‘Even the thing I am ...’:
Tadeusz Kantor and the Poetics of Being

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Abstract

This thesis explores ways in which the reality of Kantor’s existence at a key moment in occupied Kraków may be read as directly informing the genesis and development of his artistic strategies. It argues for a particular ontological understanding of human being that resonates strongly with that implied by Kantor in his work and writings.

Most approaches to Kantor have either operated from within a native perspective that assumes familiarity with Polish culture and its influences, or, from an Anglo-American theatre-history perspective that has tended to focus on his larger-scale performance work. This has meant that contextual factors informing Kantor’s work as a whole, including his happenings, paintings, and writings, as well as his theatrical works, have remained under-explored.

The thesis takes a Heideggerian-hermeneutic approach that foregrounds biographical, cultural and aesthetic contexts specific to Kantor, but seemingly alien to Anglo-American experience. Kantor’s work is approached from Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian perspectives that read the work as a world-forming response to these contexts.

Read in this way, key writings, art and performance works by Kantor are revealed to be explorations of existence and human being. Traditional ontological distinctions between process and product, painting and performance, are problematised through the critique of representation that these works and working practices propose.

Kantor is revealed as a metaphysical artist whose work stands as a testament to a Heideggerian view of human being as a ‘positive negative’: a ‘placeholder of nothing’, but a ‘nothing’ that yet ‘is’ …
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‘EVEN THE THING I AM …’:

TADEUSZ KANTOR AND THE POETICS OF BEING

[… ] Captain I’ll be no more;
But I will eat and drink, and sleep as soft
As captain shall: simply the thing I am
Shall make me live. […]

(Parolles, All’s Well That End’s Well IV.iii: 312–315)

Being held out into the nothing—as Dasein is—on
the ground of concealed anxiety makes the human
being a lieutenant of the nothing.

(Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ 1998e: 93)
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In his discussion of the difference between critique and commentary, in his 1924-1925 essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities, Walter Benjamin expresses the problem of dealing with an enigmatic subject:

Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret with him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way critique seeks to discover siblings of the work of art. And all genuine works have their siblings in the realm of philosophy. It is, after all, precisely these figures in which the ideal of philosophy’s problem appears.

(Benjamin 2004c: 333)

It seems to me now, that drama, theatre, or even performance discourses, are not true siblings of Kantor’s work. As Kantor maintained, he was primarily an artist and the work that he produced was, for him, primarily a work of art in whatever form it took. As Benjamin points out, ‘all genuine works [of art] have their siblings in the realm of philosophy’ and I argue that Kantor’s work has its siblings in the realm of Heideggerian ideas, ideas that on the one hand reach back to revise the received interpretations of Aristotle, Plato and the Pre-Socratics, and on the other hand reach forward as the ground out of which the ‘continental’ philosophical strands of ‘post-structuralism’ and ‘deconstruction’ grew. In particular, one of Martin Heidegger’s ‘accidental’ students, the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, has developed a matrix of Heideggerian and Benjaminian philosophy that seem to me to resonate with Kantor’s work and ideas. These are ideas that raise fundamental questions concerning Being and beings, and of a certain sense of the nature of human being, the fragile and provisional nature of which is exactly what occurred to me on an afternoon in 1999 in Podgórze, a suburb of Kraków, where the German occupying force had confined Kraków’s Jewish population in 1941. Standing on
the site of the former dividing line that had separated the Jewish ghetto, from
the side of the street where Kantor was at the time living as part of the Polish
population was one of the seeds of this thesis. During subsequent trips to
Kraków in which I researched the Podgórze ghetto and tried to establish
Kantor’s movements and the reality of Kraków during the occupation, the
inevitability of an ontological approach became more apparent. Kantor’s
human-object hybrids, or bio-objects are, in a sense, non-synthetic. Kantor and
his actors are not ‘speaking through objects’, but rather the reverse: objects
speak through them. Piles of discarded clothing and possessions, seen in
grainy black-and-white photographs in the Podgórze ghetto museum, and in the
capacious vitrines on display in the museum at Auschwitz I, though themselves
mute, seemed somehow to speak with the eloquent voice of human being. This
voice, when one pauses to hear it, rises from the very cobbles in the streets of
Kazimierz, the original Jewish quarter in Kraków, from which the Jews were
evicted by the Nazis. To make sense of Kantor’s art it is necessary to make
sense of his relationship with objects and this requires research into the
relationship between being, not-being and human being; a consideration of life
and death in abstractio. It was this realisation, on a street on my way between
Kazimierz and Podgórze, that first led me to Heidegger’s Being and Time, and
then to Aristotle’s Metaphysics and other philosophical reading, as a parallel to
my continued reading of Kantor’s work. I now realise that this metaphysical
questioning of human being is the conceptual basis of Kantor’s crumpled
umbrellas and clothing, and the tremulous realisations of human being
performed in works such as The Dead Class and Wielopole, Wielopole.

Tadeusz Kantor: a brief critical biography
Tadeusz Kantor was born in 1915 in the Galician village of Wielopole-
Skrzyńskie, to the southeast of the city of Kraków in southern Poland in the
Subcarpathian area. He died in Kraków in 1990. His life therefore almost spans
the entire twentieth century and all that that has meant for Poland: the Great
War and its aftermath with the short-lived Second Republic of Polish
independence (1918–1939); the inferno of the Second World War and German
occupation (1939–1945); and the resulting legacy of Yalta when Poland became a satellite of the Soviet Union until 1989.¹

After starting at the village school in Wielopole, Kantor moved with his mother and sister to Tarnów, a provincial town midway between Wielopole and Kraków. He graduated from the primary school there and was admitted to the Kazimierz Brodziński First Gymnasium where his interest in art flourished. That part of southern Poland, Galicia, had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the Gymnasium education would, as Pleśniarowicz has noted, still have been based on the ‘nineteenth-century philological-classical curriculum’ (2004: 17). Kantor apparently excelled in Greek and Latin and his knowledge of the classics is evident in his later work. In 1933 he moved with his mother and sister to Kraków where he enrolled at the Fine Art Academy to train as an artist. ‘I had decided to be a painter, and a famous painter at that! So I travelled to Kraków’ Kantor claimed (in conversation with Krzysztof Miklaszewski, cited in Pleśniarowicz 2004: 23). However, paradoxically, Kantor reacted against the traditional aspect of his education at the academy (dominated as it then was by a conservative preoccupation with French Postimpressionism) and ended by taking courses with the scenography professor, Karol Frycz (1877–1963), training as a theatre designer in Frycz’s studios on the opposite side of the street from the main Neoclassical academy building. Although, according to Kantor, Frycz was a ‘friend of Stanislavsky’ and ‘represented the Craig School’ (Kantor quoted in Miklaszewski 2006: 156 and 157), he was a protégé of the Constructivist artist and theatre designer Andrzej Pronaszko (1888–1961) and had been tutored by artists associated with the Constructivist movement in Poland (and with whom Kantor briefly worked in 1946). As such, Frycz would have been familiar with the work of the Russian avant-garde and the Bauhaus.

