinking into the sea. The ninth shows a basket seller. The tenth represents night, snow and a tent. People pull out the boat hull from the sea. *Knee Plays* give a sense of process. They show how a tree goes through several metamorphoses.

For the presentation of a complete performance of *the CIVIL wars*, each *Knee Play* was performed as an entr’acte. They were set between fifteen fully staged scenes in order to create a continuity of action.

Wilson’s theater and art are perhaps best understood as an assemblage. Objects, sounds, words and media are used merely for their functional value. Everything seems
to be meaningless in content, the compositions are open, and plots do not have any beginning and end. The complexity comes out of chaos that contradicts reason and out of the difficulty to perceive the hidden reality. The collage-like treatment negates an apparent order and controls the perceptive ability of the viewer.

II

An Overview of Space and Time

Manipulation of Scale

In many of his visual and theatrical performances Wilson manipulates scale in order to achieve various effects of space and time, including *The King of Spain* (fig. 22). In 1969, the Byrd Hoffman Foundation gathered forty-five non-professionals of all ages and rented the Anderson Theater for two theatrical performances of *The King of Spain*. The performance represented the self-conscious side of Wilson by bringing a giant cat’s legs into the stage space, a childhood idea that he always wanted to bring to life. By bringing thirty-foot tall legs on to the stage, Wilson introduced an illusionistic technique for the representation of theatrical space that was otherwise possible only in film or television.

Although the choice of elements was not unusual, the entire space was enclosed within a huge proscenium arch. The backdrop set was simply a painted Victorian drawing room with a central high chair upon which a seated figure was placed with its back to the audience. But the technical means through which Wilson maintained the novelty of space was his manipulation of scale. Generally the manipulation of scale is
common in television and film, because such illusions are only possible through cameras. For instance, in television and film it is quite common to show a gigantic object against a miniature one and to perceive it as convincing trompe l’oeil. In theater, however, it is unusual to achieve any such illusion. Describing one of the illusionistic devices Wilson utilizes to manipulate scale, Laurence Shyer maintains:

*The King of Spain*…introduced the first of the spectacular visual effects for which Wilson would become known: the appearance just before the final curtain of a cat so enormous that only its legs could be seen. No one can initially figure out how to rig and animate such a huge object and many of those around him urged the director to forget the whole notion. But Wilson refused to surrender his vision. He went out and punched a hundred-foot imitation fur and some giant slinkies to shape the towering legs, and eventually found someone to construct a system of pulleys and ropes that could be manipulated from the wings. The legs descended into the painted salon on cue and then moved majestically if somewhat unsteadily across the stage….³²

The enormous scale creates startling effects. At first glance the legs are so enormous that stage space seems to be divided into separate regions, thus maintaining a sense of non-linearity (fig. 25). Upon further observation, however, the viewer starts establishing a relationship between foreground, middle-ground and background while getting a sense of linearity. Although the cat’s legs in the foreground are huge and appear close, their movement is unsteady and the contours are furry, which blurs the foreground into the background. By achieving such non-conventional and startling
effects, Wilson overtures the usual concept of time and space. Wilson achieves a sense of space that is fragmented and united without sacrificing a strong effect of trompe l’oeil. Wilson acknowledged these effects in one of his statements: “so much of what I did was trompe l’oeil painting. Old-fashioned scene painting…. There were things in The King of Spain – paintings on the wall, architectural details – that were convincingly three-dimensional…there was a great quality of illusion.” Thus the gigantic cat’s legs enhance the illusionistic effect in The King of Spain and achieve a space that is startling and grand.

**Overlapping of Realistic and Non-Realistic Elements**

In another example, Wilson manipulated time and space by overlapping realistic and nonrealistic elements and in doing so achieved almost cinematographic effects. In his Memory of a Revolution (1987), Wilson showed a gigantic elephant leg plunged down in the center of tiny rats (figs. 10,11). The installation The Memory of a Revolution was a representation of a historical site, the Bastille, which is known for its fort and prison house. For centuries, the fort remained a favorite site for aristocrats. During its ransacking in 1789, a huge plaster elephant was found here. In his Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art, the art historian Robert Rosenblum states:

Of these Napoleonic resurrections of imperial splendor, the most unusual was one no longer to be seen in Paris – a huge plaster elephant at the Place de la Bastille. Originally designed in 1810 by Jacues Cellerier, a Dijon architect who had earlier participated in the creation of Republican rather
than Imperial pagentry, this great beast revived a long iconographical tradition. For Napoleon the elephant was a symbol of Caesar and of the Emperor, and as such, it contributed as fully as the Roman temples, triumphal arches and victory columns to the imperialization of Paris.”

What one sees is an unconventional theatrical experience that depends upon its divergence from established visual means for its effects. As an example, in the visual arts and theater, objects are proportioned according to the human figure so that the observer can be part of the event. In this case, however, the viewer hardly feels part of the scene; instead, he or she is caught in endless chains of incidents. Moreover the idea that strikes the beholder is a spectacular articulation of visual objects in relation to its geometric space, quaintly juxtaposed with an appalling room interior, where the *Memory of a Revolution* is displayed. The effect on a visual level seems even more stunning, when one views a gigantic elephant leg juxtaposed against a room with a very small opening. Wilson achieves the relativity of his space and time by exaggerating scale in a bizarre and unimaginable way.

To exaggerate the visual space further, Wilson carves out a tiny stone-walled room into the elephant foot, which accommodates a man wearing a late eighteenth-century costume. The space is exaggerated even more by showing a theater interior resting on the lap of the old man. Emphasizing a miniature theater in proximity to a human being, all fitted into an elephant leg, perplexes the viewers’ visual perception and directs attention away from the incommensurate and disproportionate elements. Wilson stimulates the viewer’s imagination by maximizing and minimizing the visual space in theater and the visual arts. Such dramatic use of space creates a tension between
space and time. As one follows the visual path, the space seems to be constructed and deconstructed, so that one perceives the space as a temporal phenomenon. The use of such devices is important for Wilson because he wants to concentrate not on the written text but the visual space, which he thinks can actually shape the text.

Manipulation of scale changes the spatial relation as well as the temporal dimension, because it is through space that the temporal dimension of the artifact is maintained. The mysterious relationship that Wilson aims to achieve reflects not only his vision of space but also his vision of time. In his *The King of Spain* and *The Memory of a Revolution*, time is achieved by means of pictorial space, which allows the “inexplicable and beautiful to take place.”

As Johannes Birringer writes, “His painterly and architectural sensibility can compose an alluring poetry of light and movement seemingly extended into imaginary spaces outside the representational logic of the theater or the objective space of the museum.”

In essence, scale affects the spatial elements within and outside the artifact and transforms the movement through space, controlling temporal dimension through continuous stage movements localized in disassociated zones.

**Localization of Disassociated Zones**

The localization of disassociated stage zones along with the accentuated scale may be mysterious and unacceptable for some, but for others it is a major source for maintaining a sense of modernism. Describing the Overture for *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE* (1972, fig. 1), presented at the Shiraz arts festival in Iran, Basil Langton suggests:
Everything was larger than life and often extremely theatrical. They employed mask, dance, mime, symbol – all elements of the classical tradition – and verbal and visual images were more than sur-real than real. Yet in spite of this supernatural un-reality, there was no sense of anything being performed. Everything seemed merely to exist, in its own time, its own shape, and its own dimension....”37

In his Overture for *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*, one sees great harmony between the real and surreal, the natural and supernatural.

**Performance or Picture**

Wilson uses illusionistic techniques, confusing the effects of real and unreal. Although he loved nineteenth-century tradition and always appreciated the formal visual aspects of proscenium theater, Wilson rendered space in somewhat two-dimensional means. As a visual artist and stage director, Wilson always viewed the space as a picture and not as a theatrical or sculptural space. Therefore there is always something astonishing, visible and hidden, like a charcoal drawing on paper. Tom Kamm, who worked in Wilson’s projects as a designer, says, “Bob is a pictorial artist more than a sculptural artist and there is this context in which everything exists: you have a black box with black wings and everything happens within this frame…. It’s a picture within a frame.”38

The two-dimensional effect of some of his artifacts suggests another technical means by which Wilson manipulates space—the use of lateral zones. Visually, the beholder sees a framed picture distributed by parallel strips, laid down vertically and horizontally. For instance, in *the CIVIL warS* (1983-1985), Act 1, b (Dutch Section, fig.
the stage is clearly divided into lateral zones, presenting the foreground, middle
ground and background. Its flatness and lack of perspective is devoid of any *trompe
l’oeil* effect. For the Dutch audience it is simply a “stereotypical postcard view of
Holland,” with a horizon line against which a soldier seems to make his way towards
home. A thin strip of garden in the foreground is covered with snow along with another
narrow strip of canal.

In this flat and two-dimensional landscape, Wilson heightens the dramatic
tension by means of a giant woman almost twenty feet tall standing at the extreme right
corner and facing left. The diagonal line of her arms points toward the soldier in the
background. The colossal figure of the woman connects the lateral zones with each
other, which otherwise may appear independent and isolated. Each zone gives a sense of
continuity and as the viewer moves forward he or she keeps on going ahead. The form is
open and does not come to an end, so that the process keeps on going. What is
interesting in the handling of space and time is that the artist is quite successful in
executing a space and time that keeps on moving and never stops. For instance, in the
*CIVIL wars* (fig.24), there is a small house almost in the center, which is represented in
such a way that it is being destroyed in front of our eyes, and as if we cannot see anything
else but the foundation.

To make this process successful, Wilson uses two techniques: the lateral zone and
the manipulation of scale. These two techniques have a tremendous effect on the
execution of space and time. With the unfolding of the space, the viewer encounters new
wonders at each level. There is also a totally different story presented on each level.
Each level is different in colors and execution of texture. The use of vertical and
horizontal lines adds a dramatic tension, which creates a movement that goes up and extends to the sides. In essence, the layering of the lateral zone and the gigantic figure of the women set the visual space to the scene (figs. 23, 24). The visual objects appear even further and smaller than they actually are. According to Bonnie Marranca, “The biodiversity of Wilson’s theater lyricizes both space and time.” All the lateral zones, such as the garden with a gigantic lady in the foreground, a narrow canal in the lower middle ground, the foundation of a house in the upper middle ground, a walking man in the background, all animate the theatricality of the event. As Andrzej Wirth writes about one of Wilson’s theatrical performances: “This multimedia theatrical discourse holds together through the strength of internal references and cross references… an echo within an echo, an endlessly referential incrustation in the midst of a discourse.”

With the passage of time, the lateral zones turn into even more abstract symbols. The horizontal and vertical lines juxtaposed with bold images turn into something totally different. The unfolding of space and time that results from these lateral zones transformed into a space and time that may appear entirely empty. Wilson started to invade purely abstract shapes, achieved through extreme light and dark effects. As Freddie Rokem suggests: “In Wilson’s production the black backdrop opens and closes during the performance, creating different-sized square or rectangular ‘empty spaces’ which usually are filled with a ‘white’ light, but sometimes also with a colored light.” The use of such geometrical shapes as a major source of structuring the artifacts starts from preliminary drawings. For example, some of his drawings start directly with the arrangement of geometrical shapes (e.g. a series of thirteen drawings for Einstein on the
Beach, fig. 26). Some of these shapes could be just a vacuum, but not for Wilson. Nothing is empty for him, including a stark black or highly lit plain wall.

The notion of empty space is hard to accept; however, it is definitely different than the space that might be called social space, a space that one perceives in daily life. Colin Counsell thinks that space in Wilson’s theatrical performances is different than the social space which makes his theatre unique and hard to perceive: “The events on the stage are governed by logics alien to our usual experience…the playing space is to be viewed in a way different from ordinary social space.”

Use of Empty Space

Wilson makes use of an empty space in order to give an open choice to his viewer. To perceive a space that is governed by law is different than to experience something that appears as it normally appears in life. His use of space is such that each individual will feel and interpret the space based on the interaction he has at that very moment. As Langworthy suggests, “One can find this emptiness compelling, or even interpret it as content.” Wilson himself feels that the empty space and stillness of time is an attempt to provide an opportunity to think and mediate several things at a time: “I give you time and space in which to think.” Obviously such understanding encourages personal interpretation. According to Shyer, “Wilson’s works admit all interpretations and all meanings but at the same time resist any single view.”
Use of Camera Techniques

In order to provide such freedom of time and space, Wilson also applies techniques that are very close to the camera. To maintain his desired light on the stage, Wilson simulates the action of the shutters of a camera, opening and closing to expand or eliminate light. The visual effects are pleasing, dramatic and very close to a photograph.

According to Rokem:

By changing the lighting, illuminating the backdrop, or emphasizing the lighting more on the front stage, this opening sequence already achieves striking photographic effects, as if a photograph suddenly changes from negative to positive representation of an abstract human body. Silhouette thus suddenly become transformed into human figures.47 By creating such bold effects Wilson plays with the perception of the audience. The silhouette effects are performed in multiple guises and variations. As a result, the spectator perceives a space alien to him.

Wilson keeps each shot isolated from the use of light and dark. For instance, the opening image of Danton’s Death (Alley Theater, Houston, 1992) represents a dark background, which gradually changes shades from light to dark with a black, shadow-like figure standing in the center. Later on, in the first scene, several groups start entering into the stage space. The light is arranged in such a way that each group appears to have no connection with the rest. The sequence of the images is so abrupt that each image seems to be taking place at its own time and space. There seems to be no apparent link between these images.
For example, in the first scene of *Danton’s Death*, Danton, his wife, and the card-players appear on the stage. Each group is lit at different times and, therefore, each appears isolated. Their dialogues are also fragmented, because they speak extremely slowly. They were advised to perform their dialogue in “long sustained lines rather than short pauses.” Because of such a dramatic use of light and such a fragmented dialogue, the historical event of the past became more like an act of ritual in which the real emotions of the incident can only be interpreted formally and not emotionally. According to Shyer, “though many of Wilson’s characters are drawn from history and mythology, there is little if any sense of the past in his theater…. The action does not rush headlong into the future…the length of the performance is the only timespan his actors inhibit.”

The characters dramatize the isolation and fragmentation of the existing space. In essence, they are playing not only with space but also with time. As they have been advised by Wilson, “We will need to play with time. Some parts are real time, some parts are in supernatural time, some parts are as if you were in a large room speaking to others, some are inside of your head.” Time in Wilson’s theater is not just time, passing in a sequential order, but a thing that metamorphoses into different modes and transitions—natural, supernatural, sustained, isolated or fragmented. Technically, such manipulation rarely maintains any realization of past, present and future. Yet there are ways that are utilized to overcome such problems. The use of images, sound, setting and dialogue all contribute to manipulating time.
Manipulation of Time

In some of his artifacts Wilson manipulates time by showing the past, present and future as one. In *Deafman Glance* (1970), Sheryl Sutton appears on stage like a “phantom presence.” Sutton was assigned the role of silent murderer. With a very slow action Sutton performs this ritualistic act. She appears on the stage in a high-collared Victorian dress, and stands still and silent, facing toward the back wall. There are two children on stage: a little girl sleeping completely covered with a white sheet behind Sutton, and a boy seated on a stool reading a book. To Sutton’s left is a table covered with a white sheet, upon which there is a pitcher of milk, two glasses, a napkin, a black glove and a large knife. In this dramatic setting, space and time are recoiled into one entity, through Wilson’s use of stage silence and different phases of slow motion (figs 2, 3, 4).

In front of this frozen and monochromatic scene the audience is taking their seats. In an extremely dim light, a tall black figure starts moving, turns very slowly towards the table, wears the black glove and pours milk into a glass. In extreme slow motion she moves toward the boy to feed him milk. After the boy finishes the milk, she returns to the table, cleans the knife with a cloth, returns back to the boy in the same slow motion and silence, and pushes the knife into his chest. The boy falls from the stool without any expression of pain; she gently lays him down onto the floor. She repeats the same action with the other child.

Many have perceived this scene as nothing but a construction of time. According to Sutton, “[It is] a kind of mechanism to define different phases of slow motion. It’s a way to divide time. I think the scene approaches true slow motion, not just slow motion...
for the stage but near photographic time….“51 Sometime this slowness of time is perceived as equal to something still. As Clive Barnes maintains:

Wilson rejects that speed-up… which we accept as part of the theater, and restores something of the space of real time to his world. Some things are very s-l-o-w but this does not matter. At times it is like watching cloud formations, slowly evolving their figurative suggestions, and at times, naturally more rarely, it is like watching a street accident. This is visual theater – you think of painters you might have known, and forgotten animals from your youth. But there are also literary memories as you wander rather comfortably through the landscape of Wilson’s creation, pausing to ruminate, ponder or wonder about it. It is theater that deliberately gives you time to daydream. Indeed it is theater that puts a stop to time.52

Wilson himself, however, does not want to present still or frozen time, but rather to appropriate the naturalness of time. As Barnes suggests, he rejects the idea of accelerating time because it does not allow enough time for the spectators to mediate and become immersed fully into their personal experiences and to relate them with their theatrical experiences. Wilson believes that it is slow motion that can allow the audience to think about natural time and space:

We are not dealing with slow motion but with natural time. The scene is added by accelerating time, but I use the natural time that helps the sun to set, a cloud to change, a day to dawn. I allow the audience time to reflect,
to mediate to other things besides those which are happening on stage: I allow them time and space to think.\textsuperscript{53}

Sheryl Sutton, who performed this silent role in the \textit{Deafman Glance}, thinks it is hard to perform something so slowly, because one feels as if one is losing the real perception of clock time. Elaborating on her experience of performing such slow action she says, “It’s really not possible to count out the time either and even that’s very inaccurate because you inadvertently slow the count. The way I approached the scene was to break down the action into inner cells of contrasting speeds so I could pace myself through it.”\textsuperscript{54} In watching such a slow motion the audience experiences “a kind of stopping of their inner clocks.”\textsuperscript{55} Such a process stops them from thinking of anything slow or fast, or more specifically of the horrible act of murdering. Since there is no screaming, horror nor bloodshed, it is easy to “translate the slow motion and minimalist actions into a kind of mental terror.”\textsuperscript{56} The performance of “Byrdwoman” as Wilson calls her, seems full of ambiguities, where love of a mother in the form of feeding milk and her act of killing her children is a contradiction. The contrast is also explicit in the use of colors. The use of white against black raises several connotations, such as life and death, purity and sin. These contradictions and paradoxes have a strange power, which accelerates the stillness of time. It is here that watching the silent action does not stop going through the eternal journey.

The stillness of Byrdwoman seems mythic and timeless, but she is actually present everywhere. Wilson conceives her character more like a figure in a painting or a statue. The painting effect has been enhanced not only by her stillness and silence but also by means of the whole setting surrounding her. According to Sutton:
You look at her in the same way you would look at the sea. You can watch for a long time and just have your thoughts. I think we’re attracted to her in the same way we’re attracted to certain portraits. That’s what the Byrdwoman is for me, she’s a portrait, a three-dimensional painting. That’s why she was always somehow the essence of Bob’s work because he’s really a painter. You can stare at a painting in a very impersonal way because it doesn’t stare back at you. And good paintings also awaken some emotion in you. It’s very unusual to have that relationship with the actor.  

Silence as a Non-Verbal Language

Wilson creates a relationship between his characters and audience that is possible to produce only through painting. The technical means that Wilson utilizes in order to produce such an effect is non-verbal language or silence. For Wilson, language is a great barrier in producing something real. He believes thinking about dialogue distracts the character from gaining a real essence of the situation. He rejects the idea of providing specific training to the actors because such training teaches them to interpret the text rather than to perform it. He complains of theater with more of a concentration on text, because the actors “worry about how to speak words and know nothing about their bodies. You see that by the way they walk they don’t understand the weight of a gesture in space. A good actor can command an audience by moving one finger.”

By elaborating the visual language in his theater, Wilson emphasizes its importance. He states that the: “Visual is not an afterthought, not an illustration of the text. It has equal importance. If it tells the same story as the words, why look?” It is
this power of the visual that he wanted to achieve through silence. Although several other dramatists had made use of this technique, it is only in Wilson’s hand that silence gained the classification of ritual and established him “as a prophet of silence.”

Comparing the length of silence in Beckett’s play with that of Wilson’s productions, playwright Eugene Ionesco observes:

Beckett succeeded in creating a few minutes of silence on stage, while Robert Wilson was able to bring about a silence [in the Deafman Glance] that lasted for four hours. He surpassed Beckett in this: Wilson being more rich and more complex with his silence. His silence is a silence that speaks.

For Ionesco, silence in Wilson’s productions speaks, but for Susan Sontag it is a “perceptual therapy.” In Wilson’s production silence itself becomes a strong metaphor to reflect the inner force of the artist’s vision. It becomes the major force to convey the message, and on occasion proves to be more powerful than the language. To translate such untranslatable theatrical experiences, one needs to understand Wilson’s new methods of structuring. As Sontag suggests, “What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.” Without learning to see, hear and feel more, one will find nothing else but a paradox between the proper understanding of visual images and clarity of meaning and there will always be “something inexplicable … at the core of Wilson’s work,” writes Langworthy. Wilson advised critics not to think about a story because one cannot find any. Even avoid hearing the words, because “you just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangement in time and space, the music, the feeling they all evoke. Listen to the Pictures.”
The scenery that Wilson built out of the architectural arrangement of time and space shows his process of development as an artist. His visual arts and theatrical performances are products of unrelated elements, images, narratives, sounds and lights. The architectural arrangements of these elements are usually devoid of any particular relation or unity; instead they play a separate role in the course of time like an independent path. While the overall effect appears to be discontinuous, there is always something that exists in relation to the other. Wilson sees such discontinuities as the naturalness of life, where unrelated incidences seem to correspond at a certain time.