Michal Kobialka, in his 1993 book on Kantor A Journey Through Other Spaces,

¹ Kantor’s life has been, and continues to be well-documented by the efforts of Jozef Chrobak, an associate of the Cricoteka archive and former member of the Kraków group of artists, whose list of publications on the subject (in Polish) continues to grow. Chrobak et al. 2000 is a useful summary and this, together with Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz’s masterful summary in his 2004 book have been my main sources. These have been supported by reference to Kantor’s lengthy interviews about his life and work with his friends and colleagues, the Polish art critics Wiesław Borowski (1982) and Mieczysław Porębski (1997).
confirms that Kantor was well aware of the visual artists of the Polish inter-war avant-garde, such as Leon Chwistek (1884–1944), Titus Czyżewski (1880–1945), Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952), Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951) and Maria Jarema (1908–1958) ‘all of whom rejected the officially accepted aesthetic tenets of Post-Impressionism’ (Kobialka 1993: 270). The styles of these painters ranged from that of Analytic Cubism (Czyżewski) and Italian Futurism (Chwistek) to the Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich and the Constructivism of Vladimir Tatlin exemplified in the paintings of Strzemiński and Kobro, whilst Jarema, with whom Kantor would later form the Cricot 2 group in 1955, favoured a more pure geometrical form of abstraction (see Kobialka 1993: 388–389 fn.2). In this cosmopolitan environment Kantor’s work in the late 1930s started to be inspired by Constructivist and Bauhaus ideas, influences that were apparent first in his student production of Maurice Maeterlinck’s Symbolist play Śmierć Tintagilesa (‘The Death of Tintagiles’, the play Vsevolod Meyerhold had chosen for his first production), which was performed once at the Dom Plastyków (‘Artists’ House’) in 1938. Kantor would reprise his student production in 1987 as part of his short performance work Maszyna miłości i śmiertci (‘The Machine of Love and Death’). Subsequently he developed his use of the Constructivist/Bauhaus aesthetic in his underground theatre work between 1942 and 1945. On December 12, 1939, Kantor completed his final exam with Professor Frycz and graduated from the academy. At this time and during the war, Kantor painted mainly in a style reminiscent of Analytical Cubism and the Russian Cubo-Futurists.

During the occupation Kantor ran one of the three clandestine, underground theatre groups in Kraków. He worked on an unrealised project to stage Jean Cocteau’s The Death of Orpheus and staged two productions in private apartments, somehow managing to escape the notice of the Gestapo. The penalty for being caught at or involved with such illegal performances was death. Juliusz Słowacki’s (1809–1949) Symbolist Romantic drama Balladyna was staged in 1942 and, following Kantor’s student production in 1938 of Maeterlinck’s Symbolist play, both productions were heavily influenced by a Constructivist/Bauhaus style of abstraction. The next production, which was
eventually staged in 1944, Stanisław Wyspiański’s (1869–1907) Powrót Odysa
(‘The Return of Odysseus’), another Symbolist-imbued text, went through
various stages, from an ostensibly Constructivist aesthetic to what Kantor, and
his art-critic colleague Mieczysław Porębski termed ‘poor realism’. Kantor was
later to claim that:

The return of Odysseus established a precedent and a prototype for all the later characters of my theatre. There were many of them. The whole procession that came out of many productions and dramas—from the realm of fiction. All were ‘dead’, all were returning into the world of the living, into our world, into the present.

(Kantor 2009c: 350; emphasis in original)

It was at this time (1944) he would later repeatedly claim that his ideas of ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and the ‘poor object’ were born. The period of occupation together with these productions and ideas will be discussed at greater length, particularly in chapters five and six.2

Following the war Kantor continued experimenting with styles of figurative painting reminiscent of Picasso’s Analytical Cubism, and particularly, in terms of form and subject, with Russian Cubo-Futurism as exemplified by the early work of Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin.3 In 1945 Kantor found work designing costumes and scenery for productions by the Teatr Stary (‘Old Theatre’), where he was employed as an assistant stage designer. Besides this Kantor directed and designed his own productions: firstly, a production of a play by Józef Czechowicz, Niegodzien i godny (‘The Unworthy and the Worthy’), followed by a revival of his 1944 production of The Return of Odysseus. Kantor did not direct another production until 1955.

In 1946 the Ministry of Culture and Art awarded Kantor a scholarship to travel to Paris where he spent six months in 1947 (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 52). Whilst in Paris Kantor acquainted himself with the latest trends in the city’s art-

2 See Pleśniarowicz 1994b and 2004 chapter 3 for a fuller account of Kantor at this time.
3 See, for example Kantor’s paintings from this period: The Pigeon Fanciers, Portrait of Tadeusz Brzozowski, The Laundress and The Bakers from 1946 (Kantor 1991a: plates 12, 14, 15 and 16 respectively).
scene, visiting Picasso’s studio and encountering the work of Ernst, Kandinsky, Klee, Miró and Tanguy (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 53). However, it was the repeated visits that he made to the Palace de la Découverte (Palace of Discovery) that seemed to make the most radical impression on Kantor (Kantor n.d. Notebook ’47: 1; Polish text in: Kantor 2005: 103; see also Pleśniarowicz 2004: 54–55). The displays concerning the latest scientific imaging of the internal structure of matter fascinated Kantor. He realised that the microscopic structure of reality was every bit, if not more fantastic than that revealed by the attempts of avant-garde art to penetrate reality. It is still possible to see today in one of the galleries, a sketch of the atomic structure of crystals, that is echoed in some of Kantor’s drawings (see for example Kantor’s various drawings from 1947 and 1948 titled Przestrzeń ‘parasolowata’ (“Umbrelloid” Space’) reproduced in Borowski 1982: 27, plate 8, and 29, plates 14–16; also the later drawing of the same title from 1952 in Kantor 1997: no pagination).

As the Polish art critic Piotr Piotrowski comments, Kantor’s work of this time was not entirely abstract in the sense of absolutely eschewing the (human) figure. Sometimes the images articulate space as a convoluted latticework (‘umbrella’ or ‘umbreolloid’ space, after the veins of an umbrella). In other works, however, this strutted, latticework space is articulated as a figure, for example in Man with Umbrella of 1949 (Kantor 1991: plate 19), which would be more aptly titled ‘umbreolloid-man’, because the figure is articulated against a coloured geometrical background in terms of the twisted struts and spokes of a skeletal umbrella. In this way the ‘figure’ is rendered as an intensified field of space rather than as some separate entity set within it. Kantor claimed that his principal discovery in this period was of the prioritisation of space and of a primal conception of it as ‘ur-matter’ that lent it an animated or vital character. This spatial conceptualisation allowed Kantor to collapse the normative distinction between figure and ground, between the object and the space it is located in. In his writings concerning his paintings of this time, between 1947 and 1954, which he labelled as Metamorphoses, Kantor was keen to articulate the work in terms of realising the vitality of space and matter that had made such an impression on him in the Palais de la Découverte. This apparent
reference to Ovid’s poem (Kantor had enjoyed a classical education in Tarnów) indicates a sense of a world seething with change, a world in which reality could shift form and where instability renders the action of metaphor actual.\textsuperscript{4} The term ‘metamorphoses’ later itself metamorphosed into the label ‘metaphorical’ in Kantor’s description and naming of some of the works from this period. In his taking literally the metamorphoses implicit in metaphor, Kantor was reflecting the general pervasive influence of Surrealism in post-war Europe.\textsuperscript{5} It is also evident in the appearance of the prefix ponad- (‘sur-’) in the titles of some of his paintings of this time (for example, Ponad-ruchy (‘Sur-Movements’) 1948).

However, there was a darker imperative to Kantor’s preoccupation with space, form and matter, that came from his recent experience of the Nazi occupation. Kantor described how, whilst in Paris, he and his companions had found it difficult to countenance the conventional beauty in art and the conventional, classical, representation of the human figure. As he remarked in an interview with Porębski in 1990:

I remember how, on my first trip to the Louvre [with Jerzy Kujawski, a Polish émigré Surrealist artist], I walked right past all these images, which were images of the beautiful human body, I walked past them with contempt. And anyway, Kujawski did so too. And the reason we did so was because of the occupation and the Nazi dehumanisation. We had not realised that this dehumanisation carries on afterwards.

(Kantor in Porębski 1997: 125–126; my translation)

The nature morte of human corpses on the streets of Kraków had been an all-too-grim everyday reality for Kantor.

As I will discuss in chapter five, the influence of his particular experience of the metamorphic reality of the occupation strongly influenced Kantor’s conception of space and matter. This experience can also be seen to have been further refracted through the aesthetic conceptions of Bruno Schulz, whom Kantor had been reading before the war and in whose fictions, the very fabric of

\textsuperscript{4} See Ovid 2004: 9.

reality seethes like an ant’s nest. Just so in Kantor’s paintings and drawings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, there is a sense of movement within the invisible latticework of the very fabric of space. Where Descartes had envisaged a geometrical space carved into a regular three-dimensional grid, Schulz, and Kantor following him, saw something that pulsated, ebbed and flowed, a space and time that seems more in tune with Einstein’s vision of warped and curved space-time than the Cartesian-Newtonian conception of a fixed and unchanging eternal framework within which beings moved. This Schulzian sense of reality is something that Kantor carried over into his later performative happenings and theatrical works. Moreover, it is a sense of reality that is not ‘new’ in the sense of Descartes’ new vision of nature, but rather a ‘poor’ and ‘degraded’ reality. As Wiesław Borowski notes in his 1982 discussion of Kantor’s Informel paintings and subsequent emballage-period works all those who understood his artistic vision of reality at the time ‘saw in Kantor, like Schulz, degraded reality’ (Borowski 1982: 123; my translation). In Kantor’s work, as I will discuss in chapter five, this ‘poor’ and ‘degraded’ reality was a combination of the Schulzian sense of provincial bankruptcy together with the sense of the peculiar mixture of ethical and metaphysical bankruptcy of the reality of the occupation.

Some of the paintings and drawings from the period following his return from this first trip to Paris, especially the series of paintings (as opposed to the drawings under the same title already mentioned) entitled Przestrzeń parasolowata (‘Umbrelloid Space’) are reminiscent of Mikhail Larionov’s Rayonist compositions, Aleksandr Rodchenko’s and Varvara Stepanova’s paintings, and especially Liubov Popova’s Space-Force Constructions of 1918–21 (although it is not clear whether or not Kantor knew the work of these painters directly). This is a reminder that, as Marek Bartelik has noted in his recent book on the inter-war Polish avant-garde:

From a historical perspective, the fragmentation of Polish society during the inter-war period might have been dangerous to the security of the Polish state, but it enriched the society and its art. Only a few people were able to realise that the pluralism of expression that sprang from the ethno-cultural diversity was, in fact, beneficial,
and resulted in works of art that reflected Poland’s place within European culture, suspended as it was between Western and Eastern Europe.

(Bartelik 2005: 54)

Poland’s geographical location therefore granted it a character that tended to blur and blend the distinctions between eastern and western influences, culturally as well as politically. Following his return to Poland in 1947, Kantor mounted what was to be the last exhibition of modern art before the imposition of Socialist Realism where he made use of the lessons he had learned from the Palais de la Découverte.6

During the late 1940s Kantor supported himself as a stage designer and for a brief period, from 1947 to 1949 as a junior professor at the State Higher School of Plastic Arts (the then-current name for Kraków’s Fine Art Academy). He was dismissed in 1949 for a perceived ‘incorrect manner of teaching’ (anonymous official letter cited by Pleśniarowicz in 2004: 58). In 1949, following the vice-minister of culture Włodzimierz Sokorski’s announcement at the now-infamous Nieborów conference that Socialist Realism was ‘the only progressive creative method sanctioned in contemporary Polish art’ (Ibid.), Kantor, together with sympathetic fellow artists such as Jarema, refused to exhibit their paintings publicly (although, in reality it was unlikely that they would have been permitted to do so). From 1950 until 1963 Kantor worked officially as stage designer for the Stary and Słowacki theatres in Kraków, as well as for theatres in Warsaw and other regional cities where he designed around 38 productions (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 59 and 85). Kantor received state awards for his work as a stage designer in 1954, 1955 and 1956, and 1962. To his annoyance, his work as a painter was not recognised in this period.

In 1955 Kantor travelled to Paris again as part of the second season of the Theatre of the Nations festival where productions featuring his stage and costume designs were shown. Kantor used this visit to see current exhibitions and to meet European and American painters such as Wols, Fautrier, Matthieu,

6 For further information on this exhibition see Appendix 1.1
Pollock and Arnal (Borowski 1982: 41). During this second visit to Paris Kantor had been exposed to *Art Informel* and on his return to Poland, from 1956 to 1964, he practiced an idiosyncratic version of this which he termed ‘informel’ after the French term. In his *informel* work, at least in his oil paintings, any sort of figuration is apparently abandoned for the physical, textural play of thick paint on the surface of the canvas. However, for Kantor there was always a tension between the spirit of abstraction and that of figuration. As he was later to comment in an interview with Porębski (1997: 124, and as noted by Piotrowski regarding Kantor’s *Metamorphoses* paintings of the late 1940s):

I have actually never been an abstractionist, even during the informel period it was not abstraction, the human form was, for me, always extremely important […]. And this human form became compromised [by the experience of occupation], we could no longer have its form based on a humanistic idea of the Classical beauty of the human figure. Such beauty remained absolutely erased, and I also did not respond well to deformation, say, the deformation of Picasso. I could not reconcile myself to this.