Wilson explains this process in the following words:

It’s just like when you’re driving a car and listening to Mozart. You look out the window and see the grass blowing and it looks like the grass is moving to the music. And maybe it is. It changes just at the moment the music changes. Or you imagine a connection.66

The understanding of Wilson’s artifacts is based upon the perceptual ability of the viewer. He believes that “the audience has the same role as the author, the director, or the actor. All of us are engaged in the process of asking ‘what is it?’ We don’t try to say what it is or what it means.”67 The statement reinforces the inherent indeterminacy of Wilson’s artifacts where naturalness is a process of imaginative construction, open to multiple interpretations. These multiple interpretations are neither naturalness nor illusion. The images are not representations, therefore they do not add up to the content. As a result, the viewer perceives nothing else but the indeterminacy of objective existence, non-linearity of time and fragmentation of space. There seems to be no relationship between cause and effect.
From this perspective Wilson’s artifacts can be viewed not simply as a construction of reality but something beyond reality, a construction of the imagination, open to the unexpected. Philip Glass speaks about this particular aspect of the artifacts: “Art and culture are invented. We make them up. Otherwise they don’t exist. We live with our culture so closely that we think of Art as something that has its own natural, independent existence. But obviously, it does not … because art has to do with people.” The art is created not simply for art’s sake, but for a synthesis of life and art. Therefore, the naturalness Wilson usually claims is actually the synthesis of art, life and culture. This synthetic approach to art is best understood if one briefly examines the vast landscape of Wilson’s criticism and the historical time period that was in part responsible for generating his approach to art.

III

Robert Wilson’s Art from a Historical Perspective

In 1962, when Wilson arrived in New York, the contemporary art scene was undergoing significant changes which had a great impact in shaping the art of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and even later periods. It was a time when artists from all disciplines were looking for new ways of representation. Annoyed with the old concept of “art for art’s sake,” artists were seeking a kind of art that they could relate to their own lives. Visual artists wanted to get rid of Abstract Expressionism, which believed that art was “inseparable from the biography of the artist.” In the wake of such a paradigm shift, they arrived at a new perception and experimented with new aesthetics and ideologies. Thus, a novel way of looking at art developed in the 1950’s, which eventually shattered
the formal approaches of Abstract Expressionism. These new art forms can be specified under numerous categories, such as Junk Art, Environmental Art, Happenings, Pop Art and Minimalism.

This re-evaluation of art also brought another significant change to the fate of American artists. They started gaining increased recognition in Europe and their work began to be collected in European museums. In some cases, artists were even better recognized in Europe than in America. Robert Wilson’s name can be placed in the list of such artists who were praised more abroad than in their homeland. For instance, his *Deafman Glance* was awarded the Critics Award for Best Foreign Play in Paris (1970) and the Drama Desk Award for Direction in New York (1971). Moreover, Wilson faced several difficulties in the development of his career in America. For instance, when *Einstein on the Beach* was being considered as one of the most innovative operas by international critics, the Library of Congress was repeatedly refusing to copyright its visual part. He was so disappointed by such incidents that he spoke with despair, “I am American, I do not want to spend the rest of my life as an expatriate, but it is hard to do innovative work at home. Creativity is being repressed in America.”

In spite of such difficulties, artists continued experimenting with new forms, ideologies and aesthetics. Beginning their career as Abstract Expressionists, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage presented art that incorporated objects and motifs from their immediate surroundings. The major change occurred when John Cage presented his theory of the “interchangeability of art and life.” At the New School for Social Research, Cage offered a class on experimental music composition. He attempted to gather artists from all disciplines and to allow them to exchange their ideas and
techniques. Since the concentration was on “non-narrative and non-traditional forms of performance,” the results were fundamental in shaping the new experimental forms of art, which found their expression in the following years. In spite of the diversity of expression during this important phase of transition, it is possible to trace some of the major traits of the experimental art of the late 1950’s and 60’s: 1) The artistic field was open to experimentation. 2) Genres and media were intermixed. 3) Linear and planned structures turned into fragmented and non-linear forms. 4) Preference for chance and indeterminacy appeared in almost every discipline.

The most enthusiastic representation of the idea of chance and indeterminacy was offered by Cage, who in 1952 created 4’33”, which was presented by the pianist David Tudor. The composition surprised the audience because Tudor did not play anything for the whole duration of the piece.

The inclusion of chance and the creation of artistic concepts out of ordinary objects had been explored in the 1910’s by the Dadaists. The idea created by Cage, however, was still unique because now the artwork did not include pronouncements of anti-art, nor was it “art for art’s sake,” but rather it was a representation of the social and cultural condition of humanity. Now common objects were presented in order to pronounce some sort of social reality rather than hate for art and condemnation of social and cultural values. Cage’s efforts to create an interdisciplinary performance continued. In one of his piano compositions, entitled Water Music (1952), the pianist simply poured water from pots. The composition was completed with numerous visual activities happening simultaneously on stage.
The idea of pouring water in Cage’s composition anticipates Robert Wilson’s *Ka MOUNTAIN* (1972), where Sutton appears on the stage, stands at a high table and pours water from a pitcher. But there is an apparent difference between these two similar acts. Cage wanted an interdisciplinary performance representing daily activities of people. Wilson, on the other hand, wants to make this simple act of pouring water a ceremony, where simple activity becomes more classic and takes the form of a ritual. It is not simply the act but the manner of presentation that makes this ordinary act more ritualistic, primitive and ceremonial and at the same time different from Cage and his followers.

Cage’s student Allan Kaprow was particularly impressed by his theories of the interchangeability of art and life. He continued experimenting with Cage’s ideas. In the fall of 1959 at the Reuben Gallery he displayed one of his environment pieces, entitled *18 Happenings in Six Parts*. The gallery was divided into three parts, and was brightened with pink and deep, pale blue. The form was non-linear and fragmented. There was no particular subject nor any story presented, nor was any particular music composed for this project. The performers were not specially trained for this show, but were members of the audience. In fact, there was no need to be professional for the presentation of such simple daily life activities such as standing, walking, and playing. It is noteworthy, however, that most of the activities were very well calculated; for instance, a man stood for sixteen seconds resting his hands on his hips, and then the same man started flapping his arms like a bird. These simple activities were overlapped with a variety of sounds of recorded voices. The dramatic effect was enhanced by turning lights on and off throughout the show.76 Light played a major role in the art of Kaprow and some other artists of this period, as it does in the art of Wilson, who uses light in his theater as a
painter would use light in his paintings. In Wilson’s theater, light has become a medium which communicates not only space but also the whole idea, as in his own words:

Light is the most important part of theater. It brings everything together, and everything depends on it. From the beginning I was concerned with light, how it reveals objects, how objects change when light changes, how light creates space, how space changes when light changes. Light determines what you see and how you see it… I paint, I build, I compose with light. Light is a magic wand.\(^{77}\)

For their performances, Environmental artists introduced another direction for future art: the participation of the audience. In Kaprow’s show, the *Words* (1962), the audiences were asked to write their own phrases on the constructed partitions. At that time, during which Kaprow was searching for new ways of interchanging life and art by eliminating the distance between spectator and artwork, Red Grooms was attempting to fuse the Abstract Expressionist’s notion of the act of creation into performance. At this point everything looked like performance, and purity of genre was eliminated.

Almost all of the major artists of Happenings, such as Kaprow, Dine, Hansen, Whitman and Dick Higgins were working on a similar ground; however, it was Oldenburg’s *Snapshots from the City* that blended painting effects with that of theater. *Snapshots from the City* was based on thirty-two tableaux, representing danger, misery, and deprivation. Participants wore elaborate costumes and presented stereotyped characters. The recurrent use of flashlights made this performance even more like a painting. According to a Judson Gallery press release, *Snapshots from the City* was “a painting in the shape of theater.”\(^{78}\)
The idea of fusing painting effects into performance and theatrical events became the foundation of Robert Wilson’s art. After working for more than twenty years as a visual artist, he gradually started mixing his artistic skills with theater. The result was his 1980’s exhibition organized by the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, which was an apparent attempt to fuse painting and theater in the form of tableaux. He always emphasized that “I am a visual artist, I think spatially.” Even for his theatrical productions he proclaimed: “When I make a play, I start with a form, even before I know the subject matter, I start with the visual structure, and in the form I know the content.” For Wilson each line in his theater is symbolic; it has become a language of his artifacts in order to explain meaning. For him “All shape is semantic. In great works of art the deepest significance is transmitted to the eye with powerful directness by the perceptual characteristics of the compositional pattern.” When the visual composition took charge of narrative, there remained no need to emphasize plot. The artists of Happenings had already thrown away the idea of plot and structure. It seemed obvious that there was no need and no scope for such formalities, because Happenings were usually based on found objects or even junk, collected from the streets. By showing the most ignored aspect of life they gave emphasis to life itself, as in Kaprow’s words: “the passive and the active sides of a single coin.” Along with Happenings another group of artists emerged, Fluxus. It is believed that it was George Maciunas who executed the first concert under the title of Fluxus in September 1962 in Wiesbaden, West Germany. It is also Maciunas who is held responsible for the first American Fluxus concert in 1964 in New York. Fluxus attempted to merge the boundaries between music and performance. They also augmented Cage’s concept of chance, with which they had experimented in Cage’s
class at the New School. For instance, for his *Time Table*, George Brecht asked the
performers to go to the train station and pick a number from their timetable. The
performers picked the number 3:25, which was considered the actual time for
presentation, and all the activities of the train station within this time period were
considered part of the composition. Their insistence on time goes back to the Dadaist
artist, Tristan Tzara, who repeated the single word “roar” 147 times, alternating with the
phrase “who still considers himself very charming.” Brecht’s inclusion of chance and
single words and phrases changed the direction of performance. For instance, his *String
Quartet* consists of the words “shaking hands.” The idea behind such performances was
to provoke the audience’s perceptual participation and enrich their imagination. In *A
Letter for Queen Victoria*, Robert Wilson makes a similar use of repetition of words; for
instance, in act 1, section 2, the audience has a taped recording of Christopher from off-
stage, repeating, PIRUP, PIRUP, PIRUP. Again in act 1, section 4, Chris enters and
repeats the word, “SPUPS” thirty-six times.

Haskel maintains that one important element that was developed by Fluxus was
the use of a “typographic style similar to that in Dada publications.” Maciunas’ use of
typography had a major impact on the development of art. He printed many
announcements and labels and even artists’ broadsides. He encouraged artists to use
typography in their creative works. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, Robert Wilson makes
use of this technique on a grand level by composing some of his sets with a single word
as a backdrop (fig. 29).

Although La Monte Young and his colleagues, Walter de Maria and Robert
Morris (sculptors), Simon Forti and Robert Dunn (dancers), Joseph Byrd and Richard
Maxfield (musicians) and Jackson Mac Low (poet) were working along with the Happenings artists, they are generally placed under the category of Fluxus. For instance, in his *Composition 1960 # 5*, instead of playing any instrument, Young released some butterflies into the air.\(^8^9\)

The reason that this particular period is important for the understanding of Robert Wilson’s art is twofold. First we see a revival of Dadaist techniques, which have frequently been applied by the artists of the 1950’s and beyond. Among them the most important is the use of found objects. George Brecht displayed an ordinary white porcelain sink at Reuben Gallery, entitled *Sink* (1963), obviously reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). Conceptually the two artifacts are different in approach. While Duchamp’s *Fountain* is a proclamation of anti-art and a presentation of vacuous passion, Brecht’s *Sink* is a representation of his age. It makes an attempt to capture the earthiness of life, while at the same time emphasizing the detached and commercial side of the object. Another composition by Brecht, entitled *Clothes Tree* (1963), is based on a painted clothes-tree with three hats, one coat, and two umbrellas. The disinterestedness of these simple commercial objects is also taken by Pop artists, who replaced them with found objects of Happening and Fluxus’ artists into found images. Since their aim was just to provoke the audience’s imagination and perception, they made use of every imaginable activity that could meet their goal. Sometimes the activity may be as small as to read a one-line poem. These miniature performances roused the idea of reductionism. Later this notion of reductionism found its extensive expression in Minimalist art.

Reductionist techniques were also applied to dance. Inspired by Cage’s theory of chance, indeterminacy and interchangeability of life, dancers tried to avoid traditional
choreographic methods. They also turned away from the self-conscious and highly emotional style of Martha Graham. Instead they preferred a dance style based on randomly chosen compositions, tasks and activities from everyday life. The dancers who were active at this time (1960) belonged to two major groups: the Judson Dance Theater and the Merce Cunningham Studio. In his footnotes, Haskell mentions the collaboration of Merce Cunningham and Cage. In 1944 they participated in a joint performance, in which Cage and Cunningham were asked to compose time-structured music. Haskell also establishes Cunningham’s relationship with Martha Graham, where he remained the principal dancer of the company until 1945. If one looks at the development of these two groups, it becomes easier to trace a movement from reductionism to mannerist and baroque effects. This gradual shift is interesting when one sees its impact on the art of Robert Wilson. Holmberg confesses, “Anyone interested in understanding Wilson should look at Denby’s writings on Balanchine and Cunningham.” Robert Wilson acknowledges this inspiration in a lengthy statement:

When I arrived in New York in the early sixties to study architecture, I went to Broadway to see plays. I hated them and still do. Then I saw the work of George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet. I liked that very much and still do. The first major influence on my work was Balanchine’s choreography. I was fascinated by his abstract ballets—no story, just the visual rhythms of bodies moving through space. I liked the architectural patterns. I even liked his story ballets because the performers maintained a distance. The best dancers danced for themselves, not for the audience; their interpretations were for themselves. So the audience had
more space to think about what it was experiencing. In contrast, the actors on Broadway overinterpreted their roles. Later I saw the ballets of Merce Cunningham. I liked them very much and still do. They were abstract constructions of time and space.  

This statement is important for understanding Robert Wilson’s art. It acknowledges an indirect influence of Cage and his ideas, coming through Merce Cunningham and several other artists who worked along with him. Art of the 1950’s should be considered an important phase, because it was the time when Cage introduced his theories of art that had a great impact on Happenings and Fluxus. Robert Wilson was not directly involved or influenced by Cage’s students or any of his theories. But one can trace such influences through other sources. For instance, in his above statement Wilson mentions the inspiration of Merce Cunningham, who collaborated with Cage in 1952, when Cage arranged some performances at Black Mountain College (North Carolina) during their summer session. 

This brief survey of the art of the 1950’s and 60’s is important for our understanding of Robert Wilson’s art. This period is an archive of eclecticism and experimentation. There is a great deal of disregard for unification; instead, one sees a diversification in form, structure and theme. The movement developed two major concepts: the interchangeability of life and art, and chance and indeterminacy. 

Artists started to work collectively. They exchanged their ideas and shared their talents and disciplines. They made every effort to bring life closer to art. At the professional level a sense of artlessness increased, because artists attempted to provide an equal opportunity to the audience in order to create a more life-like effect. The
accommodation of non-professionals increased the diversification and eliminated the sense of unity. The result was a kind of juxtaposition of different elements without any specific meaning. There was no need to make any attempt to make art meaningful, because art was what was there, meaning everything presented was not simply a thing but a piece of art. On the other hand, audiences were free to construct their own interpretations. The use of found objects was again an appreciation for mundane and artless forms. The ultimate result was something emotionless and expressionless. The rejection of conventional narrative and expressive intent was sacrificed at the hands of non-narrative and non-conventional form. In some cases the narrative was reduced to a single line or single word. Silence and physical movements became the languages of the artifacts, creating a dialogue between process and product. Robert Wilson’s art also shares these new formal elements and organizational principles. This eclecticism is termed collage by the critics. In order to produce a collage-like effect, Robert Wilson did not make any attempt to fuse the variety of elements he used for his productions. Instead he emphasized his reliance on juxtaposition, which enhanced contrast and gave a sense of image rather than reality.

IV

A Brief Survey of Wilson’s Criticism

The above historical survey suggests that at the time Robert Wilson started working, the traditional way of looking at art had already been outdated. Artists were enthusiastically experimenting with Cage’s theories of chance and indeterminacy, as well as his notion of the interchangeability of art and life. Changing with the cultural and
social demands, contemporary theater and visual arts were radically being transformed into a mixture of styles. In Robert Wilson’s art, this eclecticism and experimentation took the form of collage, a term that “describes not only Robert Wilson’s art but his process and evolution as an artist; it is the basis of everything he does in theater.”

Moreover, the final production of Wilson’s theater and visual arts was usually based on a variety of assemblages and the outcome of several unrelated images, dialogues, characters, sounds and media. Interestingly, like a collage, all the elements seem to reflect their own identity. In other words, characters, sound, design and text are usually juxtaposed, yet also exist independently; each element has its own layer and participates in the perceptual process autonomously. The idea of juxtaposition enhances the contrast between the elements and thus emphasizes its effect.

In the visual arts, especially in his charcoal drawings and sketches, Wilson achieved this juxtaposition by elaborating on extreme dark and light effects. His dependence on juxtaposition gave a sense of image rather than a reality. But it is this image-like rendering that according to Wilson gave his ideas a real and natural effect. Wilson often told his performers, “Whatever you are doing, it’s all one thing.” An extraordinary dependence on independence let Louis Aragon (a Surrealist writer) declare that Wilson’s works are “an extraordinary freedom machine.”

Critics have long been struggling to accommodate Robert Wilson’s art under one category or another. Referring to his early period, Craig Owens identifies some of the minimalist tendencies in Robert Wilson’s art: “Repetition, extended duration, geometric patterning—all familiar minimalist strategies—are frequently applied in his works.” Katherine E. Kelly in the Theatre Journal (October 1993) has also recognized some of
the minimalist tendencies in one of his productions, namely, Danton’s Death. Pointing towards the minimalist characteristics of the production, Kelly acknowledges: “Robert Wilson’s adaptation of Büchner’s play is a sort of literary three-dimensional painting of history in his minimalist signature…."

Minimalism is not the only source that can be traced in Robert Wilson’s art. There are several other features that can be traced back in the theater and visual arts movements of the 1960’s and the 1970’s. Wilson himself, however, denies any association with these artistic practices. Rejecting Arthur Holmberg’s idea that his theatre seems to come from the 1960’s, he replies:

No, I came out of it. I hated the theatre in the 60s. I was never part of that movement. What I was doing did not resemble the Living Theatre, The Open Theatre or the Performance Group. I went against everything they were doing. I loathed the way their theatre looked. I had more in common with the nineteenth-century theatre and vaudeville than with those groups. I was formalistic. I used the proscenium arch. My theatre was interior, and I treated the audience with courtesy. When New York was going for Minimalism in a big way, I was doing rich baroque pieces like Stalin and Deafman Glance."

Some of his collaborators also see him differently than the critics. For instance, Sheryl Sutton puts her opinion in these words: “Oddly enough, Wilson’s theatre is really classical theater in that the stage is very separate from the audience.”

These few examples reflect the inherent difficulty that one faces in analyzing Wilson’s art. The quandary comes from the conflicting modes of representation, which
raises the question regarding how one can break down the barrier and fill up the gaps between multiple and incommensurate systems of representation. For instance, presenting a scene in *KA MOUNTAIN* in 1972, Sutton appeared on the stage in a white Victorian dress, stood at a high table, and poured water from a pitcher, “a pitcher which never ran out, an action without end.”

In this scene an action started “long before the water comes and the volume of the pitcher is such that if you only pour a thin stream it can go on for a very long time.” Such problems appear in the structuring of the artifacts but one faces such puzzles at multiple levels. Bonnie Marranca in her *Ecologies of Theater: Essays at the Century Turning*, points to similar uncertainties: “Wilson problematizes the issue of rupture, dislocation. His *Forest* is part fable, part fiction, now epic, now science.”

The eclecticism observed in Wilson’s art resists any categorical labeling such as Minimalism, Naturalism (as he thinks about his work) and Classicism, and makes his work difficult to analyze. To better understand Robert Wilson’s art, the following chapter will outline some of the major rubrics of Chaos Theory and Postmodernism, which in turn will be applied to Robert Wilson’s visual arts and theatrical performances.
Chapter 2

Where do Wilson’s Art, Chaos Theory
And Postmodernism Intersect?