(Kantor in Porębski 1997: 124; my translation)

A sense of this hidden presence of the figurative is perhaps behind his comment to Jan Klossowicz that the term ‘lyrical abstraction’ may have been a better term (Kantor interviewed by Klossowicz 1985, cited by Pleśniarowicz in 2004: 66). These comments give a new perspective to Kantor’s *informel* paintings, allowing the surface textures of these canvases to be seen as real forms rather than as ‘abstract expressions’, perhaps, surprisingly, more akin in essence to Malevich’s Suprematist experiments, than to European *Art Informel*, or American Abstract Expressionism. As Kantor commented in his conversation with Borowski, the pictures were ‘a record, a product of action’ (1982: 42). This action was not a romantic product of the artist’s ‘expression’, but an ‘action brought about by the intervention of chance’ in which ‘the accidental was not so much surrendering to chance, as controlling chance and deliberately assigning it a role (Ibid., cited by Pleśniarowicz 2004: 66, translation William Brand).
Following Stalin’s death in 1953 there was a gradual relaxation in the severity of the Soviet regime. By 1955 this ‘thaw’ had spread to Poland and allowed for a relaxation of censorship (Davies 2001: 8), a factor which permitted greater artistic freedom, culminating in 1956, the year of the ‘Polish Spring’ signifying the end of Stalinism in Poland. In this new climate, Kantor, together with Jarema and the playwright and poet Kazimierz Mikulski felt able to engage publicly in art again and revived the idea of a group of artists dedicated to artistic performance. Cricot 2 was formed in 1955 at the Dom Plastyków (‘Artists’ House’) on ulica Łobowska (where The Death of Tintagiles had been staged in 1938 during his student years). It was named after the inter-war Cricot group (1933–1939), which had included the artists Jonasz Stern as well as Jarema. (The name ‘Cricot’ is an anagram of the Polish to cyrk—‘it’s a circus’.) Kantor and Jarema formed their group outside of the official theatre establishment to stage a play by the writer, artist and philosopher Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz whose works had been banned during the Stalinist period. The première of the Company’s first production, Witkiewicz’s Mątwa (The Cuttlefish), was staged at the Artists’ House on 12 May in 1956, directed by Kantor with costumes designed by Jarema. Kantor was the first director to stage one of Witkiewicz’s plays since the war (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 69). Mątwa was followed in 1957 by another play, this time by Kazimierz Mikulski, Cyrk (‘The Circus’), again staged at the Artists’ House.

Mątwa had been the first production of the original Cricot in 1933 and in it the figure of King Hyrcian IV had been made up to look like Hitler (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 71). According to Pleśniarowicz, Jarema’s costumes in the 1956 Cricot 2 production:

also seemed like concrete allusions in that Post-Stalinist atmosphere. Years later, Jan Józef Szczepański recalled that the authorities sent Adam Polewka, a writer who had been involved in the pre-war Cricot and a party official, to review the dress rehearsal—an ordinary censor would have been too low-ranking. Polewka supposedly remarked, ‘Listen, I know who Hyrkan is, but don’t tell anybody that I know’.
Kantor quickly became the sole leader of Cricot 2 and went on making work
with it in pursuit of its original manifesto as an autonomous theatre until his
death.7 The first paragraph of Kantor’s partytura (‘score’) for Cricot 2’s first
production reads:

This text is a kind of collage. It consists of original texts,
notes and writings from the time when Cricot 2 was being
born and I. Witkiewicz’s play Mątwa was being prepared
for the stage in 1955, but it also contains some additions
made later or even quite recently, when after some 10–20
years I have tried to realise the sense of those activities.

(Kantor, ‘The Scuttle-fish’ [sic] n.d.: 1; Polish version in
Kantor 2005a: 136)

‘Those activities’ that Kantor tried to realise were centred on the idea of
autonomous theatre, an idea that had several names over the long course of
theatre’ and ‘The Theatre of Death’. Looking back on his production of Mątwa in
1963 Kantor wrote:

The theatre that I call autonomous
Is the theatre that is not
a reproductive mechanism,
i.e., a mechanism whose aim is to
present an interpretation of a piece of literature
on stage,
but a mechanism that
has its own independent
existence.

... I do not apply the concept of
the Autonomous Theatre
to explain
the dramatic text,
to translate it
into the language of theatre,
to interpret it,

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7 See Appendix 1.2 for details about published statements on the formation of Cricot 2 and the
idea of autonomous theatre.
or to find its new meanings. The concept of the Autonomous Theatre is not the tool to excavate the so-called stage equivalent, which could be perceived as a second parallel 'action' that is mistakenly called 'autonomous.' (Kantor in: Kobialka 1993: 42–43)

Kantor’s theatre works were not productions in the conventional sense of the staging of a piece of dramatic literature. In an interview with Uri Hertz in 1985 Kantor stated that he had never ‘[…] staged Witkiewicz’s plays. I’ve done the staging of my own personal ideas which have been realised in painting, in theater and in happenings’ (Kantor in: Hertz 1985–1986: 17). Although in his work with Cricot 2 between 1955 and 1975 (apart from the production of the one play by Mikulski in 1957), each of these pieces dealt only with plays by Witkiewicz. Kantor talked of ‘playing with Witkiewicz’ in the sense of a collaboration between equal partners, rather than any sense of a subservient ‘playing of’ the text of the play. As he commented to Hertz: ‘You mustn’t play Witkiewicz, you must play with him like you’re playing cards with a partner’ (Ibid.: 16). Consequently, Witkiewicz’s plays were not privileged over the other components of the production but were placed on an equal footing with them: ‘environment / objects / actor / and his exceptional characteristics: / —dynamism /—the ability to undergo psychological and emotional changes at a quick rate /—the ability of quick reaction and the ability to discriminate between infinitely small nuances, / actions / situations / happenings / events’ (Kantor, ‘The Scuttle-fish’ [sic] n.d.: 3–4; emphasis in original, Polish version in Kantor 2005a: 138). Kantor asserted that none of these components had any function of explaining commenting or illustrating the text of the play: ‘Since they have no such function … They merely form a set of relationships’ (Ibid.: 4; emphasis in original). For Kantor the ‘performance turns into / a mill grinding the text’, and he asks, ‘does the mill “interpret” the product that it grinds?’ (Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 48; emphasis in original). In the series of productions from 1956 to 1975
Kantor constructed a series of such ‘mills’ with which to ‘grind’ Witkiewicz’s texts. In these productions until *The Dead Class*, the action ran on two parallel and equal tracks with the spoken text and the autonomous theatrical action functioning separately. According to Pleśniarowicz Kantor’s ‘idea was to eliminate “all illustration of the text of the play on stage,” in order, instead, to evoke “reality, real action, the real object,” without “any reference to fiction and dramatic illusion”’ (Kantor cited from Borowski 1982: 49; in: Pleśniarowicz 2004: 70).

Kantor had been painting privately during the Stalinist period, but following the ‘thaw’ he began to exhibit his paintings publicly again. By the early 1960s he had become disillusioned with stage design work and he refused such appointments with official theatres after 1963. Although *Grupa Krakowska* (the Kraków group of artists) managed to gain official status as an artists’ group in 1957 (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 75), Cricot 2 was not officially registered, nor did it become so, functioning as the unofficial and informal ‘theatrical section’ of the group (Ibid.: 76) until, with Kantor’s growing fame in the 1970s, it became indisputably associated with him alone. His ability to support himself from the sale of his paintings in the West from the early 1960s (Ibid. 84) may have contributed to his ability to assume such control and assert artistic autonomy in the prevailing regime. As Pleśniarowicz has noted:

> Although it is common even today to think that Kantor’s work in the theatre overshadows what he accomplished as a painter, and therefore to regard him as an artist whose international success was long-delayed, the fact is that he made a name for himself in Europe as a successful—and original—painter as soon as the first cracks appeared in the Iron Curtain, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

(2004: 77)

Despite the difficulty of East-West relations Kantor was extensively exhibited in continental Europe during the 1960s and became very well known in the art world of France, Germany and Italy as well as in Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, and the former Yugoslavia. Kantor’s art was seen in exhibitions in Paris (1958, 1959, 1961, 1966, 1970, 1982, 1983 and 1989), Stockholm (1958, 1966 and

Kantor began to have an impact on the English-speaking world when he appeared at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1972. His theatrical work was seen in the United States in 1979 when Cricot 2 performed The Dead Class at La Mama Experimental Theatre in New York. While a few of his visual art works had already been shown in New York Kantor’s work as an artist, theatre designer and director was relatively unknown in the United States until then. Before his La Mama appearance Kantor had several exhibitions in New York. He was selected for the exhibition of contemporary Polish art organised by the Kościuszko Foundation in New York in 1947 (Pleśnianowicz 2004: 50); he had an individual painting exhibition in 1960 at the Saidenberg Gallery (Ibid.: 77); in 1961 he showed work in the 15 Polish Painters Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (Kobialka: 7, and also the exhibition catalogue: Selz 1961); and, in 1965 he showed work in the Seventeen Polish Painters Exhibition at the D’Arcy Galleries (Pleśnianowicz 2004: 98).

In collaboration with the Scottish Arts Council Richard Demarco mounted an exhibition of contemporary Polish art called Atelier ’72 at his Edinburgh gallery as part of the official festival. This exhibition featured artists from Wieslaw Borowski’s Foksal Gallery in Warsaw in which Kantor had been heavily involved since 1965. Alongside Polish artists such as Stanisław Dróżdż,
Zbigniew Gostomski, Koji Kamoji, Edward Krasiński and Maria Stangret (Kantor’s second wife), the 1972 Edinburgh exhibition featured documentation of Kantor’s happenings and examples of his wrapped objects or *emballages* (Jurkiewicz et al. 1998: 52).

In support of the work shown in the Exhibition, Demarco also invited Kantor to stage his latest performance at the Forrest Hill Theatre as part of the Fringe. With his company Cricot 2, Kantor presented *Kurka Wodna* (‘The Water Hen’), a happening performance after the play of the same name by Witkiewicz. This event constituted Kantor’s first truly international success (*Kalendarium*: 226 in Suchan 2005). In the following year, Cricot 2 performed again at the Edinburgh Fringe with *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (also known as *Lovelies and Dowdies*, after Witkiewicz’s 1922 play *Nadobnisie i koczkodany, czyli zielona pigulka* (‘Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes, or the Green Pill’)), which was also performed at the Glasgow Fruit Market and in London at the ICA. Kantor returned to Edinburgh with *The Dead Class* in 1976, this time going on to play at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff and at London’s Riverside Studios. An exhibition of Kantor’s *emballages* followed at London’s Whitechapel Gallery in the autumn of the same year (see exhibition catalogue: Stanisławski 1976).

Cricot 2 performed in Britain again in 1980 with *Wielopole, Wielopole*, as part of the Edinburgh Festival of Art, followed by performances at the Riverside Studios, London. The company made two further visits: in 1982, playing *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear* at the Riverside Studios, and in 1991, *Today is My Birthday*, performed, posthumously, in the Edinburgh Festival of Art. In the United States, *Wielopole, Wielopole* was performed in 1982 at La Mama in New York, and in 1984 in Los Angeles as part of the Olympic Arts Festival. Cricot 2 returned to La Mama again with *Let the Artists Die* in 1985, with *I Shall Never Return* in 1988 and for the posthumous performance of *Today is My Birthday* in 1991.

From the mid-1960s the performance events, happenings and theatre productions that Kantor made with Cricot 2 became increasingly successful, first in Poland, then Europe and then internationally. In the latter half of the 1970s
Kantor’s 1975 production of *Umarła klasa: seans dramatyczny* (‘The Dead Class: a dramatic séance’) became an international success through the series of tours detailed above. Kantor’s artwork enjoyed continued success and in 1978 he was awarded the Rembrandt Prize for Painting (also known as the ‘painting Nobel’ (Piotrowski in: Suchan 2005: 33)). Alongside this successful career as an artist, he continued to build on the aesthetic philosophy of his performance work in a series of productions with which he toured until his death. Following *The Dead Class* in 1975 his major performance works, which are now thought of in terms of a cycle of the ‘theatre of death’, were *Wielopole*, *Niech sczezną artyści* (‘Let the Artists Die’, 1985), *Nigdy tu już nie powrócę* (‘I Shall Never Return’, 1988), *Dziś są moje urodziny* (‘Today is My Birthday’, 1991). All were performed internationally to tremendous critical acclaim. In between these large-scale spectacles, Kantor produced shorter and smaller scale performances that he termed ‘cricotages’: ‘a kind of activity which stems from the experience of the Cricot 2 Theatre and from the method of acting discovered and practised there’ (from the programme notes for *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear?*, 1984). In 1978 *Où sont les neiges d’antan?* or *Gdzie są niegdyśsze sniegi?* (‘Where are the Snows of Yesteryear?’, Rome 1979, and a revised longer version premiered in Paris 1982), *Ślub w manierze konstruktywistycznej i surrealistycznej* (‘A Wedding in the Constructivist and Surrealist Style’, Milan 1986), *Maszyna miłości i śmierci* (‘The Machine of Love and Death’, Kassel 1987), *Bardzo krótka lekcja* (‘A Very Short Lesson’, Charleville-Mézières 1988), and *Cicha noc* (‘A Silent Night’, Avignon 1990).

From the mid-1950s to the early 1970s Kantor ransacked the twentieth-century avant-gardes, working across an extremely wide range of media from painting, sculpture, installation, happening and performance and conceptualising his practice in the form of manifestos that demarcated his changing ideas as they metamorphosed from label to label under the titles ‘Informel’, ‘Zero’, ‘Emballage’, ‘Happening’ and ‘Impossible’. Despite the unified nature of his work, early on Kantor was only officially recognised in his own