Robert Wilson’s Memory/Loss (Venice 1993, figs. 5, 6) is an installation that represents a man more than half buried in a cracked clay floor. At the Venice Biennale in 1993, the installation was awarded first prize in sculpture. The sculpture expresses feelings of anguish and pain through spatial, temporal and formal elements. Jamie James elaborates on some of the formal elements of the installation: “The piece is easily described: the interior of a long room was caked with mud that cracked after it dried. A single window at the far end admitted a bit of artificial light. In the middle of the room, emerging from the floor, was a wax bust of a man wearing what appeared to be a tight-fitting cap.”\(^{104}\) Wilson also provided a written piece for the audience, which was distributed at the door before they entered the display room. The written script describes the story of Mongolian torture. It states how the prisoners of wars were kept and treated. The story specifically mentions those prisoners who were captured in wars and were not executed. Their heads were shaved and tightly tied up and covered with a camel-skin or poultice material cap. They were made to sit under the blistering sun, their caps shrinking tightly around the head after drying. Eventually the prisoners lost their memories after the turbans got too tight around their heads.\(^{105}\)

The installation also depicts several literary references related to revolution and memory. Wilson himself acknowledges that *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot is the primary source for this installation. The poem suits Wilson’s purpose because it draws
attention toward the contemporary crisis and sense of loss. The approach to this dramatic installation is provided through a narrow door, which leads to a comparatively vast room with a single window. Wilson thinks that because the entrance is so narrow, only one person can enter at a time:

So you were alone in this wide space, in another world with light of varying colors, there was also a sound installation, with my voice reading excerpts from *The Waste Land*. And that was continuously interrupted by noises, screams. During the twenty minutes or so that it lasted, the text was more or less destroyed.\(^{106}\)

In this vast and somewhat multi-dimensional space, the viewer loses the originality of the text, just like the half-buried figure of memory loss loses its clarity. According to Hans Peter Kuhn:

> The sound-space-structure is an acoustic universe in itself, separated from the outer world, and such balance depends on the position of the listener. The composition contains sound effects as dripping water, thunder, a telephone ringing, industrial sounds, a dog barking, fragmented text [from *The Waste Land*] spoken by Robert Wilson and a violin solo.\(^{107}\)

Kuhn’s statement carves out a dramatic spatial and temporal configuration, especially since the viewer is left encountering a heavily cracked surface leading to nothing but multiple lights. Furthermore, the space of this dramatic room constitutes a temporal configuration that is another construction of the artwork itself. In this dramatic piece, the actual text, *The Waste Land*, exists only through scattered words as well as through the persistent and circuitous motion of space as it unfolds in time.
Based on the disembodied monologue, the text acquires a multi-layered sensation through the enforced repetition of sound and other voices. The isolation of the spoken words reinforces the splitting of time, but seems to unite in the overlapping of sounds, lights and images in the isolated space of the room. The disjunction of the words serves to diffuse the original words, but allows the construction of new images in the imagination of the viewer. As a result, time and space are merged from a new vantage point where the viewer encounters new processes and forms. This new shift in the implication of time and space questions the general awareness of the audience and signifies a certain attitude toward chaos. The use of the word chaos here might seem strange because of the connotations it evokes. My use of this word is similar to the one that chaos theorists use to define a certain attitude of a system that is fragmented and nonlinear. In order to avoid confusion between different usages of the word chaos, it seems appropriate to have a brief look at the etymology of word.

In ancient Greek etymology chaos signifies an infinite space and has its associations with abyss, chasm or gulf. Hesiod in his *Theogony* imbued chaos with the original condition of things. Hayles suggests that “narrating the birth of the world as a story of increasing differentiation of form, the *Theogony* depicts chaos both as not-form and the background against which the creation of form takes place.” By some Greek accounts chaos is regarded as a pre-creation state, when order was not enjoined with the elements of the earth. Since chaos is seen as a primitive and primordial state out of which the order of the universe evolved, in several mythological interpretations chaos is believed to be the “first state of the universe.”
From the classical period onward “chaos” and “cosmos” have been viewed as a paradox between order and disorder, linearity and nonlinearity, finiteness and infinity and, above all, parts and whole. Suggestions of such incongruity are also explicit in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, when he proclaims:

Before ocean was, or earth or heaven,

Nature was all alike, a shapeless,

Chaos….  

Here and in several other Greek and Roman accounts, chaos appears to be inseparable from order, uniformity or equilibrium. It was suggested that order is something that can “be classified, analyzed, encompassed within rational discourse; disorder was allied with chaos and by definition could not be expressed except through statistical generalizations.”

My object here is to make use of Chaos Theory to engender an understanding of indeterminate, unpredictable and chaotic use of time and space in Robert Wilson’s art. Although the word chaos is not new, few people are aware of the way chaos theorists use it. The traditional view of examining chaos has greatly changed in the last forty years. In recent re-evaluations chaos is being viewed as a great source of information. Moreover, the chaos-order paradox is being conceptualized not in a paradoxical formation but in an analogous way. Consequently a new kind of theory, specifically, Chaos Theory, is making its way into the sciences and even into literature. According to Hayles: “At the center of chaos theory is the discovery that deep structures of order are hidden within the unpredictability of chaotic systems. ‘Chaos’ in this usage denotes not true randomness, but the orderly disorder characteristic of these systems.”
Chaos Theory reexamines the usual methods of formalizing a system through mathematics and physics and makes new observations in order to understand the complex system and behaviors of chaotic systems. A. B. Cambel defines Chaos Theory as “a collection of mathematical, numerical, and geometrical techniques that allows us to deal with nonlinear problems to which there is no explicit general solution.”

Generally, there is not any single definition to explain Chaos Theory. According to Cambel, “It is a heterogeneous amalgam of different techniques of mathematics and science. Systems that upon analysis are found to be nonlinear… and that incorporate randomness so that they are sensitive to initial conditions and have strange attractors are said to be chaotic.” Because of the unusual nature of this critical tool to be used, an examination of the major rubrics of Chaos Theory is important in order to lay the basis for their application to Wilson’s art. I will begin with the linguistic intricacy of the term Chaos Theory, because the science of chaos is distinguished from the conventional usage of chaos, where the former is carefully defined term for nonlinear processes and forms. The science of chaos envisions unpredictability, indeterminacy, void, noises and nonlinearity as a means of new information. It rejects the Newtonian notion of predictability, which envisions the universe through preconceived time and space.

Chaos Theory concentrates on irregular forms, in contrast to Newtonian mechanics that are basically “scale-invariant.” It demonstrates that the statements relevant to one scale level cannot be true for a different scale level. Chaos Theory also rejects the idea that a small cause can lead to small effects; it states that a small cause can
be responsible for bigger and unpredictable effects. Hayles further explicates the differences between Chaos Theory and the Newtonian paradigm:

The difference between the two paradigms is expressed by the icons often associated with them. Whereas the Newtonians focused on the clock as an appropriate image for the world, chaos theorists are apt to choose the waterfall. The clock is ordered, predictable, regular, and mechanically precise; the waterfall is turbulent, unpredictable, irregular, and infinitely varying in form. The change is not in how the world actually is—neither clocks nor waterfall are anything—but in how it is seen. The broadest implication of [chaos theory] derives from this change.¹¹⁸

Broadly speaking, there are two major emphases that exist in Chaos Theory. In the first, chaos is differentiated from factual randomness. According to Hayles, “Where truly random systems show no discernible pattern when they are mapped into phase space, chaotic systems contract to a confined region and trace complex patterns within it.”¹¹⁹ In order to show that chaos can have patterned structures in it, scientists such as Benoit Mandelbrot and Edward Lorenz concentrated on fractal geometry and strange attractors. They focused on multi-dimensionality, freedom of creation, decay and random fluctuation of information, and showed how by tracing recursive symmetries and self-similarities one can see pockets of patterned behavior into disordered systems. They mapped the behavior of a system in a phase space.

Phase space is an abstract space that allows things to move into any possible dimension. It is one of the most important spatial modeling tools in physics. According to Camble, “the concept of phase space is used when dealing with complex
systems…system consists of a variety of discrete elements…this is not a regular, symmetrical, and neat coordinate system as we are accustomed to….“120 It is an abstract space, which has the ability to be stretched and folded over, not only to normal dimensions of height, length and width, but also to their associated velocity.

Generally any time-oriented process can be mapped in a phase space. Freedom of dimensionality is required to build a system in a phase space. Scientists usually use the motion of a single and double pendulum in order to show the ordered and random behavior of a system. Later in this chapter, it will be demonstrated how the behavior of a double pendulum is different from that of a single pendulum. At this point it is important to know that the motion of a single pendulum behaves in a very ordered fashion, on which Newtonian mechanics are based. The motion of a double pendulum is difficult to calculate, especially if the motion of both pendulums is different from each other, because of the indeterminacy involved in the system. The use of phase space is important for understanding the system’s overall behavior, because it shows how a system changes during its journey into the phase space. In both examples the pendulum moves into space, and the area that is occupied by the motion and the momentum are recorded, in order to see a system’s behavior in space and its evolution or decline through time. Phase space, therefore, plays a highly important role in mapping space and time. As N. Katherine Hayles suggests:

The phase space diagram shows how these snapshots change over time. It has as many dimensions as there are variables in the system. When the double planner pendulum is mapped into phase space, its orbits do not wander indiscriminately but stay within a confined region. Within this
region no two orbits ever exactly coincide… [their strangeness is apparent by the way they] combine pattern with unpredictability, confinement with orbits that never repeat themselves.121

The second branch concentrates on non-linear processes. Generally, the scientists of this branch come under the term “complexity science.” With their focus on order out of chaos, these scientists concentrate on the properties of fluid motion and self-organization. Their common themes are weather patterns, population growth, prices on the international exchange and the study of the flow of information. All are open dissipative systems because they take their input from outside in order to generate entropy (the measure of disorder). The Nobel Prize winner Illya Prigogine is a main figure of this branch.122

Robert Wilson’s Memory/Loss is an interesting example that explicates some of the methodological implications of Chaos Theory in relation to space and time. One of the most effective uses of such an analysis arises by adopting methods which can trace the fragmented, chaotic and fractal nature of a system. In Chaos Theory one such method is known as the strange attractor. Before I employ this method for the purpose of analysis, I shall explain its technical meaning. The terms attractor and strange can be defined separately. In science, attractor refers to a system’s behavior when it is set in motion. Following the motion of the system, scientists look for the attractor, which seems to pull out the motion toward it. Shaking water in a glass provides the simplest example of an attractor, called a fixed-point attractor. It is obvious that every time the water will be shaken it will return to rest at the same point. This resting point can be called the attractor. The attractor will be strange when the particles will continue to
move in a random motion and there will not be a single but “quasi-periodic cycle” in motion. As James Gleick observes:

The strange attractor lives in phase space…. In phase space the complete state of knowledge about a dynamical system at a single instant in time collapses to a point. That point is the dynamical system – at that instant. At the next instant, though, the system will have changed, ever so slightly, and so the point moves.¹²³

As soon as the point moves from its original path everything changes and the cycle can never get back exactly to the same starting point. A *strange attractor* is thus a broader term that is usually applied to a complicated, dynamic system in order to analyze its behavior in space as it evolves through time.

In a system, strange attractors behave in a contradictory manner and demonstrate extremely complex behavior. In 1963 Edward Lorenz developed a method of articulating unpredictable behavior of turbulent and quasi-periodic systems.¹²⁴ *The Lorenz Attractor* (fig. 27) represents a two-dimensional mapping of three-dimensional phenomena that shows points along a certain route following a path around the strange attractor without repeating their path. In such systems the route never passes through the same point twice, and motion remains always unstable and somewhat periodic.¹²⁵ According to Lorenz:

It implies that two [initial] states differing by imperceptible amounts may eventually evolve into two considerably different states. If, then, there is any error whatever in observing the present state – and in any real system
such errors seem inevitable – an acceptable prediction of an instantaneous
state in the distant future may well be impossible.\textsuperscript{126}

In such systems, the closer points get farther away, and the farther points get closer,
creating a folding and stretching. This kind of stretching and folding is known as fractal
dimension. Explaining some of the characteristics of strange attractors and fractals, A. B.
Cambel maintains:

The term ‘Strange Attractor’ is due to D. Rulle and F. Takens, who
defined it as being locally the product of Cantor set [a set of points with
more than one dimension] and a two-dimensional manifold. Such
attractors have complicated geometric properties. For example, they are
nowhere differentiable and have noninteger or fractal dimensions. The
trajectory of strange attractors does not close on itself. They are folded,
stretched, layered and undergo all sorts of contortions. The trajectories of
chaotic attractors diverge and they are sensitive to initial conditions. This
is characteristic of strange attractors and of chaos. The terms, ‘strange
attractors,’ ‘fractal attractor,’ and ‘chaotic attractor’ are sometimes used
interchangeably.”\textsuperscript{127}

If the terms strange attractor and fractal attractor can be used interchangeably, as Cambel
suggests, then how should one understand the term fractal itself? In a broader sense
fractals are irregular shapes, and Benoit Mandelbrot is credited with introducing the term.
In his opening statement to \textit{The Fractal Geometry of Nature}, Mandelbrot devises the term
fractal from the Latin word “fractus,” suggesting the use of the word for something
fragmented and irregular.\textsuperscript{128} According to Mandelbrot:
Fractals are geometrical shapes that, contrary to those of Euclid, are not regular at all. First they are irregular all over. Secondly, they have the same degree of irregularity on all scales… Nature provides many examples of fractals, for example, ferns, cauliflowers and broccoli, and many other plants, because each branch and twig is very like the whole. The rules governing growth ensure that small-scale features become translated into large-scale ones.\(^{129}\)

Harriett Hawkins suggests that by formulating several computer graphics from the mathematical equation commonly known as the “Mandelbrot set,” Mandelbrot devised great mathematical fractals (fig. 28). By choosing recognizable examples, such as the irregular shapes of mountains, clouds, and trees and the distribution of the galaxies over the universe, Mandelbrot described their mathematical description and rules that can be produced on a computer. Hawkins points out that “through iterating a relatively simple equation, the Mandelbrot set produces the most extraordinary computer graphics, rich in complexity, with graceful seashore swirls and curlicues containing graceful coils and curlicues in infinitely varied combination.”\(^{130}\)

By devising such “mechanical forgeries,” Mandelbrot devised the characteristics of fractals and self-similarities or recursive symmetries. If one observes these sets carefully, one learns that a fractal set with the characteristics of self-similarity retains its general characteristics in another set but never repeats exactly the same pattern.\(^{131}\) Like fractals, strange attractors also have the potential of showing similarities without duplication. Moreover, like Mandelbrot’s fractal, strange attractors exhibit iteration rather than repetition. But then why does one call them strange attractors and not
simply fractal attractors? There are several reasons for this particular use of the term.

Generally speaking, an attractor could be any point in a system that seems to attract the whole system toward itself. As previously mentioned, the term “attractor is [also] associated with how a system behaves after it has been set in motion.” Scientists usually refer to the midpoint of a pendulum as an attractor, because every time the pendulum is pushed it ends up at the mid-point. But the system illustrated with this example has an attractor but not a strange attractor. The system based on such a single attractor may be said to have a fixed-point attractor and not a strange attractor, because the pendulum has only one point to be attracted to. In order to construct a strange attractor Hayles suggests making use of a double pendulum:

In a single pendulum the motion is linear and its path is easy to trace. But when a double pendulum is used, the system becomes a little complex, more specifically, if the initial condition of one of these pendulums is changed, by pushing it faster than the other. Obviously, it is difficult to trace the path when two pendulums are in motion on different scale levels. The space occupied by such motion is called phase space and the point that seems to attract the whole system will be called the strange attractor, because no long-term prediction is possible due to its sensitivity to the initial condition. Moreover, the strange attractors never repeat or close on it.  

The example shows that a strange attractor never repeats the same path. The incursion happening during the process never repeats but iterates; therefore, we see similarity and not duplication. According to Kevin A. Boon:
Fractal discourse is a discourse of infinite possibility in finite space, of similarity without duplication, iteration rather than repetition, of multiplicity and possibility. While a fixed-point attractor centers and limits potential, a strange attractor opens up potentiality, just as we see chaos emerge from order, order, as well, emerges from chaos. Both chaos and order, intimately linked in a \textit{pas de deux}, in concert move to form a universe that is both predictable and unpredictable, consistent and variant, stable and changing.\textsuperscript{134}

Boon sees great potential in a system that is variable rather than consistent, because it is open to the unexpected and it suggests and refutes prediction. It is \textit{strange} in its predictability and \textit{fractal} in its irregularity and fragmentation.

In \textit{Memory/Loss}, Wilson creates a system similar to the double pendulum. In this system the center of the room occupies the upper part of a figure. The space occupied by this installation is phase space. Its strangeness starts to become apparent as soon as the audio system starts working along with the visual. The viewer gets involved in two systems: hearing and seeing. The exact meaning of the words being spoken by the artists and the different sounds overlapping them cannot be caught, because they are fragmented and do not make any sense. The viewer goes back and forth to the figure displayed in the middle of the room, which has almost become an attractor in this whole process. However, it is apparent that the two processes will work independently and can never exactly coincide. According to Cambel:

\begin{quote}
An important point to appreciate is that with a fixed attractor one knows where the system will eventually find itself, but this is not so with strange
\end{quote}
attractors. The only indication one has is that the system will be somewhere on the strange attractor, but one does not know exactly where. The principal reason for this is that the dynamics of chaotic attractors never repeats itself.\textsuperscript{135}

Therefore, it is difficult to predict what is going to happen next within the process of perception. Because of the inherent chaos of this system, each individual will come across a different outcome. The strangeness of the system is obvious, “for it combines pattern with unpredictability, confinement with orbits that never repeat themselves.”\textsuperscript{136}

The system is exceptional in a sense that the individual encountering the system understands what he or she is going to perceive but does not know when. The understanding of such a complicated system is not explicit in the technique or analysis of how the chaotic pattern is created, “but the mode of conceptualizing [is] necessary to bring the patterns into view.”\textsuperscript{137}

Although the system is chaotic, there are still ways to see patterns embedded within the system. One of the most popular methods is to look for recursive symmetries or self-similarities. Explaining the characteristics of recursive symmetries, Theodore E. D. Braun suggests, “recursive symmetries between scale levels (or self-similarities) can be thought of as fractal-like…narrative structures.”\textsuperscript{138} Such patterns will evolve when a sound, light or word will be repeated at various length scales. The result will be something similar instead of identical. As a result, one can perceive an enlargement and diminishing of the form in time and space. The mathematician Stephen Smale demonstrates that, “The orbits which act like this move as though the space had been stretched and folded over itself time and again.”\textsuperscript{139}
The method of looking for recursive symmetries is amazing, because it allows scientists to trace patterns within chaotic forms, or, in other words, to map out order within chaos. In *Memory/Loss* it is difficult to predict what sound will be heard next; however, over the course of time an individual will be able to recognize some of the repeated sounds. In doing so it is possible to predict something that lies under the unpredictability of the system. Mitchell Feigenbaum is considered the first to show that “although iterating a nonlinear function yielded unpredictable results, the rate at which the recursion occurred quickly approached a limit that proved to be a universal constant.” Hayles suggests that such a “constant expresses an orderliness amidst the unpredictability by showing that large-scale features relate to small-scale ones in a predictable way.” Referring to such juxtaposition of orderly and random forms, Hayles asserts that “this odd combination of randomness and order conveys the flavor of a strange attractor.” The key concept in this process of recursion is to map out similarities rather than identities, as is evident in the following example:

**MAD**

**VERY MAD**

**VERY VERY MAD**

**VERY VERY VERY MAD**

**VERY VERY VERY VERY MAD**

In this example, statements iterate but are not identical. By adopting this method it is possible to define variables that are invariant at another time. An analysis of such recursion can also help trace individual differences and a sense of its overall form that is related to such small details. According to Hawkins:
The artistic tradition is chaotic, not linear, and it acts and reacts on itself in recursive, self-referential ways. Thus the behavior of one function is guided by the behavior of another. In linguistics, the term ‘recursion’ is applied to a grammatical feature or element which itself may be involved in the process by which that feature or element is repeatedly introduced; or applied to a grammatical rule in which part of the output serves as input to the same rule, as in ‘This is the house that Jack built, This is the mouse that lives in the house that Jack built,’ and so ad infinitum. In chaos theory, self-similarity implies recursion. 

Generally analyses are made by carefully defining the form of an artifact, but now the focus will be on the process, which can trace the path during the course of time.

Kenneth Wilson, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics, developed the idea of recursive symmetries. He analyzed the behavior of turbulent flow and the changes from smooth movement to dynamic motion. He demonstrated how microscopic changes persist or expand and bring greater changes at the macroscopic level. During such processes molecules start spreading quickly or may come closer at anytime. This dynamic process makes it extremely difficult to predict how the molecules will react in the future. The method that Wilson adopted to trace symmetries between different scales is called renormalization. According to Hayles, “Renormalization implied that the choice of a ruler used to measure physical properties affected the answer… at the same time it revealed that there was something else… that remained constant over the many measurement scale.” By using the renormalization process it has become possible to find symmetries that are invariant for different measurement scales. Because symmetries
allow “coupling to take place between different levels… this kind of transmission and magnification is possible, because a system possesses an appropriate kind of symmetry.”

Wilson’s art illustrates how this method demonstrates chaos.

Wilson’s production *Einstein on the Beach* is the best example to show the characteristics of recursive symmetries. As an appropriate mathematical example, the performance can be viewed from the number three, which serves as a structural device. In order to build a numerical structure, smaller episodes are fit into the major scenes. The whole idea of *Einstein on the Beach* is conceived around the number three. For instance, there are three main images—train, trial and spaceship (figs. 15-17). Each image is presented three times. The nine episodes are distributed in four acts in order to achieve every possible variation of these numbers. Although the numbers one, two and three are repeated, their repetition does not allow duplication. Therefore, we see iteration which allows similarities without duplicating the form. As a result the structure appears as follows:

K1

Act 1 SC.1 TRAIN [1]

SC. 2 TRIAL [2]

K2

Act II SC. 1 FIELD (SPACE MACHINE) [3]

SC. 2 TRAIN [1]

K3

ACT III SC.1 TRIAL (BED/PRISON) [2]

SC.2 FIELD (SPACE MACHINE) [3]
ACT IV SC. 1 BUILDING/TRAIN [1]

SC. 2 BED [2]

SC. 3 SPACE MACHINE (INTERIOR) [3]

Explaining the structure of *Knee Plays*, Philip Glass who collaborated with Wilson, comments:

What we’re doing is taking two three-part structures and spreading them over three two-part structures. Consider for the moment the first three acts—each of those acts is in two sections (sec. 1,2) and against that I’m putting two three-part structures (1-2-3, 1-2-3). That’s something we do in music all the time. The fourth act is 1-2-3 all together—it actually is a recap of the first three acts.147

The distribution of the major themes throughout the play is also interesting. At first glance the play seems to be built in a three-part structure based on three different themes. In the first part, the train scene, the theme structure remains simple, because the audience hears all three parts of the train music. After that, the night train scene represents only the first theme, the building scene coincides with the second theme, and the spaceship scene combines the third theme. All three themes are juxtaposed with three major images of train, trial and spaceship. According to Glass, “Each appearance of a theme is a further playing out of that theme. To say that scenes mirror one another isn’t accurate, what we have is more like an extrusion. Each time you come back to the train music, you are further along, you’re in a different place.”148

The process of extrusion sounds similar to Kenneth Wilson’s method of
renormalization, which he uses to trace symmetries that are invariant for different measurement scales. To illustrate this method, Hayles refers to Georg Cantor’s “middle third” set.\textsuperscript{149} The set proposes to draw a line from 0 to 1; let’s call it set A. For set B draw a line showing the middle third of Set A as erased. In essence, the smaller lines of Set B are not different in form, because multiplying these lines by three will return us to the original set. By further erasing the middle third of Set B, we can get Set C, which will be a further multiplication of sets A and B. The purpose of developing such a model is to demonstrate “operations and variables that allow fixed-point symmetry to emerge.”\textsuperscript{150} Hayles suggests that during this change from one form to another, a system goes through a phase change that allows the smallest level changes to expand into the largest level changes. This illustration demonstrates how strange attractors with their fixed points are responsible in creating chaos. The example suggests a strange attractor, which even though it has one fixed point, still has the potential to create further points and finally to transmit tiny changes into large changes in its trajectories.

To return to *Einstein on the Beach*, it is obvious that Wilson’s method of structuring the play is similar to Canton’s “middle third” set, because it has a fixed point—three, which has further coupling points which magnify the theme into larger units. In this new arrangement the recursion occurs in such a way that the familiar set of 1, 2, 3 never repeats twice when it is distributed in four acts. The structure looks like this:

Act 1: 1, 2

Act 2: 3, 1

Act 3: 2, 3
Act 4: 1, 2, 3

This magnification that Glass calls extrusion creates a kind of chaos and indeterminacy. Chaos Theory suggests that, although the system has determinacy as Einstein on the Beach shows, no one knows what will happen next during the phase change to the familiar themes of train, trial and spaceship. Moreover, knowledge of the initial condition of the theme does not aid in the prediction of further changes happening in the future. The system is considered chaotic because of such indeterminacy.

*Einstein on the Beach* is also an appropriate example depicting chaos out of order. We have seen that the structuring of this performance is highly ordered and one can even expand the pattern further. But the overlapping of images with the themes is somewhat chaotic because of the recursion which occurs during the coupling of themes and images. As a result the theme, music and images seem to work upon one another. According to Brecht:

One heard one piece and saw another, and noted that they divided time the same way: as Wilson and Glass had referred to the same ur-piece, a purely temporal structure. The cooperation between music and spectacle worked this way: the energy deployed by Glass sustained the admiration of one’s eyes, and the steady circus of minor events so splintered the music that undisturbed by its defined variety one could give oneself to the scenery’s painterly bravura.151

In order to see how recursion occurs and how something chaotic seems ordered, one needs to look for overlapping of temporal and spatial treatment through the scaling symmetries. An analysis of scaling symmetries can trace the operation of qualitative and
numerical, temporal and spatial as well as physical and abstract. Moreover, this shift in our process of measuring can unveil the hidden order. According to Hayles, “Feigenbaum was the first to realize that scaling symmetries implied not just qualitative similarities but exact numerical correspondences… [and found] that chaos, in its way, had a structure as rigorous and compelling as order.”

In *Einstein on the Beach*, the repetition of images and variation on a theme become the major forces in the performance. For instance, the sequence of train scenes begins with the first Act. At another level the train transforms into a night train and later metamorphoses into a building, which also resembles a train. In this process the image of a train not only metamorphoses but also becomes more and more abstract.

In one of his statements Glass refers to this transformation as an energetic, reductive order. It is apparent now that recursion makes simple things more chaotic as well as informative by reducing their order and energizing their structure and form. This is the reason that chaos theorists also see recursion as a source of information. For them, quantities neither diminish nor conserve, but become a source of new information. Robert Shaw is credited with connecting chaos with information. In one of his articles he suggests that strange attractors transform information into the trajectories, by dividing their trajectories into smaller blocks of phase space called “logon” or information cells. The “oscillator acts as a ‘translator’ between microscopic and macroscopic levels” during this transformation of information from one cell or logon to another.

The study suggests that because the information keeps on increasing at every ongoing step, a time comes when one cannot predict nor trace the path any further. This inability to predict future events, however, does not limit the richness of our experience.
Suppose one is listening to a tape recording generating random numbers. The numbers keep on coming in an unpredictable way. Although the result is very chaotic, a person will still receive more information as the process continues. Chaotic systems are rich in information, because the “production of information is good in itself, independent of what it means.”

Understanding randomness as a source of information changes the way one envisions chaos. As is seen in *Memory/Loss*, fragmented pieces are presented in a disordered fashion; therefore, they appear as chaotic and unpredictable. But they are ordered as well: they possess strange attractors, which allow recursive symmetries to step in. Recursive symmetries replicate form instead of simply repeating themselves overtime. It is also significant to note that the scientist who envisioned chaos as complex but rich in information regarded information as different from its common meaning.

It is usually said that Robert Wilson’s artwork does not make any sense, because it is intended to be devoid of meaning. This does not imply however, that it is devoid of information as well. Talking about the ambiguity of meaning in the trial scene in *Einstein on the Beach*, Laurence Shyer suggests:

The trial scene is an example of Wilson’s ability to create images that lack specific meaning yet fill the mind and imagination. What crime had been committed and who is being judge? Wilson was later to say that he always felt the bed itself was on trial. Is the dreamer, whose capacity for discovery and creation may yet bring the world to the verge of destruction, the defendant? Is it imagination or science or human knowledge or time (which Einstein redefined) or the universe itself? The questions are never
answered nor can they be. Like the title *Einstein on the Beach*, which may refer to humanity brought to the brink of annihilation, man on the shore of unknown or—as one critic jokingly suggested—that ‘we are all washed up’ or perhaps only a man standing by the ocean. Wilson’s image evokes many responses and resonates many meanings, but yields no certain answer. ‘It’s not a question of what Einstein means,’ as Glass says, ‘it’s that it’s meaningful.’

Is it meaningful or full of ambiguities? The treatment of the subject—*Einstein on the Beach*—is full of information, because the information lies not in its story line or plot but in its construction of time and space. The reliance on time and space is much stronger in this particular work and reflects Glass’ time-oriented nature and Wilson’s ability of visual and spatial structuring. As a visual artist, Wilson is more concerned with the architectural and spatial framework of the piece, while as a composer Glass is concerned with how the scenes proceed in terms of rhythm and tempo. For instance, he creates a scene of a locomotive followed by “the static and controlled tableaux of the courtroom, which would in turn yield to the free and rapid dance sequences of the field/spaceship scenes.”

Glass thinks collaborating with Wilson is different from other artists because they always worked on different grounds. Extrapolating on his experience of this collaboration, he tells about how whenever he suggested that Wilson read a book about the life and times of Einstein, Wilson always rejected this idea and said, “I don’t want to know any more than what everyone knows about Einstein, I just want to know what the man in the street knows because that’s what they’ll be bringing to work.” Interestingly
the images such as the train and spaceship do not tell anything about Einstein himself as a historical figure, but they share the essential information about his age. For instance, the image of a locomotive is a reference to steam engines and Einstein’s childhood, and the spaceship might refer to his contribution to science and humanity. On a broader level, however, the work starts with images that refer to the nineteenth-century train and ends with a twentieth-century image of a spaceship.

The dual aspect of the above information is exciting because it reveals a sense of indeterminacy. For instance, one might think that the train and spaceship represent the age of Einstein, or that they may simply refer to the change of a period and development of technology. The more the element of probability increases, the greater the chances are that we are going to get more information. If we go back to see the transformation of the train, we notice that the element of probability increases along with the level of abstraction. Ultimately nothing is left that could look like a train, but a transformation of train/night/building and so on, because every time the train image appears, it is not repeated in the same way as it appeared before. With such transformation, it can be concluded that “maximum information is conveyed when there is a mixture of order and surprise, when the message is partly anticipated and partly surprised.”

Even in Memory/Loss, the original reference to T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land has almost vanished, but Wilson has definitely added more information to it. The viewer is left with a number of pieces acting separately or in connection with one another. In some cases these individual pieces are reminiscent of the actual text, yet at others simply the recipient of information will be used to convey a message to the audience. In this process, information has itself become a tool of organization.
What does information mean in a broader sense? Mathematical information theory suggests that “information is… a measure of a quantity of possibilities out of which a single actual message is selected; it is, in other words, a measure of the uncertainty of a receiver that will be resolved by the reception of a given message.”

Information theory is a branch of science that was developed between 1940 and 1950. It promotes the idea that information and meaning are two different entities in a message. Therefore, an apparently random series of numbers and letters may have more information than an ordered and patterned one. Furthermore a random number and pattern is full of surprise and generates much richer patterns. Information theory is widely used by researchers in order to analyze the complexity of organizational systems and communicative messages.

The *Memory/Loss* composition contains abruptly chosen words from the text along with sound effects such as dripping water, thunder, a ringing telephone ring, a barking dog and industrial sounds. All these communicative sounds do not seem to come from one single system of communication but are self-sufficient, to be taken as a piece of information on their own. In some cases, however, they may not be autonomous to transforming any information reliably and can make the system chaotic.

In order to understand the complexity of a chaotic system, one needs to look at the previous example again. For the purpose of analysis of this particular aspect, suppose that T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is our set A and *Memory/Loss* is set B. In reproducing Eliot’s text *The Waste Land*, if Wilson does not change anything then we would have had almost the same copy of the text repeated in *Memory/Loss*. As a result, one may not have any interruption that can be called chaotic. But since Wilson has made a number of
changes, set B carries a lot of chaotic channels. Moreover, the information delivered by
set B is ambiguous and resists the clarity of the actual message. The ambiguity of the
meaning decreases the strength of the actual message, while increasing the quantity of
information that is entering from several related channels. As a final product, set B is not
a copy of set A, but an altered version of it, which carries more information than the
original because “the partial destruction of a transmitted message within one level of a
hierarchy leads to increased variety in the message that this level in turn transmits to
another part of the system.” At the same time it is imbued with ambiguities that,
according to information theory, are called noise. In a system, an element of noise will
enter when a system seems to be communicatively imperfect. An artwork does not work
in such a way, because it has a greater capacity to transform noise into information.
Keeping this particular advantage of an artwork in mind, Jurij Lotman suggests:

Art—and here it manifests its structural kinship to life—is capable of
transforming noise into information. It complicates its own structure
owing to its correlation with its environment (in all other systems the clash
with the environment can only lead to the fade-out of information).

The statement mirrors the organizational nature of an artwork. The capacity to
transform noise into information is unique an art artwork, because of the particular type
of communicative play between unnecessary order and informative output that goes
beyond the usual system of communication. Because of this unusual communicative
power, an artwork does not pose the problem of decidability, but is admired for being a
part of reality. Stefan Brecht seems to have a similar realization when he talks about
Wilson’s theatrical performance *Deafman Glance*:
In a disassociated manner various events occur. They are out of unrelated frames of reference. As conventions of representation are played off against one another, the mode of reality becomes dubious. The form goes beyond ambiguity into evasiveness: only barely, though definitely, triumphing over our inevitable discontent by beauty, a bravura trick. If reality there be, it is reality in act, not in being. But we may view it otherwise also, namely as the objective world not hidden by our imposing on it coherence, congruity, structure, focus, direction and a single exhaustive mode of possibility, as the raw world which in spite of all our anxious strain at synthesis continually reappears at the fringes. Here it is out front, organization only a continuously aborted, forever incomprehensible stirring within it.\footnote{163}

Brecht’s lengthy statement is noteworthy, because it does not see fragmentation and ambiguity as a lack of reality, but as a synthesis of hidden reality. If one judges this statement from the perspective of Chaos Theory, it seems possible to reiterate several similarities between the characteristics that Brecht points to in Wilson’s art and that are also explicit in Chaos Theory. For instance, Brecht talks about the disassociated manner that points to non-linearity and fragmentation. He suggests that events presented appear to be out of frame; therefore, there is no restriction to the boundary. The statement alludes to an openness and endless form. He further maintains that no specific conventions of representations are applied to make things real, so we see a sense of self-organization, where things appear and disappear. The form opens the sense of imagination and goes beyond what a person can think, unveiling a broader hidden world.
In this context a small cause leads to not a small effect, but one that is larger than expected. Finally he mentions continuity of an aborted organization, which keeps one inside and goes beyond the comprehension of the individual’s powers, suggested as something emerges out of a void. Although Brecht is not specifically interested in Chaos Theory, he has suggested the characteristics that one can envision in Wilson’s art with reference to Chaos Theory.

Like Chaos Theory, Postmodernism also emphasizes the element of unpredictability and indeterminacy achieved through multiplicity. Wilson’s freedom of presentation enhances the sense of multiplicity. Therefore a person encounters an excess of information. The more information one receives from a system, as in Memory/Loss, the harder it becomes to tell accurately what is coming up next. Paul Smethurst considers this aspect as one of the great discoveries of science, which he calls a “postmodern science.” Referring to an excess of information one receives and the difficulty in establishing precisely the future of things, he maintains:

The postmodern world is guided by simulacra and sometimes this becomes a substitute for measurement and extrapolation. One effect of this is that we suffer from an excess of information, and the more information we have about the status quo, the harder it becomes to establish precisely where we are and where we might be heading. This has been one of the most surprising discoveries of postmodern science, so much so that we might regard the defining moment of the postmodern as that moment, whenever and wherever it was, that scientists in various fields realized they could never absolutely define a moment in time or a
position is space. And furthermore, that small inaccuracies are multiplied exponentially during mathematical procedures giving entirely unpredictable results. This is the basis of what we are coming to understand as Chaos theory.\textsuperscript{164}

Here in this statement, Smethurst relates excess of information with the postmodern world and consequently with postmodern science. For him, Chaos Theory is also a postmodern science, because it discovers the element of unpredictability in the overflowing of information. Smethurst is not the only one to see such a relationship between Chaos Theory and Postmodernism. There are several other scholars who have made such suggestions in their research. For instance, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in their Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations maintain:

One even finds a postmodern turn in the field of science where ‘postmodern science’ refers to a break with Newtonian determinism, Cartesian dualism, and representational epistemology. Advocates of postmodern science embrace principles of chaos, indeterminacy, and hermeneutics, with some calling for a re-enchantment of nature.\textsuperscript{165}

In her Chaos and Order, Hayles considers the element of indeterminacy and unpredictability as one of the major connecting points between Chaos Theory and Postmodernism. In doing so she points to the unpredictability of a complex system: “...the science of chaos is like other postmodern theories in its recognition that unpredictability in complex systems is inevitable, because one can never specify the initial conditions accurately enough to prevent it.”\textsuperscript{166} Hayles takes two major postmodern movements Deconstruction and Structuralism, as example and compares them with
Chaos Theory. She thinks Deconstruction and Chaos Theory sound similar because both theories attack the accurate initial conditions of things or origin of things and therefore share the element of unpredictability. In the same way, Structuralism shares the idea of recursive symmetries with Chaos Theory. She suggests that the “structuralist penchant for replicating symmetries is modified by the postmodern turn towards fragmentation, rupture, and discontinuity.”

Kenneth J. Knoespel in his article “The Employment of Chaos: Instability and Narrative Order,” sees similarities between Chaos Theory and Deconstruction. Comparing Mandelbrot’s fractals and his ever-renewing swirling patterns in self-reflexive patterns with Deconstruction, he concludes:

Both presume a continuous proliferation. By articulating disorder, by decentering what appears as a privileged text, chaos theory and deconstruction intervene to make us aware of other forms of order. Just as chaos theory seeks to define order which has hitherto remained undecipherable, deconstruction exposes experience which has been ‘ignored in order to preserve the illusion of truth as perfectly self-contained and self-sufficient presence.’

Peter Stoicheff also takes Mandelbrot’s fractals and self-reflexive patterns as an example and compares them with postmodern fiction. He maintains that, like Chaos Theory, self-reflexiveness in metafiction is “always involved in the simultaneous processes of manufacturing illusion and revealing its artifice. It thus becomes an eternal system of creating and deconstructing.” He demonstrates that metafiction, like recursive symmetries also creates patterns that never reach to a revelation but come close to it. The
system works like a complex system which organizes itself into a series of patterns and sub-patterns in order to be receptive to metaphoric language. In metafiction, language works like a sign and symbol which never reaches its closure, but always takes the individual on a new journey—an unpredictable journey. This sort of generative process at work is evident in Einstein on the Beach and in Memory/Loss.

John Leeland Kundert-Gibbs seems to share Stoicheff’s idea of fractals and their iteration in postmodern literature. He thinks that self-similarity and fractals that generate more information are similar to postmodern and absurdist writings because for them, “the value of predictability is secondary to the excitement of generating more information through unpredictability; the ordering of these works moving from the narrative (or linear) to the tangential scalar (non-linear).”

Stoicheff also refers to Prigogine and Stenger’s statement, in which they assert, “nonlinearities may produce an order out of chaos of elementary processes and still, under different circumstances, be responsible for the destruction of this same order, eventually producing a new coherence beyond another bifurcation.” He suggests that this statement refers to another phase of Deconstruction, in which “disorder, randomness, and nonlinearity, all characteristics of metafictional texts’ understanding of language, can create their own order.” Since a person is involved in the continuous process of construction and deconstruction through bifurcation, there are fewer chances of getting involved in the interpretation of the actual meaning of the text. Stoicheff suggests that the order is manifested in pattern and not in the meaning of the texts.

Boon finds that: “nonlinearity, dynamicism, indeterminacy, and unpredictability—[are] all qualities foreground by many late twentieth-century thinkers
such as Lyotard, Derrida, Prigogine, Deleuze and Guattari…” Boon believes that the main reason for such interaction between Chaos Theory and scholars is the methodology provided by Chaos Theory, which seeks “turbulent events previously dismissed as experimental noise; [and] it shifts our focus away from simple reductive models of physical behavior towards complex systems of interaction.”

Thomas Jackson Rice also observes some similarities in Chaos Theory and Postmodernism. He maintains that: “Chaos theory promises to follow the same directions already taken by the ideology of uncertainty in contemporary culture, ultimately providing both a counter view and a supplement to the indeterminacy of postmodernism.” Again emphasizing the notion of uncertainty in Chaos Theory and Postmodernism, he maintains:

The reaffirmation of causality in chaos theory directly subverts the indeterminist view of what has passed or is passing, the ideology of uncertainty in a postmodern culture that has questioned the possibility of reaching such exact knowledge of origin, the assignment of any determinate meaning, and ultimately the existence of an aboriginal reality.”

William W. Demastes proposes that to see chaos as a birth of order is actually a cultural aspiration. In his *Theater of Chaos: Beyond Absurdism, Into Orderly Disorder*, he sees unpredictability and uncertainty as culturally constructed phenomena. He argues that our contemporary culture seems to be preoccupied with the idea of unpredictability and uncertainty at a number of levels, such as the economic, social, political and spiritual. He further states that because the postmodern world of the late twentieth century is a
world full of turbulence, “its choice to recognize and concentrate on such phenomena should be conceived of as something of an appropriate choice.”

At this point it seems appropriate to say that Chaos Theory and Postmodernism are connected to each other from a synchronic perspective because it appears to be a culturally constructed phenomenon. If we go back to Brecht’s statement again, in which he analyzes Wilson’s *Deafman Glance*, “If reality there be, it is reality in act, not in being.” Here he seems to be speaking in a postmodern moment, a postmodern event. A postmodern event would be one which passes reality in allusion so that one can conceive that which cannot be presented. Jean-Francois Lyotard, answering the question “What is postmodernism?” says, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself….” He thinks that the postmodern writer/artist is free from any boundaries of pre-established rules:

> The postmodern artist and writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules and they cannot be judged according to determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.