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8 See Appendix 1.3 regarding Cricot 2 productions toured after Kantor’s death.
country chiefly as a stage designer. By the time he received the Rembrandt Prize from the Goethe Foundation in 1978 for his outstanding contributions to art, he was already predominantly known in the Anglo-American world as a theatre director (although, as I have already suggested and will argue later, this label is less than ideal). Up to the end of his life he claimed to be co-influenced as much by what he called ‘constructivism’—a label that seemingly encompassed Suprematism and the Bauhaus as well as aspects of Dada—as by ‘symbolism’, which for him eclectically included Franz Kafka and Maurice Maeterlinck, as well as Polish figures such as Wyspiański, Witold Gombrowicz, Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz and Schulz. In addition, during the 1950s, and before his exposure to Art Informel, his paintings, and stage and costume designs had been predominantly influenced by Surrealism, which, as noted earlier, had been a dominant underlying force in Polish art before the period of official Socialist Realism. Viewed in this way, as the recipient of such a wide spectrum of influences, Kantor could therefore be understood as a figure that has been fractured in his own interpretation and self-representation as much as in that of his critics. However, a sense of the ‘fractured’, ‘splintered’ and divided, is not necessarily inappropriate, nor, as it may at first appear, a negative characterisation of Kantor and his work. As I will argue in chapter three, the traditional Western metaphysical representation of the individual as a unified presence is something that Kantor critiques. Indeed, his predecessor, the artist, playwright, philosopher, Witkiewicz, himself echoing a self-portrait by Marcel Duchamp (Five-Way Portrait of Marcel Duchamp, 1917), famously represented himself as a fractured personality in two photographic self-portraits. In one, Multiple Self-Portrait in Mirrors (1915-6) the artist, in his Russian officer’s uniform, sits before several mirrors, whose multiple images stare back at him. Another photographic self-portrait is of one reflected image (Self-Portrait, 1910), but this time the mirror is fractured into shards that render Witkacy’s face as a partial and lacerated image. Kantor’s version of this trope on the fractured self was his 1977 installation Autoportret (Self-Portrait), an articulated series of black cubes, each bearing a photographic image of Kantor from different stages of his life. For Kantor, as for Witkiewicz before him, the idea of jedności w
wiełości (‘unity in multiplicity’), (part of Witkiewicz’s theory of Czysta Forma (‘Pure Form’), which Kantor followed), was fundamental to his art.

By the late 1960s Kantor was operating as an unofficial, but independent artist, exhibiting abroad and increasingly coalescing his recent artistic ideas into performative, theatricalised experiments. In 1968 he stayed for several months in Germany where several of his happenings were filmed by Dietrich Mahlow for his 1969 film for West German Saar Television Kantor is da: Die Künstler und sein Welt (‘Kantor is Here: The Artist and His World’). This film was broadcast in the year Kantor first enjoyed international success with his theatre productions. It was also the first full-length study of the artist (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 103). A brief survey of Kantor’s work featured in the film demonstrates how his preoccupations had developed following his informel period. In the film, Kantor and his work are revealed in different situations in various scenes, for example:

- The exterior of a Communist-era apartment block: a sun-lounger is being lowered from an upper window by a rope; it is wrapped in brown paper; its wrapped form betrays human-shaped legs extending from one end.
- In amongst a room filled with packing crates a giant hand-shaped package lies. It is labelled ‘The Hand of Saint Peter’.
- In the same room Kantor is glimpsed sitting amongst the packing crates, as if stored there himself.
- Elsewhere in the same room Kantor is seen at work, balancing precariously on a chair, hammering nails into the lid of one of the crates; he is observed from the other side of the room by two bikini-clad young women who regard him with extreme indifference from a state of seeming narcolepsy; the hammering Kantor seems both impotent and unnerved, the nailing both incompetent and chaotic; later the women have fallen asleep slumped against each other as he continues his pointless activity.
- A figure in coat and hat is loaded with a large bulbous rucksack with many pockets and set off into the street on his journey; later, in a cafe full of people, Kantor attempts to interview this taciturn figure, still fully covered and laden as
it noisily slurps from a bowl of soup; it becomes clear from Kantor’s references, and from near-subliminal inserts of the image, that the figure is an incarnation of Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving: *Rhinoceros*.

- In long shot, a black Mercedes-Benz circles the centre of the arena of the Nuremberg Stadium anticlockwise. In the centre, on a podium, filmed from the circling car, stands Maria Stangret-Kantor, Kantor’s wife: Kantor moves around her clockwise, wrapping the podium and the standing human figure with a roll of paper tape—a human *emballage*; the sounds of an earlier crowd chanting ‘*Sieg heil, sieg heil*’ is heard on the soundtrack.

- On a busy restaurant terrace a man seated at a table calmly smokes a cigarette whilst Kantor cuts and snips his clothing away as crowd of onlookers watch.

- In a gallery before an audience Kantor conducts an anatomy of the clothing of a live subject: the scene is arranged in the form of Rembrandt’s famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) (to be discussed in more detail in chapter five).

- In Kantor’s studio a human subject is toppled backwards onto a horizontal canvas—his clothing is snipped, nailed and glued to the surface and painted onto it; the naked human subject rises and vanishes into the darkness leaving the splayed clothing ‘crucified’ under paint on the canvas.

In these scenes the Kantorian themes and preoccupations identified with the 1975–1990 ‘theatre of death’ cycle can be discerned. For example, an intimation of eternity is sensed in the engagement with artworks from the Renaissance (treated as *objets trouvés*), from the reference to crucifixion, from the idea that quasi-mythical body parts can be packaged and warehoused for future retrieval. The works featured in _Kantor ist da_ provide a snapshot of the interdisciplinary nature of the artistic practice in which Kantor was operating in the area between art and performance, an area still occupying the world of the gallery, but that was being presented increasingly through the medium of the live event or happening. However, this sense of liminality was not new to Kantor.
at this time. As Piotrowski has argued: ‘the work of the so-called metaphorical period of the turn of the 1940s, is to some degree, paradigmatic of Tadeusz Kantor’s art as a whole’ (Piotrowski 2005: 34). Kantor’s earliest work can therefore also be seen to occupy this hinterland between the traditional conception of artistic product as easel-art or sculpture and avant-garde conceptions of the art as performative event. Similarly, Kantor’s later works need also to be seen as a whole across the breadth of his work, from painting and installation to his small and large-scale theatrical spectacles.

Unfortunately, because Kantor’s contact with the English-speaking art and theatre world has been largely through his theatrical work, it is perhaps not surprising that the full breadth of his output is less well known here and in the United States, than in continental Europe, given the relatively few gallery exhibitions of his work compared with theatre performances. It is not surprising therefore, that Kantor has become better known in Anglo-American culture as a theatre director than as an artist. The ambiguous nature of his artistic presence—his tendency to place himself between his work and the spectator, whether artwork or theatre spectacle—has perhaps contributed to this (mis)perception. It contributes to certain problems in interpretation, where Kantor is seen as a sui generis artist, as the creator of ‘strange’ and ‘wonderful’ spectacles featuring bizarre grotesquery, apparently non-narrative alogical plotting, and extreme anti-naturalistic acting and staging (see Żurowski 1985: 364). However, the idea that Kantor is a ‘difficult’ artist, both for his audiences as well as from the perspective of his contemporaries, is partly the result of a twofold failure. Firstly, it is the failure to see Kantor and his work in their appropriate context; secondly, it is a failure to meet him on the metaphysical ground where his art, and his discourse as an artist, operates. This ‘difficulty’, as I identify it, is compounded by the fact that the contextual and metaphysical perspectives are not separate. Although the specificity of Poland’s history might appear strange and exotic to the Anglo-American mind, it is nevertheless a history of a certain national form of human being, whose story has the power to speak to the human condition. That Kantor arose out of this specific national context no doubt contributes to his apparent ‘peculiarity’, but his context also provided him with the ‘grist’ for his
metaphysical ‘mill’, without which he may never have come to formulate and articulate the specific aesthetic strategies that he developed over the course of his career.