Ihab Hassan’s *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* is credited as one of the great studies of Postmodernism. It is widely read and quoted by scholars of all disciplines, such as culturalism, Marxism, feminism, socialism, visual art and performance arts. In his comprehensive research on Postmodernism, Hassan gives a brief list of those artists whom he wants separated from the avant-garde artist, and whose works reflect the earliest signs of Postmodernism. The list includes the artists John Cage,
Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik, Robert Wilson, Donald Barthelme.¹⁸²

If Hassan places Wilson’s name in the list of Postmodern artists, then there is a need to understand the term *Postmodern* itself. Scholars are radically acknowledging the inherent ambiguity of the term Postmodern because of its prefix *post*, which implies that it is *not* modern. In this usage, Postmodern refers to a break with the modern, characterizing abandonment of the modern. Pointing to the inherent paradox in the term Postmodern, Lyotard suggests that the “post-modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) and anterior (modo).”¹⁸³ At another place he maintains: “a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not Modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.”¹⁸⁴ Like Lyotard, some other thinkers also assign a positive role to the new developments and affirm a dependence on and continuity of the modern.¹⁸⁵ For instance, J. G. Merquior calls the postmodern development a hypermodernity and Wolfgang Welsch calls it a postmodern development within modern. Talking about the ambiguities of the term Postmodern, Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber state:

The extent to which postmodernism is unable to make a clean break with the modernism no doubt influences our anxiety about what modernism is not. To claim that the postmodern came after modernity in any simple sense would be to produce another modernism. The work of the postmodern is rather to produce another to modernism. Thus, postmodernism comes before modernism rather than after it, in the sense
that it is the other the modern forecloses at its inception, in order for modernity to begin.\textsuperscript{186}

Drawing on the Lyotard notion of Postmodernism as “the time of the event,”\textsuperscript{187} it can be suggested that the idea is unique in the sense that it refers to a particular occurrence, which will never be happening in the same way again, because “the event is a radically singular happening that cannot be represented within a general history without loss of its singularity, its reduction to a moment.”\textsuperscript{188} Moreover, considering Postmodernism, a particular event is similar to drawing a line between Modernism and Postmodernism. Can one really “distinguish postmodernism further?” asks Ihab Hassan.\textsuperscript{189} He then draws some schematic differences, and for this purpose he takes ideas from multiple fields such as rhetoric, linguistics, literary theory, science, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, theology and politics. Although the list is quite extensive, a few examples are presented here:

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<th>Modernism</th>
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<td>Disjunctive and open form</td>
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<td>Art Object/Finished work</td>
<td>Process/Performance/Happening</td>
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These examples suggest that Modernism is characterized by order, predictability, determinacy and product. Postmodernism, on the other hand, concerns itself with disorder, unpredictability, indeterminacy and process. Modernism looks for origin and therefore seeks a linear path towards absolute truth. Postmodernism questions the origin of things and exposes the arbitrariness. Since the origins of a thing are hidden, there is always a need to keep on looking for new hidden realities and the process never ends or repeats itself. As Lyotard said, it is a postmodern event, ever new and singular without “post” and “modo,” like a strange attractor. This is the point where Wilson’s art, Chaos Theory and Postmodernism intersect.
Chapter 3

A Letter for Queen Victoria: An Analysis of Space and Time

A close analysis of Wilson’s art reveals that in his artifacts space and time are bound together in a self-renewing process, yet each retains its own identity. Viewing space and time in the context of Chaos Theory, it is explicit that art and life are both open to the unexpected. Several of Wilson’s statements along with critiques of his art works and interviews testify to his constant fascination with the process of art. The way in which he talks about the steps in creating his work is no more than a construction of time and space. According to Bonnie Marranca, “The biodiversity of Wilson’s theater lyricizes both space and time species; flora, fauna, human—enliven narrative in this advanced stage of theatrical evolution. He frames their adaptability, and process of hybridization….”

Wilson lyricizes time or space, constructed or deconstructed, and it is explicit that he envisions time and space before he thinks about a theme. Therefore, his theatrical performances are not constructed around a story line but are bound together in a self-renewing process of space and time.

Wilson’s art works are usually understood as removed from their particular genre. His visual art works, such as Memory/Loss, have been combined with time arts and his plays have become performances or opera. His Einstein on the Beach and A Letter for Queen Victoria are problematic to consider as opera in a conventional sense. According to Marranca, “We can say again that the human figure has been transformed, that the
notion of performance—indeed of theater—has been reinterpreted.” Wilson gives his own reason for calling his performance an opera and not a play. He maintains:

People can do several things at once. We can watch television and follow the story, we can talk to somebody on the telephone and also talk to somebody sitting across from us who’s talking to somebody else. I called *A Letter for Queen Victoria* an ‘opera’ because everything in it happens at once, the way it does in operas and the way it does in life.\(^{192}\)

A detailed analysis of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* reveals that Wilson is deeply concerned with the self-renewing process, which he delivers through his artistic expression. At the same time, the play seems to bring forward many of the concepts that are central to the science of chaos, such as fragmentation, indeterminacy, unpredictability, chaos and information. Wilson’s artworks also demonstrate an awareness of Postmodernism and its force in shifting artistic culture. The play can thus be considered a development parallel to Chaos Theory and Postmodernism.

*A Letter for Queen Victoria* was first premiered on 15 June 1974 in Spoleto, Italy at the Festival of Two Worlds and later on Broadway at the A.N.T.A. Theater on 22 March 1975. The play was conceived, written, designed and directed by Wilson. He has always attempted to base his artworks on great figures and to make a connection between the past and present. King Philip of Spain, Freud, Stalin, Einstein, Hess and Queen Victoria all point toward this key aspect of his art. When Wilson was writing and trying to understand the subject of *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, he received a re-written copy of the original letter from Stefan Brecht. Wilson relates that he liked the idea because it was reminiscent of nineteenth-century language.\(^{193}\) The script was like this:
ALBEIT IN NO WAY POSSESSED OF THE HONOR OF AN
INTRODUCTION, AND INDEED INFINITELY REMOVED FROM
THE DESERVING OF IT, YEA, SINGULARLY UNFIT FOR
EXPOSURE TO THE BRILLIANCE OF YOUR SUN...A CONDITION
SO ABJECT...THE SCARCELy FORGIVABLE
PRESUMPTION...DEPRIVED OF THE LEAST TALENT FOR THE
EXERCISE OF THE ARTS OF ADDRESS...TO WIT, DEPRIVATION
OF MERIT SO ABSOLUTE AS MUST, BY ITS MATHEMATICAL
ABSURDITY...194

Wilson states that he was not able to make up anything out of this rewritten letter
by Brecht. He never saw the original letter and had no idea what changes Brecht had
made to the original text. After adding a few more lines he finished the letter, which was
read in the beginning of the opera as an entr’acte.195 It is evident that Wilson developed
his key concept around this rewritten letter because he was fascinated with the language.
He observed that over a hundred years the language had considerably changed. He
believed that the combination of two different language styles could have a great impact
and resonance through the time of Queen Victoria and his own. It is significant that the
main idea of A Letter for Queen Victoria evolved not from the grand and heroic figure of
the Queen, but from the language used in that particular period. Moreover, Wilson did
not use language to dramatize the real spirit of nineteenth-century language, but to
preconceive the crises of language in subsequent centuries and present them through his
artistic expression.
Thus, *A Letter for Queen Victoria* questions not only the textuality of nineteenth-century language but also the phonetics of the period. Wilson perceives of a language, which could be more fragmented but which promises “more channels of communication in its arsenal…” In Wilson’s theater language is not simply a verbal presentation but an accumulation of the visual, verbal and aural. Now language can be conceived as an image and a visual sign. The non-linearity of the language disrupts the simultaneity of thoughts and emotions and leaves more questions than answers. Focusing on this particular aspect, Arthur Holmberg maintains, “No one has used visual signs to question words with such adamantine severity as Wilson, and nowhere does one experience the nervous breakdown of language as in Wilson’s theater.”

Wilson’s fascination with his language has become the main structuring tool for this particular performance. It is the basis of his artistic expression and demonstrates his ability to challenge the traditional relationship between speech and writing, the visual and the verbal, words and objects, and, above all, time and space. Holmberg maintains, “Just as all Wilson’s theater is meta-theater – asking what and how theater communicates – so too is all his theater meta-language – obsessively involved with the pathology of words.” It is explicit that the use of language in this play has become the main force of communication. It is through language that Wilson constructs time and space as an ever-renewing process. Language is now the main character that controls the whole structure of the performance. Before I examine how language contributes to the self-renewing process of time and space, and how Chaos Theory and Postmodernism can contribute to the analysis of this particular aspect of the play, it is important to know which kind of language Wilson employs to build the structure of the play.
**Language as a Protagonist**

Wilson often demonstrates his fascination with the use of language. He admires Shakespeare because of the rhythmic sounds Shakespeare maintains through the use of language. Wilson acknowledges, “Shakespeare’s words are indestructible, solid as a rock. You can put them anywhere—sink them to the bottom of the ocean, fly them to Jupiter, or drop them into Vesuvius. Nothing destroys them.”

In *A Letter for Queen Victoria* he attempts to capture the rhythmic character of the language. He understands that naming the character could destroy the kind of rhythm he wants to achieve. In order to achieve a rhythmic pattern he calls his characters by numbers and letters. For instance:

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<tr>
<td>PILOTS</td>
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<td>WARDEN</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BILLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| CHRIS        |
He designs four acts of the play in a similar fashion. By using words, letters and numbers, he sets the rhythm of sounds as well as the physicality of the language. He composes words as a backdrop and plays with the theatrical space they create on to the surface. In this way Wilson uses language as a main character of the play, and controls time and space through its sounds and visual images.

**Manipulation of Scale**

In the analysis of time and space in chapter one, I pointed out that Wilson uses several illusionistic devices in order to manipulate time and space. For this purpose he manipulates space by changing the physical character of things. For instance, he places a large object against a very small one. Moreover, by juxtaposing two things of extremely different sizes, he challenges the way one perceives space and time. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria* he uses language as a character and a physical object. He uses letters of varying scales and arranges them in the backdrops. More importantly he uses capital
letters, and in doing so he gives them a more graphic and architectural look. By focusing on the visual signs of these letters, he creates a space that is active rather than passive. The large scale gives these letters a concrete look and acts like a physical object. It generates a sense of motion and blends words into images (Fig.19, 29).

**Overlapping of Visual and Verbal**

Wilson dramatizes letters not only by giving them physical existence, but also by overlapping the visual and verbal. Nonetheless, the letters retain their individual existence. For example, in Act III Wilson makes use of words in the backdrop. The words “CHITTER” and “CHATTER” are designed on the screen in a symmetrical fashion. He repeats another symmetrical setting in the front of the screen where characters are sitting in groups of two (figure 29). The relationship of the words with the composition is amazing because both support each other aesthetically and practically. The arrangement of characters is such that they look static and more like an object. The use of words, on the other hand, achieves a sense of linear perspective and appears to be in motion. A closer look will reveal that this arrangement has almost overturned the dimensionality of foreground and background compositions. Here background composition looks three-dimensional, which is actually two-dimensional, because of the illusion of linear perspective that it maintains. On the other hand, figure composition in the foreground suggests two-dimensionality because all the characters are aligned in a straight line in a motionless fashion. By overlapping two different characters and the arrangement of words and human beings, Wilson changes their practicality. According to Holmberg:
Turned into abstract shapes, language became visual design on the curtain and pure rhythm in speech. By privileging the signifier over signified, words ceased functioning as symbols and became objects – the referent evaporated into physical sound. As concrete as poetry gets. Like concrete poetry, *A Letter for Queen Victoria* confronts printed language with pictorial language.\(^{202}\)

Although it is not a kind of language that transcribes meaning, and although one can follow the path in a linear fashion, it is nonetheless a kind of language that gives words a physical existence. It is the combination of the visual and the verbal that problematizes an individual’s thinking process, because what one sees may not go along with what one hears. There are no boundaries laid out between conscious and unconscious thinking. Wilson believes there is no need to convey a message to the audience and “if I wanted to send the audience a message… I’d use a fax.”\(^{203}\) This statement suggests that Wilson wants his audience not to search for the message but to enjoy the visual pattern and verbal rhythm of the language. He wants them to enjoy the space as he has arranged it, to move freely, and to forget about the sequence of events in an orderly fashion. Now space and time are not meant to convey a historical fact or story, but more or less an artistic expression, which can only be enjoyed aesthetically.

**Unity in Diversity**

In spite of the fragmented nature of the play, one can still enjoy a sense of unity on some level. Wilson makes use of language that is disruptive and at the same time universal. Marvin Carson suggests that Lyotard’s use of the language-game focuses on
the aspects of discourse and figure: “Discourse is the general process and structure through which a narrative gives meaning, while ‘figure’ is the specific event of narration…. The postmodern asserts the power of figure to claim its own disruptive space, no more and no less universal than others.”

Wilson creates a sound oriented language, which has more figurative and universal power, even in its diversity.

In *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, Wilson constructs and deconstructs the language in such a way that at one time one perceives it as fragmented and noisy and at another as patterned and informative. For instance, in Act 1, section 4, performer 2A delivers the following dialogue:

2A (IN A VERY LOW VOICE AS IF A RADIO IN THE DISTANCE)

BORIS CHRISTOPHE PLAY BY TAKES AND COUNCIL YOU READ
ABOUT AND FAMILY HELP YOU LIVELIHOOD SOMETIMES
CONTROVIRSIONAL 8 O’CLOCK ROMAN NUMBER 3 BUY NEW YORK 526 WHAT CAN YOU POSSIBLY NOW THERE ARE WHO HAS TO TAKE CARE

After a while performer 1A and 2A speak together:

WHEEL WHAT WHEN NOW HOW

OK

WHEEL THERE THERE THERE (PAUSE)

THERE THERE THERE THERE (PAUSE)

OK

If one compares the structure of these two dialogues, it is quite clear that both are of a contrasting nature. He has clearly designed these structures through a combination of
elements which are tonal and atonal, ordered and chaotic, patterned and disparate. Above all, by layering centrifugal against fugal, Wilson creates structural unity in diversity, which generates a symbolic and an allegorical atmosphere because words take one beyond their literal meanings. For instance, in the above example, the word WHEEL is followed by WHAT WHEN NOW HOW and again by THERE THERE THERE THERE, creating an entirely different meaning in both settings.

**Destruction of Real Time and Space**

Language in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* demonstrates time and space that deconstructs the notion of the real. No one can speak in a patterned language because it demolishes the real sense of meaning in real life. Thomas Derrah suggests that the performance of each performer is extremely calculated. He worked with Wilson on *the CIVIL wars* and explicates his experience in these words:

I didn’t know much about Wilson except that he was trés avant-garde. We were all waiting outside the rehearsal room. One by one the actors staggered out. We quizzed them on what he had asked them to do. The first said ‘I had to walk across the room in a straight line on a count of 10, sit down on a count of 21, put my hand to my forehead on a count of 13.’ The second said ‘I had to walk across the room in a straight line on a count of 26, sit down on a count of 42, put my hand to my forehead on a count of 18.’ By the time the tenth actor stumbled out, we were petrified. When I went in, he asked me to walk across the room on a count of 31, sit down on a count 7, put my hand to my forehead on count of 59. I was mystified
by the whole process. I didn’t have a clue about what I was doing or why I was doing it. But I did it. As soon as I finished, he jumped up, clapped his hands, and shouted, ‘Bravo. You are the first actor today who can count.’ I left the room confused. Was that a compliment? It’s the first time someone had praised me for counting since the kindergarten. But I was intrigued, and by the end of the rehearsal process, I loved his way of working. It’s all about precision of movement.²⁰⁷

Wilson builds A Letter for Queen Victoria not simply via spoken words but via words performed in an architectural space. It is through rhythmic and calculated movements of the body that words generate meaning. Wilson’s use of language and its relationship with the performance are not analytical but metaphorical. Wilson’s theater does not attempt to provide satisfactory answers by providing an everyday concept of time and space. Instead it demonstrates a metaphorical connection of time and space. The language is a representation of abstract time, which also resists a definitive interpretation of space. For instance:

```
2 COSABI NHJGT BNHG VFCS CO CVFESW XCVF BGH NMKJ
MNHJUGTHFRD VBNH BG V B BBNHJ BGV GLOS O
CHOCOLATE.²⁰⁸
```

This dialogue does not make any sense and resists the real sense of time. It is difficult to perceive a beginning, middle and an end. Every word begins and ends at itself, generating new meaning through an aesthetic expression. Wilson’s theater explores how sound dramatizes and conveys abstract semantic meaning.
**Juxtaposition**

The play seems to be made up of fragments of dialogue, excerpts from letters and other assorted remnants. According to Arthur Holmberg, “By juxtaposing the clashing levels of diction – Miltonic opulence and contemporary lingo, crib poetry and pre-verbal screams – Wilson dramatizes a diachronic view of language in the individual and in society.” The technique, which Wilson adopts for such construction is juxtaposition. He juxtaposes familiar words against newly created words, as in this example:

1 FABULOUS
2 RELIVE THOSE FABULOUS MOMENTS
3 SUSSEX COUNTY
   SUSFUIL COUNTY
   COUNTY
   OK LET’S GO
4 AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
1 AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
2 CONGRADULATIONS
3 CONGRADULATIONS
4 CONGRADULATIONS
Universality

Wilson does not believe that actors should use dialogue to respond to each other. Instead uses of words and sounds that overlap other actors’ dialogues. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria* Wilson employs language to create rhythmic sounds by overlapping sound patterns. Close analysis of these sound patterns reveals that he tends to reject the monotony of cultural and social boundaries and achieves sound patterns that are more universal. By rejecting the idea of conventional dialogue he introduces a language that captures the spirit of the local as well as the global. Wilson is always confident that the use of such language in the theater can restore a spirit of visible and invisible. Arthur Holmberg explicates this particular aspect of the use of language in Wilson’s performances. He suggests:

Wilson’s theater restores to language its primitive power to make visible the invisible, to reach beyond ordinary experience into extraordinary realms of consciousness where the spirit, instincts with the godhead, establishes contact with the divine. Much of the energy of ritual derives from verbal magic. Dominated by a special phonology, sing-song rhythms, repetition, metaphor, formulaic phrases spoken in parallels, and words whose meanings have vanished into the mists of time – ritual language sounds weird to the ear of common day.²¹¹

*A Letter for Queen Victoria* thus is not a play of a particular time but a play that captures a sense of universality through the ages. It is classical and mythic in its formulaic phrases and universal in its use of phonology.
Space and Time in the Context of Chaos Theory

Before the play begins and as the audience are taking their seats, the dancers are already dancing on the stage, music is being played in the background, and Queen Victoria stands on the stage. In the introduction, Christopher Knowles starts reading the letter:

DEAR MADAM,
MOST GRACIOUS OF LADIES,
AUGUST IMPERATRICE,
ALBEIT IN NO WAY POSSESSED OF THE HONOUR OF AN INTRODUCTION AND INDEED INFINITELY REMOVED FROM THE DESERVING OF IT YEA SINGULARLY FOR THE UNFIT FOR THE EXPOSURE TO THE BRILLIANCE OF YOUR SUN BEING IN VERY OF THE DISNEYSORE OF ITS DESTITUTION OF GRACE,
OUTWARD OR INWARD, AS TO MAKE MY PRESENCE TOLER-RABLE ONLY TO THE HUMBLEST ABOUNTING IN THE BOUNTY OF TOLERANCE, I HAVE SCARCELY FORGIVABLE OF THE PRESCRIPTION OF ADDRESSING MYSELF TO YOU, KNOWING FULLWELL THE DISPOSISORE OF THIS MERIT OF THIS POSITAL OF THAT IN IN IN INTO THE SPOTLESS LIGHTS AND THEN WE AND THEN AND ABOUT THE UM THE UM MM ABOUT THE MOST FLEETING ATTENTION AND ABOUT ABOUT THE ABOUT THE TREES IN IN THE WOODS IN IN IN WHERE'S WHERE'S WHERE'S IT IS TO DO THE EXERCISE OF THE ADDRESING KN-
KNOWING FULWELL AND THEN SOMETHING IT IS, OF THE PARADISE, PUZZLE OF THE PARADISE. GOOD.\textsuperscript{212}

The absurdity of the text increases as long as one keeps on going through it. Familiar words go into new modifications and unnecessary repetitions. For instance,

1. WHAT

THERE ARE THESE ELCTOR WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHEELS….

1. THERE ARE THESE AN ELECTRO WHEELS

The performers repeat the above dialogues and then the same dialogue undergoes further modification:

1. THERE ARE THESE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHE WHEELS

1. THERE ARE THESE AN ELECTRO WHE WHE WHE WHE

WHE WHE WHE WHE WHEELS

After a while the subject changes altogether

1. WHAT

2. WE’RE DOING THE FOUR ACTS ACT ONE ACT TWO ACT THREE

AND ACT FOUR

1. WHAT

1. WE’RE DOING “A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA”\textsuperscript{213}
The only significant patterning one sees here is recurrence. It is hard to maintain any structure of subordination to further organize the parts, or to maintain any all-encompassing interactive causality. In order to analyze such a disjunct and fragmented form, one needs to adopt a method of plotting. By plotting the fractured forms, it is possible to see an evolution of time and space as a self-renewing process, as a system which undergoes diverse modifications.

**Plotting the Fractal Forms**

*A Letter for Queen Victoria* is made up of bits and pieces, which can be traced only by plotting them in a phase space, as chaos theorists do, and by looking for recursive symmetries, self-similarities and the process of self-organization. To plot such nonlinear and fractal forms there is a need to concentrate on local areas, which contribute to the continuity of process through time and space.

Applying Chaos Theory for the purpose of the analysis of time and space is different than other literary and artistic theories, because Chaos Theory achieves temporal dimension of the artifacts through the use of space, while literary and artistic theories traditionally achieve time through a story line or by placing things next to each other in a unified fashion. Therefore we see a fundamental change in our focus in the new paradigm. Characters and objects are not placed against each other according to some sort of timeline, nor are they made to move according to a predetermined plan. In the new paradigm, by contrast, temporariness is achieved by means of structural principles that unite fragmented sites together by recursive symmetries. In such processes, time and
space are conceived by mapping the characteristics of self-similarities and self-organization.

In chapter 2, it was demonstrated that the use of a double pendulum serves well for two-dimensional motion. In order to build a three-dimensional attractor there is a need to build another model. As we know, Lorenz’s strange attractor (which visually resembles butterfly wings, fig.27) is a further development of three-dimensional phase space. It shows that although the motion is left to run as long as possible, it never repeats its original path while the points, shapes, and patterns can appear infinitely close enough to appear to be identical. Because of such repeated patterns, which never return exactly to their previous path, the system is called a strange attractor. The following example demonstrates the same concept:

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN
THE FOURTH ACT WILL BEGIN IN TEN MORE MINUTES
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN
THE FOURTH ACT WILL BEGIN IN NINE MORE MINUTES
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN
THE FOURTH ACT WILL BEGIN IN EIGHT MORE MINUTES
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN
THE FOURTH ACT WILL BEGIN IN SEVEN MORE MINUTES
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN
THE FOURTH ACT WILL BEGIN IN SIX MORE MINUTES

This is a good example of a strange attractor that shows how a statement iterates but is not identical. In order to analyze the process, there is a need to look at how phase space
dimensions represent variables within the system and, by following these variables, how a phase space informs the changes that are occurring over time in the space. This example is also interesting because it indicates the degree of freedom this particular piece suggests. On the whole the system is behaving in a limited space and is not too complex to predict. Therefore, the space occupied by this system is limited and less complicated.

Now compare the above example with the following.

2A  I DID NOT LIKE THE HUMOR
1A  THEN SOMETIMES IT WAS BEAUTIFUL
2A  I DIDN’T THINK SO
1A  THE SUNDANCE KID WAS BEAUTIFUL
2A  AN AWFUL LOT OF FIGHTING
1A  A LOT OF FIGHTING LIKE A MOVIE ONE OF THEM LIKE A MOVIE OR SOMETHING
2A  IS HE SHOT? PAUL NEWMAN I MEAN
1A  MAYBE I DON’T KNOW THOSE WORDS I CAN’T SAY THEM
THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL
AND THE STORY IS ABOUT THE SUNDANCE KID
AND THE MOVIE IS ABOUT THE SUNDANCE KID
AND THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL BEAUTIFUL…
THE SUNDANCE KID COULD DANCE AROUND THE ROOM
THE SUNDANCE KID COULD WALK AROUND THE ROOM
THE SUNDANCE KID COULD RUN AROUND THE ROOM
ABOUT THE HOUSES
HOUSES OF TREES\textsuperscript{215}

This example is more complex; thus, it is hard to predict where the system would be at any future moment. Here one sees a combination of complexity and unpredictability, along with a sense of squeezing and folding. The behavior as a whole shows patterned and un-patterned areas in an odd combination. Here one has more of a sense of stretching and folding, which is the prime characteristic of strange attractors. The word SUNDANCE has almost become a strange attractor. The composition provides a back and forth movement. The process will remain ongoing as long as the process is stable enough to be stretched and folded, ending up at apparently random positions. It is also interesting to note how time and space contribute to the ongoing effect of the process.

The concept of stretching and folding seems similar to the one Bonnie Marranca calls “expanded and contracted.” She writes, “In the Theater of Images the painterly and sculptural qualities are stressed, transforming this theater into a spatially-dominated one activated by sense impressions, as opposed to a time-dominated one ruled by linear narrative.”\textsuperscript{216} She asserts that because of such qualities Wilson’s \textit{A Letter for Queen Victoria} can easily be “expanded or contracted.”\textsuperscript{217} This particular reference is important to compare how close literary references are to scientific methods. The process of expansion and contraction is one of the major tools in this self-organization process of space and time.
Loop Process

Wilson also achieves the sense of self-organization by means of simultaneity, in which dialogues are performed against a printed backdrop. Actors speak aloud in front of a painted curtain on which similar words are written. The self-organization process starts as soon as characters start to deliver their dialogues, which do not follow any semantic or syntactical rules, but an autistic pattern. The experience is different than reading an ordinary text or simply viewing a performance, because the visual and verbal combinations act like a loop process. As Herbert Frank suggests:

> If we employ language as a means of communication, a linear medium arranged as a time-series, we automatically favor linear organizing principles, e.g. causality of historical process. Visual languages allow us on the other hand to see those very important connections which manifest themselves as loop processes, interactions, communications, networks, and so fourth. Perhaps our inability to think in terms of networks is due in no small measure to our restriction to the descriptive system of verbal language.\(^{218}\)

In order to make a self-organized process work, Wilson creates a network of the visual and verbal. As we know, Wilson always emphasizes the visual aspects of his artifacts. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria* spoken words are performed in such a way as to give them a visual entity. With such a juxtaposition of the visual and verbal (fig. 29), the audience goes through a unique experience of time and space, where spoken words take the form of visual images in front of their eyes. It is here that one can appreciate Wilson’s theatrical spectacle in the re-framing of the spatial and temporal modes of the
performance, and the transformation of the fragmented images and sounds into a process. As Brecht says, “The image is image process: everything is process: the sound of language reports the vibration of electricity/light, the thinking body vibrates with a cosmic explosive energy.”

**An Element of Chance**

In this act of becoming, where everything is part of a self-organizing process, Wilson creates a mediating space in which openness and closure, chaos and order, engage each other in a self-renewing dialogue. Since the motion of sound and observable action is in progress, the emphasis is on the open and self-renewing process. In this open space and time everything happens suddenly and unexpectedly. There is no closure to anything because of the element of chance. In this self-renewing process, anything can happen and the creation of new acts and sounds is unlimited. Like a strange attractor, no one knows the future of this process and nothing can be anticipated. For instance, in the introduction, when Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles come to perform their dialogues, they are not named but numbered, 1 and 2. Wilson and Knowles speak:

1 A

2 B

1 A

2 B

1 ABABABABAB

2 ABABABAB AB B

1 A A AAAAAABBB
The repetition of the letters and numbers and the diversity of recurrences are more than the mind can hold in a comprehensive pattern, and all at once it is experienced as chaos. The intensity of chaos increases, when this part of the introduction ends with screaming by Queen Victoria, who raises her arms and screams three times. The increase of chaotic behavior enhances the element of chance, which in return magnifies the sense of surprise. In this magnified time and space, it is the experience of the audience that is most enlightening. The performer is playing his entire trick, and now it is up to the perceiver to create something out of nothing, out of this self-organized space and time.

The sense of dialect begins as one hears the dialogue, background music and the performance as a single communicative network. For instance, in the beginning of act one, the two characters again appear on the stage. The scene starts with the scream song.

1 (SCREAM SONG)
1 (SCREAM SONG)
1 SHE BROKE HER NECK
2 THAT’S NOT WHAT I DID
1 OH YOU WERE
When the dialogues are in the air, they create an open space and they seem to end as soon as the subject of discussion changes from one topic to another abruptly. For instance, in the above example the screaming and broken neck make sense in relation to one another, but at the third stage the dialogue abruptly takes another turn and closes at “thank you.” This sudden closure has two elements. First, it has an element of chance and second it anticipates a change that might reiterate in the following dialogues. Evidently, the iteration of the word “thank you” appears after a few lines:

1 HAVE YOU BEEN HERE BEFORE
2 NO, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME… OK, THANK YOU VERY MUCH
1 HAVE YOU BEEN HERE BEFORE
2 NO, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME… OK, THANK YOU VERY MUCH

The iteration of “thank you” takes one to another level of the dialect, that between the stable and unstable. By creating such combinations of stable and unstable systems of language, Wilson enhances the element of chance as well as the sense of process. At the same time, the form remains open, increasing the temporal dimension of his artifacts. Consequently, we encounter a combination of open and closed spaces with excessive information resulting in a void of meaning.

There are moments during the performance where Wilson seems to create a simultaneous motion that scientists have created by using the double pendulum to demonstrate the idea of how strange attractors erratically move into phase space. It also shows how a regular and patterned structure can end up in extremely chaotic behavior.
To see this strange behavior in the play, one can look at the part of the performance where two performers use highly ordered and patterned language, but their performance changes into something extremely fractal. As an example of this particular aspect we can see the way Christopher Knowles stands at the right of the stage and Robert Wilson occupies the other corner, with a show curtain at the back. They are clapping with two wooden blocks in their hands. Again they are numbered 1 and 2 and both perform their part simultaneously. Their words juxtapose, overlap and go into abrupt motion. Although both have their separate attractors, as the first character always rests on HAP and the other on PIECE, their behavior remains strange because of the overlapping of two different motions working side by side.

1 HAP HATH HAT HAP
   HAP HATH HAT HAP
   HAP HATH HAT HAP
   HAP HATH HAT HAP
   HAP HATH HAT HAP
   HAP HATH HAT HAP
   HAP HATH HAT HAP

2 (AT THE SAME TIME AS 1)
   THE RED BED PIECE
   THE RED BED PIECE
   THE RED BED PIECE
   THE RED BED PIECE
   THE RED BED PIECE
   THE RED BED PIECE
This technique of juxtaposition explicates another method in which Wilson designs a composition. In Wilson’s artifacts, building visual space and temporal rhythm is similar to a technique known as montage, “a dialectical process of free association that creates meaning not by narration or discursive logic but by the juxtaposition of two often seemingly unrelated scenes.”

Knowles and Wilson repeat the above dialogue once again with slight changes and suddenly the words become random and lose any sense of meaning:

```
2 COSABI NHJGT BNHG VFCD XCVF BHG NMKJIMNHJUYGTHFRD VBNH BG V B BNHJ BGV PER GLOS O CHOCOLATE
1 WHAT
2 TYUJHYGFR NHJUKIOOL MNHBG VFG CDXCVFGBHNJUYT BNHGT VFCD H HGJUU GHU GLOS O CHOCOLATE
1 WHAT
GHUJYGTHRDECVBNHGTYH VBGH NHBGV FACHE DFGTYHJK BNHJMKIUYHY FACHE SDFG CIUHJ….
```

This dialogue does not make any sense at all. According to Holmberg:

By juxtaposing heterogeneous elements, simultaneity rejects a single point of view to explore an object from multiple angles…. By telescoping space and time, by yoking together a kaleidoscope of clashing perspectives,
simultaneity enables an artist to create a new aesthetic unity without denying the contradictions and chaos of experience.\textsuperscript{226}

By using this cinematic technique, Wilson changes the whole effect and the sequence of cause and effect. Just as chaos theorists demonstrate how a small cause can lead to large and unexpected results, montage creates a dialogue among discrete elements and leads to large effects on the perception of the beholder. At the same time the lack of balance between cause and effect contributes to a lack of meaning and excessive information. Lack of meaning and excessive information enhance complexity, which, in turn, create a sense of an absent reality.

**Probability**

Lack of meaning and an absence of reality increases as one goes along with these absurd dialogues of the play. As we have noticed, however, the absurdity of the dialogue amplifies the element of probability, while increasing the process of inventedness. Dialogues open and close, creating something that ends up like seeming nothingness, while generating an internal sense of the renewal process. In other words, if the space and time come to any closure, it could damage the element of surprise. Therefore, although lack of meaning seems unreal, at the same time it becomes one of the most effective tools to create a self-renewing process. Actually Wilson’s theater gains strength from such unconventional visions, because he creates things the way he sees them. At the same time it is obvious by now that Wilson shares the emphasis on multiplicity, unpredictability and plurality with Chaos Theory and Postmodernism. Time and space are not analytical but metaphorical and abstract. In order to understand such abstract
space and time oriented artifacts, one needs to maintain a relationship between artistic and theatrical expression and its relationship to the person’s theatrical experience. The science of chaos demonstrates that the physical world does not consist of regular patterned structures, but it involves both patterned and random forms. One is used to viewing things in an ordered, hierarchical and linear fashion. When a play like *A Letter for Queen Victoria* does not meet such traditional requirements, it seems unreal.

**An Absence of Origin**

This brings one to another important aspect of the play: the absence of an origin. When chaos theorists speak about the origin, they mean the initial condition of a system. In the play, such awareness comes out of the language which seems to emerge out of the void. Suddenly things appear and disappear, leading to excessive information. Each information works as a referential symbol, which is de-centered soon by another symbol or image. If we go back to our example of the SUNDANCE again, it is hard to find where the story of the SUNDANCE starts or ends. Instead, one sees a net of different thoughts connected or disconnected abruptly. Review the following dialogues:

2A  I DIDN’T LIKE THE HUMOR

1A  THEN SOMETIMES IT WAS BEAUTIFUL

2A  I DIDN’T THINK SO

1A  THE SUNDANCE KID WAS BEAUTIFUL

2A  AN AWFUL LOT OF FIGHTING IN IT
1A A LOT OF FIGHTING LIKE A MOVIE ONE OF THEM LIKE A MOVIE OR SOMETHING

2A IS HE SHOT? PAUL NEWMAN I MEAN

1A MAYBE I DON’T KNOW THOSE WORDS I CAN’T SAY THEM

THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL
AND THE STORY IS ABOUT THE SUNDANCE KID
AND THE MOVIE IS ABOUT THE SUNDANCE KID
AND THE SUNDANCE KID IS BEAUTIFUL
BEAUTIFUL...

THE SUNDANCE KID COULD DANCE AROUND THE ROME
THE SUNDANCE KID COULD WALK AROUND THE ROME
THE SUNDANCE KID COULD RUN AROUND THE ROOM
ABOUT THE HOUSES

YEAH THE SUNDANCE WAS BEAUTIFUL

THE SUNDANCE KID WAS BEAUTIFUL
BECAUSE HE WAS BEAUTIFUL
VERY BEAUTIFUL

In this example the absence of origin is apparent. The images of HUMOUR, BEAUTY, FIGHTING, MOVIE, DANCE, WALK, RUN, HOUSE and TREE keep on changing. At the same time, there are some words that become attractors, such as, BEAUTIFUL and SUNDANCE, but every time they appear they maintain their
strangeness by changing the contextual relationship. The change in contextual relation creates a balance between creation and destruction of space. Moreover, the space that was occupied by the SUNDANCE changes into “HE,” “KID” and “BEAUTIFUL.” By the time it destructs completely, it takes another turn and renews itself in another form or goes back to its original form. While this renewal of the contextual relation destroys the sense of origin, it certainly contributes to the renewal of space and time and thus enhances a sense of process.

The space occupied by this simple word SUNDANCE evolves through a continuing process between emptiness and fullness: emptiness, when it is void of meaning, and fullness, when it is full of meaning. The SUNDANCE is not just a SUNDANCE, but a multifaceted thing in the whole context. It reflects the multiplicity as well as indeterminacy. Its significance comes out of its numerous guises, which are put together like a collage. Which face will turn up is not explicit. In this process of creation and destruction, SUNDANCE goes through a kind of self-organization through language. Like a feedback loop, the same idea changes its context, which in return changes the whole effect, and the way the new image should be understood. A feedback loop in which input of the one is used as an output of the other, SUNDANCE creates a text-context relationship and self-organizes in a constantly modulating interaction. So we see a highly complex form with great possibilities of interactions between spaces so that each space is opened to new possibilities. The fragmented space turns into individual blocks that periodically lead from order to chaos or, in return, chaos to order. The complexity increases as each level goes into further modification and transformations. In this process
of becoming, the language itself manifests the self-organization process and becomes one of the major elements of the product.

_A Letter for Queen Victoria_ thus goes through numerous modifications; each level transforms into another, and finally there lives no space for the beholder to make any statement about the letter. Because every time a reminder comes that you are watching _A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA_, it falls into its own denouncement. For instance, in the introduction, Wilson as character 1 and Knowles as character 2 speak:

1. WHAT ARE WE DOING
2. WE’RE DOING “A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA”

And then there comes nothing about the letter; instead, one hears an irrelevant speech:

2. WE ARE AT THE THEATER IN MANHATTAN
   IN NEW YORK
   IN THE WORLD
   IN THE WORLD
   IN THE WORLD…

In another example, character 2 states:

2. WE’RE DOING “A LETTER FOR QUEEN VICTORIA”
1. WHAT
2. WE’RE DOING SPEAKING
1. WHAT ARE WE DOING
2. WE’RE DOING THE BLOCKS…
1. WHAT ARE WE DOING
2. YOU DID THE HAP HATHS AND I DID THE RED BED PIECE
THEN I DID
THE HAP HATHS AND YOU DID THE RED BED PIECE THEN WE DID
THERE ARE THESE ELECTRO WHELLS….230

Discarding the linearity of conventional drama and the concept of narrative as a complete statement, Wilson achieves truth through visual images, where he finds the truer modes of expression. At its roots is a sense of rupture and fragmentation, not in the formal structuring of the play but in the contextual relationship of *A Letter for Queen Victoria*. It is here that one gets a sense of the unbridgeable gap between reality and representation. The play represents something that has nothing to do with the real letter or to Queen Victoria.

**Collage of Words**

The play does not share any experience from the past or history but is punctuated by a series of fragmented images. As the dialogue continues to grow, the play increasingly gives way to information and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* ends as a collage of words, sounds and music. By punctuating numerous details in this fragmented performance, Wilson creates a common context from which anyone can scrutinize the kind of information he needs. As Hans Peter Kuhn states, “Wilson believes that all these independent layers of sound and language replicate the workings of the mind, through which simultaneously pass random, often extraneous pieces of information and stimuli as well as one’s own thoughts and mental images.”231 In this transcendental viewpoint, a sense of dialectic is explicit by means of common context, not by the fragmented images
or unrelated information. As fragmentation is usually identified as an obstruction to achieve a sense of whole, it also contributes to the sense of unity by allowing different degrees of perceptions to coexist. Consequently one finds fragmentation and fractal dialogues with areas of patterned and symmetrical replications, although the degree of clarity and diffusion is largely based on the formal properties of the dialogue, particularly the way they are presented.

In the following example, a background screen is shown. A paradox exists here because one sees an absence of reality, but at the same time this absence of reality gives way to multiple-realities as well.

```
A      HAP HAT HAP     AAAAAAAAAAAAAO   CONFORMING    O
AO      HAP HAT HAP      AAAAOAOAOA         VCONFORMINOOK
OAOA     HAP HAT HAP       AAAOAOAOA        VEOCONFOMIAOKO
XXXXXX    HAP HAT HAP       AAOAOAOA       VERYCONFORKOKOK
XXXXXXXX    HAP HAT HAP         AOAOA          VERYCONFORKOKOK
XXXXXXXXX   HAP HAT HAP       AOAOAOA        VERYCONFON ...
```

In this particular example it is quite clear that the space has almost been squeezed, while time has tremendously expanded, because it is punctuated with more information than space. This dual tension between space and time is ephemeral in its outlook and persistent in creating an ever-renewing image in the mind of the spectator. This is similar to postmodern events with no beginning and end, open to ever-renewing possibilities, plural in count but singular as process. As Susan Stewart suggests, “The procedure by which description multiplies in details is analogous to and mimetic of the process whereby space becomes significance, whereby everything is made to ‘count.’”
In the above example, the space that unfolds through time is produced through composing fragmented letters, which produce tangible qualities of a material reality on the screen but also a representation of reality that does not exist. Its tangible qualities and absence or presence of reality is an act of becoming, a self-renewing process of time and space that exists not in the past nor in the future but at the moment when it is being experienced.

The play also represents a transitional change in which chaos is breaking all conventional forms of representation. Amid these fractured forms, one can always find something new. The fragmented dialogues found in the play reflect fragmentation in culture. The play negates any sense of reality. Every time it refers to something, at the next step it is de-centered. The play performs the construction and deconstruction of space and time. New things are deconstructed and fractured and created again in a self-organizing process. The play as a whole is transcendent in the sense that it presents the meaning of life and the way a person lives in this postmodern world. Indeterminacy and unpredictability are apparent at each step. As soon as one starts bringing something into context, it loses its grounds and falls into chaos, which has no space where the beholder can enter to supply his or her own meaning. The play on the whole is not about a letter for Queen Victoria; rather it concerns some sort of information that is understandable in its own right as a very personal experience.
Chapter 4

I

Space and Time in the Context of

Postmodernism

In previous chapters I have raised some methodological implications concerning Chaos Theory and Robert Wilson’s art. I have suggested that by adopting scientific methods such as strange attractors and fractals, it is possible to see some of the hidden patterns within an apparent chaotic system. The application of Chaos Theory as an analytical tool can also help us understand the ways through which a system can be mapped out in space, and its behavior and changes can be examined during the evolution of a system. Usually it is hard to analyze a system that is fragmented, unpredictable and indeterminate. By adopting such a methodology, however, it is possible to see clearly the evolution of time and space in an indeterminate system, which is unpredictable and keeps on changing during the process. Denying the notion of rational predictability, Chaos Theory makes it possible to reveal patterns through recursive symmetries and self-similarities in a seemingly chaotic system. Because of the time-oriented nature of analysis in phase space, the concentration has remained on continuity and an ever-renewing process of time and space.

An analysis of Memory/Loss, Einstein on the Beach, and A Letter for Queen Victoria shows that, like scientists, Wilson also uses an abstract space. Scientists call this abstract space—phase space—a space that cannot be separated from time. In order to see a system in progress one needs to observe spatial and temporal changes. In these
analyses time has not been viewed as public time nor standard time, nor has the space been articulated as absolute space, natural space, nor social space; rather, space has been revealed to be an abstract, heterogeneous and private space and time that shows a sense of process, an ever-renewing process.

In this chapter, I draw parallels between Wilson’s art and the concept of time and space from a postmodern perspective. Developing the concept of time and space as a self-renewing process, this chapter looks at an overall attitude toward process and an ever-renewing system. It is constructive to explore time and space in Wilson’s art from such a postmodern perspective.

Like Chaos Theory, Postmodernism has changed the way in which past, present and future are envisioned. An analysis of Wilson’s art shows that the phenomenal world which sees a gap between past and present, inside and outside, real and unreal, and, more specifically, space and time has become problematic. The display of space and time in Wilson’s art can be conceived of as a shift. In these analyses one sees a lack of development, loss of direction and indeterminism towards the past and future. Time is usually present and space abstract, private and heterogeneous. Moreover through the adoption of Chaos Theory as an analytical tool, it is clear that certain features of time and space, such as indeterminacy, de-centering, and non-linearity are already widespread across a range of disciplines. Therefore it is possible to propose that these features are an integral part of the Postmodern world.