Having given a brief sense of the context and history of Kantor’s biography, it will be useful to identify the distinctiveness of his work in comparison with that of the Western European and United States avant-garde. It is hardly surprising that in Britain and the United States audiences and critics have found the work difficult to understand. Kantor was an artist who spoke from the experience of the peculiar vicissitudes of twentieth-century Poland: of life lived first in the independence of the Second Republic, then under Nazi occupation followed by Soviet dominion. Britain and the United States do not have any recent comparable experience of occupation; there is not the familiarity with the pressure of reality under a totalitarian regime—it is not a recent part of Anglo-American history. Apart from this historical particularity Kantor was also informed by the intellectual and cultural crosscurrents in a country existing between ‘East’ and ‘West’. A further key feature of this situation was the influence of the Jewish presence in Poland. The issues of Jewishness and non-Jewishness affect Kantor in significant ways, a theme that I will return to in chapter five. Tadeusz Kantor’s success outside of Poland is therefore noteworthy, not only because his work was internationally successful despite its difficulty, but also because his art was able to come to the West at all from behind the Iron Curtain. Kantor commented in a 1974 interview with Teresa Krzemień: ‘I have something to say and find the means to do so. I must then reach someone—or not’ (Krzemień 1975: 39). Somehow, Kantor did find audiences from Buenos Aires to Tokyo and during the 1980s his work acquired an almost universal appeal that surprised its creator: ‘I don’t know how it happened that I have succeeded to communicate with the whole world when all the time I was only communicating with myself’ (Kantor in Maślińska 1991: 9).

Audiences and critics may not have been able to articulate their understanding coherently, but there was an understanding nevertheless.
Anyone present at one of his spectacles can attest to this. However, in the years since his death, an audience has come to know his work only through photographs and videos. Perhaps unexpectedly, interest in Kantor and his work has grown and not faded away as might have been expected. A further peculiarity of Kantor’s legacy is that although his paintings and drawings and other art objects remain highly regarded, his international reputation outside continental Europe has been established more on the memory of his theatre-spectacles, which, unlike his non performance-based artworks now exist only in archival form: manifestos, scores, drawings, objects, costumes, mannequins, scenery, photographs, and video recordings.

Kantor’s position is therefore somewhat unique within the tradition of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The reputation of artists such as Picasso can be seen to rest on the exhibition of painting and sculpture in galleries and in reproductions. In a sense the traces of creativity become the artwork hanging in the gallery or reproduced in books. Since the early 1960s Kantor had argued against this view, regarding the creative process itself as the locus of the artwork rather than any resulting product. His 1963 Anti-wystawa (‘Anti-Exhibition’) (also known as the Wystawa popularna (‘Popular Exhibition’)) was intended as a demonstration of this idea. Proclaiming: ‘art is everything that has not yet become a work of art’ Kantor exhibited hundreds of drawings dating back to 1945; objects, sketches and notes of ideas, and everyday detritus such as tram tickets, a toilet roll, suitcases and newspapers (see: Pleśniarowicz 2004: 89–90). With the foregrounding of the idea of process over product the reputation of performance-based artists has always been more dependent on the problematic nature of the traces left by the essential transitoriness of their work. If figures approximately contemporary with Kantor in world theatre during

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9 See Appendix 1.4 for Nicholas Serota’s comments on Kantor’s reception in Edinburgh and London.

10 See Appendix 1.5 for a brief discussion of the video archive of Kantor’s live work.

the 1970s and 1980s are considered—for example, directors such as Peter Brook, Peter Sellars or Peter Stein—then their reputation more rests on their interpretation of dramatic texts and on their conceptions of staging and acting. These directors are appreciated for the qualities that they are able to bring out of their actors, such as ‘truthfulness’ (in acting), as much as for their conception of staging and interpretation of the dramatic text.\(^\text{12}\)

It is perhaps the figure of Robert Wilson who is nearest to Kantor as an artist straddling the gallery and the stage. Like Kantor, Wilson was trained in the fine arts (as a painter and architect) rather than the theatre, and like Kantor he has exhibited artwork around the world as well as touring his theatre productions internationally. Also, both artists share an interest in the everyday, in stylisation and anti-naturalism and in non-narrativity as means of exploring the abstract and the surreal in performance. Both artists have used non-professional performers. However, beyond this Kantor’s spectacles bear little similarity to Wilson’s. Where Wilson’s formal stage compositions tend towards the cool and austere in their minimalism, Kantor’s spectacles seethe with all the vitality of a rubbish-dump come to life. Wilson’s work derives from the formalist tradition of the American avant-garde of Kaprow, Cage, Cunningham and Glass, which focuses on the intellectual manipulation of elements according to a predetermined set of rules, the focus being the form and the manipulation of elements rather than the elements themselves.\(^\text{13}\) Kantor’s work, as I will later show, derives more from European, Polish and Russian avant-garde sources.

**Outline of Thesis**

Eschewing a direct analysis of Kantor’s major ‘theatre of death’ spectacles, I will instead adopt an oblique strategy by approaching them by way of key ‘minor’ works: a manifesto, a happening, a ‘poor object’ and a painting. In part this strategy is informed by the idea of ‘the minor’ in the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986: 16–27 and 1988: 105–106 and 469–471). Perhaps

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\(^{12}\) See Appendix 1.6 regarding exhibitions of Kantor’s work featuring Kantor’s theatrical objects as artworks.

\(^{13}\) See Kaprow, Allen 1966: 200–201.
predictably the image of Kantor’s work is almost entirely dominated by his major final five ‘theatre of death’ spectacles. In this sense these performances, and images from them, have come to occupy a hegemonic ‘majoritarian’ and somewhat ‘constant’ face of Kantor’s work as a whole. For me, they originally seemed divorced from Kantor’s other art. However, this is not the reality of those performances, which, as I will show, arose not out of, but as part of the process of Kantor’s art as a whole. Viewing these late performances as his crowning achievement effectively closes down Kantor as a phenomenon, by seeing his work as something completed, as a purely historical phenomenon. That the members of Cricot 2 met with failure when they tried to continue the company beyond the tours contracted before Kantor’s death is not the issue. What is at stake is Kantor’s belief that his ideas would continue beyond his death. By foregrounding ‘minor’, less well known works my intention is to deterritorialise Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’, to open up the process of Kantor’s work so that a sense of its fluctuating essence may make it possible to see a possibility for new creative development based on his ideas. Also, appropriately, it has something of the quality of the ‘Schulzian’ and the ‘Kantorian’ in approaching Kantor and his work by way of a ‘poor side door’.