Wilson has made effective use of space and time in his artworks, consciously using these elements to organize and disorganize the real. The emphasis in these works is on representational space and time, meaning a kind of space and time which is
symbolic, metaphorical and artistic. In *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, the reference to a historical figure is almost representational, because it is a historical reality that has been extremely individualized and is almost an artistic response to the actual historical document. Moreover, in representing such historical figures as Einstein and Queen Victoria the artist has almost lost his faith in historical reality. As Sheryl Sutton puts it, “Though many of Wilson’s characters are drawn from history or mythology, there is little if any sense of the past in his theater.”\(^{235}\) The relationship of real historical reference is also missing in the representation of real space and time; therefore, the audience cannot determine exactly what they are viewing. The conditions that lead to this complexity are multiple, since they are a combination of historical, conceptual, technological and representational factors.

In 1915, Albert Einstein in his General Theory of Relativity demonstrated that there is no absolute time and space and that the sequence of reference frames keeps changing as long as the viewer keeps on moving his or her position. From this perspective the sequence of events is not the same when observed from another place.\(^{236}\) Some scientists and thinkers are also skeptical about the division of time into preconceived units, because any standard pattern of dividing time and space is contrary to usual experience. As Henri Bergson suggests, one can only think about time because “it might be there, that it passes there and might stop there.”\(^{237}\)

But how should one understand time as it affects human nature? Obviously one follows a calendar which runs in a regular pattern. Days and seasons come and go, and everything continues to run in a regular pattern. This quantitative approach seems to fail to make its impression on the private nature of time and space because experience of
private time is more qualitative. For instance, if a person is happy, the time may appear
to run faster than it would during a less positive moment. Robert Wilson makes use of
such qualitative time, in which the personal experience of time is differentiated from the
strict sequence and division of standard time. Wilson emphasizes the experience of
private time by rejecting the standardization of time. In his artifacts, time is private to
each individual. According to Sutton, “to be in a Wilson piece is somehow an extension
of being in life.” A person is free to make his own assumptions based on his own
experience. Because of such a preference for private time, it is easy to see a move from a
standardization of space and time to a private space and time. Being a visual artist,
Wilson always emphasizes the importance of visual structure in his artifacts. He
composes space first, before he thinks of any other element for the execution of artistic
form. He states: “Space helps us see. The more space around an object, the better we
see.”

Many theoreticians, such as Linda Hutcheon, Jon Stratton, Brian McHale, and Steven Connor point out the postmodern artist’s preference of space over time. Some of them believe that the emphasis on space in the late twentieth century is almost a cultural phenomenon. Fredric Jameson also claims that contemporary culture has more emphasis on space and spatial logic. Hutcheon and other theoreticians believe that the emphasis on space rather than time is a major shift and a key difference in going from the modern to postmodern. Foucault in, Of Other Space, believes that we have left behind the experience of passing life over time, suggesting that the twentieth century could be called “the epoch of space.”
The emphasis on space with special reference to Postmodernism is sometimes critical as well, because it cannot be denied that modern artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and others were also concerned with space. They also concentrated on space that was fragmented, non-linear and disconnected. They introduced perspective in their pictures that was not linear but multi-dimensional. Then how does the concept of space and time in Postmodernism differ from that of Modernism? If we compare Picasso’s painting, *Les Demoiselles d’ Avignon*, 1907, with Robert Wilson’s *Memory/Loss*, we see that Wilson has emphasized more the temporal dimension to his visual work, because now it is not simply a process of seeing but also of hearing. Now multi-dimensionality of space is not an analytical space, but metaphorical. Now it is more illusionistic and charged with an element of surprise. It is this particular aspect that engages the audience in an ever-renewing process.

In this ever-renewing process, narratives are not presented around a time line, nor is space a representation of historical facts. As in Wilson’s *the CIVIL warS*, history is not being reconstructed as Picasso did in his painting *Guernica* of 1937; instead, we see a sense of formation and deformation of history. Some call this performance “a historical collage”246 and others refer to “the multinational chaos of *the CIVIL warS.*”247 In this process of formation and deformation, individuals are free to place themselves in their own contextualized time and space. Here space is not simply an experience developing over time but a dialectic of space and time.

Wilson’s artworks are constructions of narratives that do not present a form that can take the beholder from the past through the present into the future. This means that no prediction can be made based on past and present because history is not presented as a
historical fact based on real incidents but rather as a desire for directness and immediacy of experience. As Sutton suggests, Wilson’s works are “about the truth that’s happening at that moment.”

Sometimes this dependence on present seems to be seen not as reality but as simulation. According to Smethurst:

In postmodernity, extrapolation as a means of understanding the present and predicting the future is replaced by simulation. This is what the revolution in information has given us: the end of history as a written narrative and the beginning of history as simulation.

The analysis of Einstein on the Beach and A Letter for Queen Victoria shows how Wilson has manipulated historical reality by inserting excessive information in these performances. This is exactly what is meant by Postmodernism as an age of information. Because in these artworks historical facts are not measurable, it is difficult to trace where we are, and what is happening next. Analyzing Baudrillard’s postmodernity, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner suggest that Baudrillard thinks “History is barely kept alive by simulation, as a series of special effects or a toy; somewhere the real sense has been lost, the sense…that everybody could rely on.” According to Best and Kellner “There are no longer stable structures, nexuses of causality, events with consequences, or forms of determination through which one could delineate historical trajectories or lines of development. Everything instead is subject to indeterminism.”

In Wilson’s artifacts indeterminism and unpredictability are some of the most obvious features. Out of this indeterminism a new sense of history has grown. History is not some sort of time-oriented fact based on sequential arrangements, but an ever-renewing process of space
and time, with decontextulized history. Baudrillard called this decontextualization—the end of history. For others, however, this may not be an end of history but simply an illusion. As Ihab Hassan puts it, “History itself is staged, more like a happening than a performance, before its own facts; the politics of illusion.”

In “The Year 2000 Has Already Happened,” Baudrillard proposes three reasons that lead to the end of history. The first is an implication of hyperspace. He suggests that we are heading to an age in which everything will expand profoundly with such a speed that eventually it will end up turning into a hyperspace. In such space, no sense of history will remain and everything will lose its meaning.

In A Letter for Queen Victoria one encounters expanding hyperspace. Wilson speeds up the process by changing information at every level. The iteration and juxtaposition disconnect one event from the other. Fredric Jameson makes use of the term “hyperspace” for disorganized space in architecture. In such a hyperspace, he thinks a person cannot find any place of rest. This sense of unrest with ever-renewing interest is the key feature of many of Wilson’s artifacts, because, this is how Wilson achieves a sense of process in space and time. Wilson’s KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE (1972) is perhaps his best example of hyperspace. The program notes read, “KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE will be given for one performance only beginning at 0:00 midnight, September 2 and ending at 12:00 midnight, September 8. The complete presentation is continuous, 24 hours a day for 7 days.” Reporting on this week-long production Judith Searle wrote in the New York Times (12 November 1972):
The performance I saw began about 2:30 A.M. in the beautiful building which the Iranians call the ‘House of Mourning.’ The audience entered at one end of a long rectangular courtyard and passed various open rooms like department store display windows which housed various scenes, most of which look like tableaux. On closer examination, these proved to be slowly changing scenes in which actors moved so gradually that their movements were almost imperceptible.256

This description gives a sense of hyperspace, as each scene is represented as an individual tableau. There is not any sense of urgency, everything is moving and changing its place in imperceptibly slow motion. Here each space seems to be real but at the same time denies its own reality because each tableau seems individual as well as part of the whole. No one knows what is happening in the next tableau. Peter Cranston in the *Tehran Journal* (2 September 1972) explicates this particular aspect of the performance:

In the first one I saw a Thanksgiving dinner in progress, with a rather unhappy family sitting around a rather moldy-looking artificial turkey. Then there was a wedding, with the bride, groom and minister frozen in place, behind a small cage containing a bear. One room is unrestored and is excavated down to a cellar full of dust. There an ‘old man’ is contemplating a lion in another cage. Two camels are sitting by a pool at the rear of the court, flanked by a gaggle, and a lady setting her baby adrift in a basket. A stone mason is chipping away at old columns in another. An old *bazarri* contemplates a lovely girl in a windblown gown, who is not moving at all. Finally there is a room full of grass, with about twenty-
five real live rabbits hopping around. A Santa Claus is sitting with two live deer beside and ‘old lady’ in black, played by the nine-year-old girl in Wilson’s troupe, motionless. An enormous tower with a bell and a horrible stuffed eagle is inhabited by a number of people in white.\textsuperscript{257}

Another interesting aspect of this hyperspace is the way Wilson makes use of space for the audience. Judith Searle in the \textit{New York Times} (12 November 1972) specifically draws our attention to how audiences were made to be a part of this hyperspace. She writes that “the audience gradually clustered at one end of the courtyard, some sitting on bleachers or steps, some standing, and the major actions of the play began to unfold in various parts of the courtyard.”\textsuperscript{258}

Obviously Wilson does not make use of conventional seating for his audience; instead, they are able to spread out and can sit or stand wherever they like, or even become part of the process by participating directly in the performance. The creation of space increases randomness and indeterminacy because of its multiplicity. This leads to a second reason of Baudrillard for the end of history—an increasing sense of entropy.

Baudrillard borrows the use of this term from the sciences, in which “entropy has come to be interpreted as the amount of disorder the system contains.”\textsuperscript{259} A. B. Cambel writes that: “Entropy is inextricably linked to energy, information, and chaos.”\textsuperscript{260} By using this scientific term, Baudrillard draws our attention to a state of total passivity and boredom. He thinks that if a society reaches a state of passivity and boredom it will ultimately bring stagnation to its history.\textsuperscript{261} As in the sciences, entropy serves as a compass to designate the direction away from the equilibrium state. Baudrillard makes use of entropy to indicate the direction away from the active state to the passive state of a
system. For him history has dissipated all of its energy and has entered into a zone where it alludes to a state of inertia. According to Nina Hall, the German physicist Rudolf Clausius introduced the notion of entropy “as a quantity that relentlessly increases because of...heat dissipation.” In these systems heat is considered the random movement of the particles, which contribute to the whole system. Such a development of random movement is seen in *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, where excessive information stagnates an active system in such a way that the system becomes extremely passive, meaning we cannot receive any meaningful message from the system. As in the following example:

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2 COSABI NHJGT BNHG VFCD XCVF BHG NMKJI
MNHJUYGTHFRD
VBNH BG V B BBNHJ BGV PER GLOS O CHOCOLATE 263
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It is a phase where one has the sense that history in the form of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* has reached a state of absolute passivity and boredom. There is no sense of space or time at all from a historical perspective. The presentation of history at this particular moment is no more than a qualitative experience in which real history is left behind for the sake of simulation. Hassan’s explanation of such language is highly descriptive and symbolic. Sharing ideas from Lewis Mumford, Ernst Cassirer, José Delgado, Arnold Tonybee, Buckminster Fuller, and Ervin Laszlo, Hassan elaborates on this particular aspect of language, stating:

> Here we encounter the most speculative stage in the dispersal of the logos. Nature turns into ‘history’ (Karl Marx), culture turns into ‘symbolic language’ (Lewis Mumford, Ernst Cassirer), and now languages begin to
turn into ‘non-sensory communication’ (José Delgado). This ‘gnostic tendency’ (Ihab Hassan) assumes the increasing ‘etherealization’ (Arnold Tonybee) or ‘ephemeralization’ (Buckminster Fuller) or ‘conceptualization’ (Ervin Laszlo) of existence.\(^{264}\)

Baudrillard’s third reason derives from technology. A postmodern artist is able to simulate history in multiple ways, because of the technological perfection he has acquired.\(^{265}\) As a result, humanity leaves behind the reality of history for the sake of simulation, in which a new future, a futureless future is encountered. There is nothing waiting for us, because everything has already been perfected. Baudrillard further maintains that the frenzied attempts to assemble information and preserve historical events are indicative of the fact that there is no history to come.\(^{266}\) Now one is frozen in a timeless present. In his “The Year 2000 Has Already Happened” Baudrillard seems to suggest that it is actually simulation that opposes representation. Two questions arise: what is representation and how does it oppose reality? Peter Brooker in his analysis of Jean Baudrillard, from ‘Simulacra and Simulation maintains, “Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent… Simulation starts… from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference.”\(^{267}\)

Wilson’s Einstein on the Beach presents a copy of history, which has no historical origin. It has no such origin because it does not exactly represent historical facts. Nevertheless, it is a copy in the sense that the performance posits the recursive loop. Consequently, the performance is a representation of its failure to represent what it alludes to but never accomplishes. The audience confronts image after image, but there
is no way to put these images into words, because images hardly reflect the actual history. They fail to represent actual reality. As a result they accept no relation to any reality because they are their own simulacrum. In *Einstein on the Beach*, Wilson presents these successive stages of images by repetition and variations. We see a similar treatment in his set of thirteen drawings for *Einstein on the Beach* (fig. 26, Drawing Series). In *Einstein on the Beach* one sees how Wilson introduces the train image in act 1, then the same image turns into a night train and a building. Wilson associates such transformations with an art of “variations and themes.” In these images it is difficult to suggest that images are representations or simulacra, since the informing experiences that the audience perceives from the performance do not differentiate between them. It is an experience that can only be felt by the audience. There is nothing that is past or future, and the only thing that is explicit is that each image contributes to the ever-renewing process which needs to be experienced at the time of the performance. It is a postmodern event, ever new and singular.

Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach* embraces a form that represents no single form and it offers a context that makes no single context. Framji Minwalla presents a similar perspective, when he talks about the postmodern sensibility. He maintains: “The signifiers, we’re told, have lost all stable meaning, unitary texts are actually the products of pluralistic cultural histories, and (his)tory has no privileged point of reference; in short, there is no there there, no here here, no now now.” It is a collage of fragmented images, which implodes into a new kind of form, the simulacrum. The familiar train image gradually abandons its initial image and is transformed into a form that seems to have no original at all. Once the audience enters into this space the distinction between
copy and the original ceases to carry any meaning. At this point, the audience has entered into a space and time that is hyper-real. Here reality and its representation have been collapsed into a new space and time, a hyper-real space and time, where everything is at once non-referential as well as real, like an ever-new image.

Wilson’s art truly represents the post-industrial age of information as well as a digital culture. According to Smethurst,

A crucial sign of postmodern… can be found in the post-industrial age of information, largely made possible by the spread of information technology. Attached to capitalism and the immense power and wealth of the global market a digital culture has emerged, and this seems to be recognized as a culture of surfaces, signs and images, an immensely superficial world, and a spatially extended world.”

N. Katherine Hayles also connects simulacrum with the age of information. She believes that in this information age the original has almost vanished, and the copy not the representation displays new non-referential implications. According to her, “The emergence of an information age was crucial in bringing about this implosion, for it provided the technology that distanced an object so far from its putative origin that the origin could not recover….” Baudrillard thinks that it is because of the technology, specifically television, that the public and private spaces have been destroyed. From this perspective, the immediacy and nearness of everything has led to the loss of the real. Smethurst believes “This is both a temporal and a special condition, a loss of both geographical and historical distance…” He further suggests that “After the loss of real,
we live in Baudrillard’s most famous formulation and most dubious contribution to the
postmodern, ‘the image as pure simulacrum.’”

Wilson calls his theater the *Theater of Images*. If image is understood as
simulacrum, it should also be understood as hyper-real, in which, “real is no longer
represented but reproduced and simulated.” Bonnie Marranca maintains that the
*Theater of Images* is different from others because of its distancing from literary and
theatrical sources. Wilson believes his theatrical performances reflect his own thought
process. He uses language, the way people think and not the way they speak, “moving
suddenly from one thought to another, unrestrained by logic or the obligations of
discourse.” According to Shyer, “Wilson also likes to compare his writings to a
television that is continuously changing.” In one of his interviews, Wilson emphasizes,
“we do not want to belabor you with story.” Shyer suggests that his performances
represent “thoughts, sensations. Shards of personal memory—pieces of many stories—
which the audience is free to deal with as they choose.” Since there is no story, the
audience is free from any mental strain. Wilson represents a kind of unrestrained thought
process in the form of images. Marranca asserts:

The absence of dialogue leads to the predominance of the stage picture in
the Theater of Images. This voids all considerations of theater as it is
conventionally understood in terms of plot, character, setting, language
and movement. Actors do not create ‘roles.’ They function instead as
media through which the playwright expresses his ideas; they serve as
icons and images.
These icons are reduced to a series of disjunct and fragmented images, displaced in hyper-real time and space, because everything seems to be removed from standard time and space. Instead, we are viewing a network of events presenting time and space in an unpredictable, indeterminate, and dynamic manner. Smethurst suggests, “The network is reality in postmodern culture, but it is also a metaphor for postmodern space-time. It breaks with the linearity of the modern and with the kind of spatial distinctions that kept local and global apart.”

Network is a metaphor for a kind of non-linearity, which keeps the system ongoing. In a network, messages keep on entering into a system, and simple things keep on getting more and more complicated and chaotic. At a certain point, however, this criss-crossing of messages finds its way and receives a clear message. The best example of such a network is the internet and e-mail. No one knows from which rout a message has traveled before arriving at its destination.

Robert Wilson’s artifacts display the same sort of network; at certain points they appear absolutely chaotic. It does not mean, however, that they do not represent anything at all. They are like e-mail messages, which criss-cross several routes and ultimately make their way, or as Wilson himself believes, like television channels which keep on changing. It is true that sometimes excessive information makes prediction difficult, but at the same time this difficulty of prediction keeps the system alive in an ever-renewing process, like thought itself, which never stops. Like a strange attractor and fractal, the network demonstrates recursion, which becomes the major source of information. No matter how many routes a system adopts, messages keep on transferring. In this process
of transfer, quantities neither diminish nor are conserved but become a new source of information.

II

Expansions, Connections and Explanations

Previous chapters have shown that the use of space and time in Wilson’s artifacts generates an ever-renewing process. He makes use of space that is detached from mundane reality and forms an ever-renewing realm of its own. Time in his artworks is a constructed experience, non-linear and formed by repetitious patterns. The purpose of these analyses is not only to make use of an alternate vocabulary through which one can speak of Robert Wilson’s art, but also to show how art, science and Postmodernism share and display common ideas. This interdisciplinary approach paves the way to look at art works, which embrace a scientific and contemporary thinking. Through this interdisciplinary approach it has explored how Wilson’s art, Chaos Theory, and Postmodernism all share a common understanding of time and space, which ultimately leads to the understanding of an ever-renewing process.

Change and Renewal

Wilson’s art, Postmodernism and Chaos Theory share the idea of change and renewal. I have frequently used words like system and process. It is explicit that systems are characterized by regularity, persistence and even repetition. They provide a complete methodology. In a system “individual parts are not in themselves important but are
relevant only in the way they are used in the enclosed logic of the whole.”\textsuperscript{282} Process is usually associated with change. According to Herbert Marcuse, it even has the potential to change an image into an “instrumental reason.”\textsuperscript{283} This is a term which is frequently used in Postmodernism, suggesting a process of change. Ihab Hassan elaborates after Martin Heidegger: “At its best, process permits change, surprise, innovation; it declares the openness of being to Time.”\textsuperscript{284} David George provides an excellent summary of some postmodern terms, such as “process,” “play,” “game,” and “contradiction.” He suggests:

We may be entering an age in which there are only (italics original) media (semiosis, assumptions, paradigms, models) and no ontology, only experiences (and no Self except the one like an actor’s career made up of the parts we enact and rewrite), a world in which, difference is primordial (no-Ur-Whole), and time endless.\textsuperscript{285}

A theatrical performance, as one encounters in Wilson’s art, involves a particular process of reception, in which each activity provides an opportunity of improvisatory experimentation based on the experience of the unique situation. In order to analyze Robert Wilson’s art, there was a need to adopt a methodology that is more systematic and consistent in approach. The implication of Chaos Theory has been useful, because it has provided a method to analyze and evaluate the complex, fragmented and non-linear art works of Wilson. This analysis has explored how Wilson’s art is shaped by change and iteration, and, therefore, offers an ever-renewing space and time.

Mikhail M. Bakhtin refers to a term “carnivalization,” which in Hassan’s view refers to an “antisystem.” He suggests that the term “might stand for postmodernism itself, or at least for its ludic and subversive elements that promise renewal. For in
carnival the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal, human beings, then as now, discover the peculiar logic of the inside out….“286 The statement is important because of its use of the words “change” and “renewal.” When chaos theorists speak of a system they refer to a method that analyzes and evaluates this change and renewal during the process. Moreover, they focus on the element of space and time because such an analysis can only be made possible by plotting different entities in space and by observing their behavior through time. Wilson’s art and Postmodernism specifically share this emphasis on change and renewal through the process of time and space. In Hassan’s view, every change leads to hybridization, “…in which continuity and discontinuity, high and low culture, mingle not to imitate but to expand the past in the present. In that plural present, all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Now and the Not Now.”287 Here Hassan is referring to another important aspect of Postmodernism, Wilson’s art and Chaos Theory: “not to imitate but expand the past and present.” Chaos theorists have frequently stressed this particular aspect of fractal and strange attractors, in which a form may iterate without imitating its original traits. Such forms show similarities but are not identical.

Non-linearity/ Fragmentation

Wilson’s art, Postmodernism and Chaos Theory also share the element of non-linearity and fragmentation. Traditionally art works contain characteristics for metamorphosing mundane reality into an ordered, comprehensible fashion. A linear transmission takes place between the artwork and audience, and one can perceive events in a well-arranged sequential fashion, fully articulating the past and its consequences for
the present. Wilson’s art works sustain such a reality and share a boundary of communication whose dynamics exhibit complex and unpredictable time and space. According to Hassan, nonlinear forms create “a perception that exists outside of conventional time and space.”

In effect, such an artwork ceases to transmit the everyday reality and interrogates its own medium of transmission. The analysis of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* suggests that it consists of a nonlinear form that is made up of both patterned and fragmented language. It is this particular aspect that chaos theorists see as a combination of chaos and order and Postmodernism as “continuity” and “discontinuity.” According to N. Katherine Hayles, “Nonlinear terms are especially likely to appear when the behavior of a system is determined by two or more factors acting independently of one another.”

In order to compare Chaos Theory and Postmodernism, it would be interesting to compare Hayles’ statement with that of Hassan:

Thus postmodernism, by invoking two divinities at one, engages a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt, all must be honored if we are to attend to history, apprehend (perceive, understand) change both as a spatial, mental structure and as a temporal, physical process, both as pattern and unique event.

Hayles further looks at the affinities between Chaos Theory and postmodern theories. One of them she asserts is “a new way to think about order, conceptualizing it not as a totalized condition but as the replication of symmetries that also allows for asymmetries and unpredictabilities.” For example, in *Memory/Loss* (figs. 5,6), it is not simply the half-buried figure that contributes to the entire form but the combination of aural and visual elements. Although the visual composition is quite simple, it is actually the use of
the multiple elements of aural and visual that makes this installation fragmented and non-linear.

*Memory/Loss*, like many of Wilson’s art works, represents bold straight lines, which provide a symmetrical opening space to enter into the theatrical space. The emphasis on theatricality is elaborated by using a dramatic contrast of light and dark. The sculpture is placed almost in the middle of the room, but it does not become the center of interest because of its volume, which seems to be so small in relation to the surrounding space. Usually Wilson allows more space around his center of interest to place more emphasis on his focal point. But this is not the case in this specific situation, because the rough texture of the floor has almost overcome the small and smooth sculptural piece in the middle, so much so that one is already lost before seeing *Memory/Loss*.

What is interesting “is the syncretic aspect of his work, the relationships he establishes between the image, the text, the sense, [and] the plot….” The sculpture as a whole is incomplete without the audio recording. The audio recording is a combination of disjunct and fragmented sounds and words. Clearly, Wilson wants us to conceptualize the installation as a totalized form, comprised of both aural and visual motifs. If one analyzes closely the overlapping of the two systems, the aural and the visual, one can assume that the fragmentation of *The Waste Land*, which Wilson used as a major source for the aural part, has clearly added more information to the original, because it is not simply a copy of *The Waste Land*, but an expansion of it by the artist. There would be moments, however, when one could not perceive anything at all, and text would have been perceived only as noise. Clearly, Wilson’s art emphasizes the contingent, the random, the irrational, the symbolic and the metaphorical experiences of time as opposed
to the predictable dependence on regularity and clock-like chronology. Similarly the use of space has also gone through radical transformations. Now it is a kind of space that radically demolishes its own context, because Wilson makes use of daylight through a window opening, which keeps on changing throughout the day and keeps the system running into new space and time, like an ever-renewing process. Moreover, the use of audio ceases to transmit to the exterior world and interrogates its own medium of communication. The random patterning of this audio system is creative because it can allude to the combination of symmetrical and asymmetrical organization.

**Arbitrariness of Semiology**

Through the adoption of fragmented pieces of *The Waste Land* in his *Memory/Loss*, Wilson shares the postmodern emphasis on the arbitrariness and immutability of language. He tears the actual text apart and challenges its underlying system or structure. Like Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasizes the relationship of signifier and signified through the use of language, Wilson takes language and sound as an image, which can change the psyche of the viewer in order to present a particular concept. According to Peter Francis Mackey, “these units result from the conjoining of a ‘signified,’ or concept, and a ‘signifier,’ or sound-image, that is impressed upon our psyche and ‘expresses’ that concept.”

Mackey suggests that it is how the signifiers mainly rely for their meaning on the surroundings and other signifiers. Wilson’s fragmented use of *The Waste Land* and its overlapping with *Memory/Loss* could only evolve their meanings from each other in relation to the whole. As Mackey maintains, “The meaning of a system of signs
emerges insofar as its constituent elements differ from each other. Similarly, various cultures and languages use different signifiers to express the same signified.”296 This is how Wilson’s use of language and images, as the major elements of form, enhances the possibility of multiple interpretations of time and space. According to Jameson:

> It is, of course, no accident that today, in full postmodernism, the older language of the ‘work’—the work of art, the masterwork—has everywhere largely been displaced by the rather different language of the ‘text,’ of texts and texuality—a language from which the achievement of organic or monumental form is strategically excluded. Everything can now be a text in that sense (daily life, the body, political representations), while objects that were formerly ‘works’ can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or, yet again, sheer process….297

In this extended space and time, sound, music, words, light and installation can be read as a process of becoming. Julia Kristeva, who served on the jury of the Venice Bienniale, in which Wilson was awarded first prize for his installation Memory/Loss, shares her observation in the following words:

> A lot of people criticized us for awarding Bob Wilson the prize for sculpture. But clearly the traditional categories – painting, sculpture, stagecraft, etc. – no longer correspond to reality. Personally, I think this is due to a crisis in our psychic space and the borders that separate the object and the subject. There is an intrication of the roles of the artist and the
spectator, erasing the borders between the self and the other. This lack of differentiation can have a dramatic effect on some people: loss of sense of self, hallucinations, etc., but it can also give rise to jubilation, because it creates a sense of osmosis with being, the Absolute.\textsuperscript{298}

She believes that this is a turning point in the relationship between subject and object. Now subject and object are not only immersed fully into each other but also, “in a new form of the sacred.”\textsuperscript{299} It is this newness of formal and temporal space that is admired.

**Emphasis on Form**

Robert Wilson’s art shares another important aspect with Postmodernism and Chaos Theory and that is the manner in which the formal elements purposefully multiply our interpretations, never reaching any resolution. Concerning this conception, I am examining a set of thirteen drawings by Wilson for *Einstein on the Beach* (1976, fig. 26) as well as the Mandlebrot set of fractals (fig. 28). As we know, Wilson developed the main idea of *Einstein on the Beach* around the number three. Each set of drawings is based on nine drawings, three in each column and three in each row, except for set thirteen which randomly ends after a set of five drawings. A close analysis of these drawings reveals that none of the two sets of drawings are similar in form. At first glance all nine drawings of set 1 (fig. 26) appear to be identical but are not. Although each block is similar in treatment, no two blocks are identical, because each block is executed slightly differently from the adjoining block. The same is true for all the other sets. There is no specific title given to each set; therefore, the viewer is free to draw any conclusion from these drawings.
Wilson elaborates his idea around the images of train, trail and spaceship. None of these three images are directly related to the life of Einstein. The train and space have some connotations to Einstein’s early life, when the steam engine was already popular, and the space age, which is considered to be one of Einstein’s major contributions. When one looks at these thirteen sets of drawings there is not any reference that leads or relates them directly to the life of Einstein. These drawings reveal “Wilson’s ability to create images that lack specific meaning yet fill the mind and imagination.” The information does not add anything to our knowledge of Einstein, nor does it provide any specific information about the artworks.

The images of train, trial and spaceships, however, are significant for understating Wilson’s process of thinking. They are pictographs through which Wilson’s notion of time and space unfold. For instance, in set one, comprised of nine blocks, Wilson shows a combination of open and closed space, because each block is comprised of a broad empty space, except for the right corner, which is further framed in a square shape. The miniature work within these smaller blocks discerns clarity, and it is hard to conclude what is going on. Set two is quite interesting. It shows Wilson’s ability to capture time and space, which renews at every level. He achieves this sense of renewal by means of sharp contrast of black and white and by placing horizontal and vertical lines against diagonals. Areas treated in black actually block the view and give a sense of rest, while white areas open the space and enhance the sense of time and space. Although the setting mimics an overall form, it still remains different from the previous setting and alludes to an entirely new image on the whole. In this process of construction each part becomes an extended part of another
image, enhancing the visual perception of the viewer into an unending magic of transformation.

**Variety and Repetition**

The drawings for *Einstein on the Beach* are characterized by repetition. There are many elements that look repetitious; for instance, straight, vertical, and horizontal, diagonal and curved lines are frequently repeated. In the same way basic shapes, like square, circle and triangle are repeated. It is noteworthy that in spite of such obvious iteration there is not a single block that can be considered as an exact replica of the other. At this point several analogies can be drawn with the Mandelbrot fractals. Fig. 28, set 1 is based on such repetition, which repeats its behavior but is not identical. If we further compare Wilson’s drawing set 1 with his other 12 sets of drawings, and Mandelbrot set 1 with his sets 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, we can see how abruptly the similar image has been changed into something else. Wilson’s drawings and Mandelbrot’s fractals are similar in behavior and signify several iterations and recursions but there is not a single set that is an exact replication of the other. Because of such unexpected replications the system remains open and nonlinear. In both, time and space are represented with freedom and not with determinism. The form in Mandelbrot’s fractals and Wilson’s drawings organizes itself and essentially remains indeterminate. The viewer is caught in the unending enigma of images and their construction and deconstruction, and is thus compelled to follow various paths of possible disclosure because none of them leads to closure.
**Indeterminacy**

Wilson’s drawings and Mandelbrot’s fractals share the element of indeterminacy with Postmodernism. Concerning the postmodern perspective of indeterminacy, Hassan maintains that: “By indeterminacy or better still, *indeterminacies* (italics original), I mean a complex referent that these diverse concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation.” Hassan thinks indeterminacy and impermanency is an outcome of fragmentation, because the postmodern age demands “differences” and “shifting signifiers.” From Hassan’s perspective, indeterminacy actually paves the way for newness. In Wilson’s art, it is indeterminacy that recognizes the element of anarchy and at the same time pays tribute to newness.
Conclusion

Time and space in Wilson’s artifacts are major structuring tools and, in his own words, the basis of everything he does. His opera *A Letter for Queen Victoria* displays Wilson’s formalist schema which transforms language into artistic expression. In stage terms, the opera is rendered visually and acoustically so that the sound and visual elements can be experienced as open to time and space. The aim of the production is not one of informing the audience about *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, but one of rendering an evocation of its essence, so that the spectator enjoys the artist’s aesthetic expression.

Wilson rejects the idea of exacting a stage language as a replication of historical truth. Moreover, for Wilson such exposition of language could function only as text. He wants to organize his opera in the *mise-en-scène*, the tableau, and the stage, for it is in the actual performance of the visual and the verbal that the audience can enjoy the structure of the opera. He uses language as a musician would, mixing consonance and dissonance. This is how he attempts to promote an aesthetic experience into a personal experience. He is able to achieve his artistic goal through the power of language, by conjoining the historical reference to the contemporary and by speaking of the old through the language of his time. He achieves this by rejecting the traditional concept of plot and by deleting the use of language as a text. His art relies, instead, on the structuring of language as the visual presentation of multiple themes and motifs. Through such a practice Wilson creates his own language and stage environment, which bears very little resemblance with the actual theme. Everything is self created and self generated, telling and retelling the same story from multiple angles and creating an ever-renewing time and space.
In this renewed space and time, the general consciousness of the audience can only be reached by means of the aesthetic experience of the artwork. It is different from simply viewing the artwork, which unfolds in a sequential fashion. In his artworks, Wilson changes the usual experience of cause and effect. His is the theater, where small cause can bring much greater effects in consequence. Such concern with the viewer’s orientation demonstrates the power of the mind to transform an ordinary image into a symbolic and metaphorical one. This is how Wilson offers a theatrical solution to textual challenges. His theatrical language has a much greater power of stretching and folding. By recursive symmetries, a simple word and stage action become symbolic and change into a metaphorical state of being, as in the following example:

4  AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
1  AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
   AH UN AH UN AH UN AH UN
2  CONGRADULATIONS
3  CONGRADULATIONS
4  CONGRADULATIONS 303

The recurrence of words transforms a simple act into a symbolic and mythical performance. This and other examples show Wilson’s ability to evoke the transcendent through the use of simple words and visual images and let the art create its own world of images and free associations. His stage images dramatize the essential difference
between language and symbolic language, between experience and metaphorical experience. Therefore, the experience of time in his art is not an experience of clock time or social time but of symbolic time, which has greater power of change and, in return, power of renewal. In the same way, the space is not simply a visual representation of stage space but space that goes beyond the visual picture of the viewer and takes him into metaphorical space, transcending him into a new realm. It is this particular aspect of Wilson’s artworks that exploits the aesthetic language of Wilson’s stage into new dimensions. It is the transformation of the micro image into the macrocosm, through the folding and unfolding of self-reflexive words, images and symbols. The continuation and discontinuation, the construction and deconstruction, the stretching and folding of a simple image all serve in the renewal of time and space. An obvious recurrence of old material turns into a new vision, transforming and metamorphosing it into a process of becoming and creating a new chain of order and disorder which ultimately fuses into an entirely new synthesis. It is possible that the unfolding of theatrical language functions as a self-organizing process, and communicates effectively through the power of dramatic language.

Wilson’s visual art works also function in the same manner. His drawings are usually executed in pencil, pen, charcoal or graphite on paper. They have a strong contrast of dark and light, with bold expressionistic textures. His drawings for Einstein on the Beach are the best examples to learn about his working and thinking processes. They exist as independent art works as well as guides to the conceptual working space of the opera, ordering images and ideas. Wilson represents the exact three images in his series of drawings as he has developed in the opera. Here and in many of his other
drawing series, one sees a clear kinship between visual art and theater design. Thus, Wilson’s drawings can be viewed as mute theatrical performances. What is most interesting in these drawings is the implication of theatrical time and space. Each drawing can be visualized as a stage space, divided and elaborated as a complete stage set and picturing the realm of life.

The use of dark and light in the drawing series for *Einstein on the Beach* clearly suggests the direction of light. It also enhances the dramatic effect of space. The recurrence of some of the visual elements suggests the sequences of visual images. Each recurrence is not replicated exactly but with a little variation; therefore, Wilson’s drawings create a dialectical process between the image and the viewer. The same is true of the way he executes time in his drawings. He draws each image one after the other in a series; therefore, there is more emphasis on the element of time. Although these sets of drawings capture a sequential order, they do not follow a single story line, moving from one story to another in a free, insensate manner. In this way one image can entirely turn into a new image abruptly.

This brings us to one of the fundamental characteristics of Wilson’s art: the element of chance and indeterminacy. This particular aspect of his drawing keeps an image moving and can also freeze the motion of time within an image. There is no such thing in his visual and theatrical performances which can predetermine the oncoming image. Wilson’s drawings evoke such a sense of existence that no one can predict the exact path or time line. It is explicit that the sequence of scenes merges and emerges, forging communication through the aesthetic design of the images, which confront the imagination and create a new sense of space and time. Grounded in the space and time,
Wilson’s drawings, visual arts and theatrical performances redirect the underlying energies of the corporeal world to a metaphorical space and time, effecting an ever-renewing process of space and time.

Thus in Wilson’s theater, the main structuring elements—time and space—share the idea of renewal with Chaos Theory and Postmodernism. Wilson believes that whatever he represents is quite life-like. He believes that there is no need to reproduce historical facts because his audience already knows them. If no story is presented, there is no need to have a story altogether. His works look like a collage, because life itself is like a collage. If there is no presentation of reality in his art, he thinks there is no need for it, because his art itself is a reality. His artwork is what is being presented at that very moment; there is nothing before and after. His art is always new, a singular event, without post and modo.

Postmodernism and Chaos Theory both see a bigger change in culture because of technology, which has brought great change to our lives. Reality seems to have gone so far that the only thing that is left behind is simulation. Now time is seen not in a story line in a linear way but through visual space. In both Chaos Theory and Postmodernism, space has become the major force and time is viewed through it. According to Smethurst, in Postmodernism “space and time are combined, and space is no longer regarded as a static container in which events occur, nor is it entirely shaped by events; rather, it affects and is affected by events. Events produce space-time as well as occur in space-time.”

This is the reason that we see things occurring in the present. We do not see regeneration of historical time but an expression of time that is a production of space.
Wilson’s art shows that time and space are equally significant. In his visual artworks, such as *Memory/Loss* and in his theatrical performances, like *Einstein on the Beach* and *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, time and space are evolutionary as well as revolutionary. They are evolutionary because we see symmetrical and nonsymmetrical structures mapped out in the phase space. At several stages these structures show similarities in behavior. Therefore, although it is difficult to trace a linear, well-ordered path throughout the process, one can trace several ordered paths through iteration. In a linear system we see evolution, but we do not see revolution. In a linear system, things are for the most part preconceived and it is possible to predict the future of things. Nonlinear systems allude to indeterminate and unpredictable behavior and therefore are more revolutionary. Consequently, space and time in Wilson’s art are not simply evolutionary but also revolutionary. Here time and space are engaged in an ever-renewing dialect. Each image is not the death of history or time but its own simulation, individual and singular, and therefore always fresh and new.
Fig. 1. *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*, 1972
Figure 2: *Deafman Glance*, 1971 Act 1
Figure 3: Deafman Glance, 1971
Figure 4: Deafman Glance, 1971
Figure 5: Memory/Loss, Venice, 1993
Figure 6: Memory/Loss Detail
Figure 7: *Queen Victoria Chairs*, 1977
Figure 8: Stalin Chairs, 1977
Figure 9: Hanging Chair, 1977
Figure 10: Memory of a Revolution, 1990
Figure 11: *Memory of a Revolution* (Detail) 1990
Figure 12: Portrait, Still Life, Landscape, Rotterdam, 1993
Figure 13: Clink Street Vaults, London, 1995
Figure 14: *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976, Act 1. Scene 1 A, Train,
The Metropolitan, Opera House, New York
Figure 15: *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976, Act 1. Scene 2 A, Trial
Figure 16: Einstein on the Beach, 1976, Act 3, Scene B, Field with Spaceship
Figure 17: *Einstein on the Beach*, 1976, Act 4, Scene 3C, Spaceship
Figure 18: *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, 1977
Figure 19: A Letter for Queen Victoria, 1977, Wilson, Performing, The Drop
Figure 20: *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down*, 1984

(American Section)
Figure 21: the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down

(American Section)
Figure 22: *The King of Spain*, 1969, Drawing
Figure 23: the CIVIL warS Act 1, Scene B (Dutch Section), Schouwburg,

Rotterdam, 1983, detail
Figure 24: the CIVIL warS Act I, Scene B, 1983 (Dutch Section)
Figure 25: The King of Spain, 1969, Floor Plan
Figure 26: *Einstein on the Beach*, Set 1
Figure 26: *Einstein on the Beach*, Set 2
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 3
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 4
Figure 26: *Einstein on the Beach*, Set 5
Figure 26: *Einstein on the Beach*, Set 6
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 7
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 8
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 9
Figure 26: *Einstein on the Beach*, Set 10
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 11
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 12
Figure 26: Einstein on the Beach, Set 13
Figure 27: The Lorenz Strange Attractor
A fractal triangle, formed by dividing a square into four smaller squares and discarding the upper right square so produced, then dividing each remaining square into four still smaller squares and discarding each upper right square so produced, and repeating the process indefinitely.

Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 1
A fractal formed as in Figure 27, except that in each retained square the corner to be discarded has been chosen randomly.

Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 2
A fractal tree, produced by first drawing a vertical segment, and then, after this segment or any other one has been drawn, treating it as a "parent" segment and drawing two "offspring" segments, each six-tenths as long as the parent, and each extending at right angles from the end of the parent.

Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 3
Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 4
Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 5
Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 6
Figure 28: Mandelbrot Fractals, Set 7
Figure 29: *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, the “Chitter, Chatter,” Scene
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33 Shyer, 156.


36 Birringer, 83.


38 Shyer, 165.

39 Shyer, 166.


43 Quoted in Rokem, 170.

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46 Shyer, xviii.

47 Shyer, 172-173.


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53 Franco Quadri, Franco Bertoni, Robert Stearns, 12.

54 Quadri, Bertoni and Stearns, 6.

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56 Quadri, Bertoni and Stearns, 6.

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61 Quoted in Holmberg, 52.


63 Quoted from Holmberg, 52.

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73 Haskell, 12.

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75 Haskell, 31.


77 Quoted in Holmberg, 121.

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89 Haskell, 53.

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93 Haskell, 31.

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96 Shyer, xviii.


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102 Shyer, 11.


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127 Cambel, 70.


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130 Hawkins, 81.

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137 Hayles, *Chaos and Order*, 10.


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141 Hayles, *Chaos and Order*, 10.

142 Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, 150.

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For details see, Mandelbrot, 96.

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189 Hassan, 91.


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I am borrowing this term from Henri Lefebvre, who uses it to refer to some sort of symbolic and metaphorical space through which one experiences physical space. See *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 119.


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246 Shyer, 189.

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248 Shyer, 14.

249 Smethurst, 83-85.


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255 Shyer, 44.

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258 Shyer, 42.


261 Baudrillard, 1988, 37f.

262 Hall, 204.


264 Hassan, 67.

265 Baudrillard, 1988, 40.

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268 Quoted in Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Postmodernism and the Multimedia Sensibility:


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272 Smethurst, 98.

273 Smethurst, 99.

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277 Shyer, 91.

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279 Shyer, 91.

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299 Kristeva, 64.

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301 Hassan, 92.

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