This thesis will therefore continue as follows: In chapter two I will review the literature concerning the artist and his work and highlighting relevant contributions to the problems of interpretation and understanding that I have indicated so far. I will identify key factors informing Kantor’s work that potentially problematise its interpretation and understanding, particularly the cluster of ideas concerning ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and the ‘poor object’ that will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. I will discuss the place of Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz in Kantor’s influences and discuss why I later concentrate on Schulz (to their virtual exclusion), as being more essentially in sympathy with Kantor’s concerns. Chapter two will conclude by identifying the need for a contextual approach that allows for Kantor’s metaphysical concerns to be seen as arising out of his experience. This approach requires a reorientation of concerns around the problem of interpretation that will be addressed in the following two chapters.
Chapter three takes one of the pieces referred to in chapter two, a 1985 essay by the Polish theatre critic Andrzej Żurowski, as a case study, using it as a basis for a reassessment of the critique of representation, which, I argue is a necessary contextual element for understanding Kantor’s work in terms of adequately addressing its essentially metaphysical force. The discussion, following Heidegger, aligns the problems of interpretation and understanding, traditionally seen as epistemological concerns, with fundamental metaphysical questions of being. In this way, the epistemological will be seen as ontological, the essential as existential, the aesthetic as ethical and the personal as universal. Basing its reassessment on this Heideggerian view of human being, the chapter begins to open up ways in which such a perspective resonates with Kantor’s work.

Chapter four addresses the problem of interpretation and understanding from a metaphysical perspective using Kantor’s 1978 ‘Mały manifest’ (Little Manifesto) as an axis around which to orient its discussion. The enigma of the curiously disappearing voice in Kantor’s manifesto is examined in the light of Agamben’s discussion of aesthetics and voice in his early writings. Relating this to the discussion of negative ontology in the previous chapter, chapter four goes on to locate the problem of interpretation and understanding within Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic discourse.

Chapter five addresses the ontological implications of the discussion of the problem of representation begun in chapter three. It takes one of Kantor’s minor works, a happening dating from 1968, as a site around which to focus a discussion of the ideas of ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and ‘the poor object’. The chapter examines the origin of these ideas in Kantor’s experience of the occupation in Kraków and his role as a witness to aspects of the Nazi ‘Final Solution’. The discussion relates this to the ethical concerns of Michel Foucault’s notions of ‘biopower’ and ‘biopolitics’, especially as refracted through the more recent Agambenian discourse of la nuda vita or ‘bare life’ to illuminate the key moment of Jewish presence in The Dead Class.
Chapter six examines Kantor’s negative aesthetics of poor and low-ranking objects from a different perspective. Taking as its starting point the consistent tension in Kantor’s art between symbolism and abstraction, and Constructivism and Surrealism, the discussion explores the idea of the presence of certain elements of Russian Constructivism in Kantor’s work, dating back to his 1938 student production. In doing so it takes seriously Kantor’s apparently ‘lax’ definitions of ‘Constructivism’ in his 1986 *Milano Lessons* to foreground the essential fluidity and blurring of apparently sharply delineated artistic categories which were a living reality in pre-Revolutionary Russia around the time of Cubo-Futurism. The discussion focuses on the importance of the rediscovery of the aesthetics of icon-painting for the pre-Revolutionary Russian avant-garde and how key features of the aesthetics of icons can be seen to inform a hidden metaphysical, mystical and symbolic undercurrent in Suprematist and Constructivist art. Such a mystical, metaphysical character, seemingly at odds with the geometrical character of later ‘International Constructivism’ allows for a potential reading of Kantor’s works in which, together with the concerns of his writings, they can be seen to be using iconic techniques to produce their aesthetic effects. The mute voice inherent in Kantor’s poor objects, objects such as the wheel, the chair, the gun barrel, the plank and the umbrella—all of which have endured in various recurring ways in his work—can arguably be heard more clearly when read in the light of the metaphysical aesthetics of icons.

Chapter seven examines Kantor’s later development of his negative aesthetics in the form of his ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’. It sets a reading of his last production *Today is My Birthday* (1991) against a consideration of his last paintings from the *Dalej już nic…* (‘Further on nothing …’) series, which represented a definitive return to figuration in his painting. It discusses in particular his increasing move from a position on the borderline between stage and audience, to the placing of himself more centrally within his work, whether on stage or within his pictures. It contrasts this move to include himself within his own work with Franz Kafka’s ostensibly comparable gesture in his last story, ‘A Fasting Showman’. In setting Kafka alongside Kantor in this
way, the particular positivity of Kantor’s negative aesthetics can be highlighted. This is articulated within a return to and continuation of the discussion of the nature of human being begun in chapter three. The discussion draws on Heidegger and Agamben’s discussion of Rainer Maria Rilke’s idea of ‘the Open’ in his eighth ‘Duino Elegy’.

The thesis concludes with a brief reflection on the paradoxical presence of the essential nothingness behind the performative nature of human being that is revealed in Kantor’s work.
CHAPTER 2. THE LITERATURE AND DISCOURSE ON KANTOR

Introduction
Although in Poland, Kantor was a prominent public figure, publishing articles and himself appearing as the subject of articles and interviews in newspapers and journals, he did not become the subject of more extended book-length studies until the 1980s. Previously, in West Germany, Dietrich Mahlow had made the documentary Kantor ist da: Die Künstler und sein welt (Kantor is Here: The Artist and His World) for Saar Television, broadcast in 1969. In France, Denis Bablet had published a selection of Kantor’s writings, Le théâtre de la mort (The Theatre of Death) in 1977, followed by another edited collection of writings, Métamorphoses, in 1982. In Poland the 1980s saw the publication of the large-format book by Kantor’s friend and colleague from the Warsaw Foksal Gallery, Wiesław Borowski, featuring black and white reproductions and photographs of the entire range of the artist’s work up to the time of Wielopole, Wielopole. Importantly it included lengthy interviews with Kantor about his life and work together with a selection of his writings. Borowski’s book was followed in 1984 by the publication of the partytura (score) of Wielopole, Wielopole edited by Barbara Borowska, which included further selections of Kantor’s writings in the form of his two collections of essays Teksty autonomiczne (Autonomous Texts), and Miejsce teatralne (Theatrical Place) together with the Partytura teatralna (The Theatrical Score) of Wielopole, Wielopole and photographs of that production alongside reproductions of his preceding work.

In France, Bablet published his book-length study, T. Kantor, in 1983 and dedicated volume XI of Les Voies de la création théâtrale to his work, this volume offering a further selection of Kantor’s texts, interviews and interpretive and contextualising essays (a second volume followed in 1993 devoted to Kantor’s later work). In the same year in Germany, Günther K. Kühnel published a volume on Kantor, Tadeusz Kantor: Theatre des Todes. Die tote Klasse. Wielopole - Wielopole (The Theatre of Death: The Dead Class; Wielopole, Wielopole), which included translations of selected texts by Kantor. This German interest in Kantor was followed in 1988 by the publication of an
important collection of the artist’s writings by Nawrocki et al.: *Ein Reisender - seine Texte und Manifeste* (A Traveller: His Texts and Manifestos). In Poland in 1990 Pleśniarowicz published his doctoral thesis on Kantor as *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora* (Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre of Death). Following this, the 1990s and the first decade of this century have seen a gradually increasing stream of articles and books on Kantor in Poland and Western Europe. Between 1988 and 2003 Anna Halczak published the three *Cricot 2 Theatre Information Guides* containing selected essays and newspaper articles and other material concerning Kantor’s work from 1986 until his death. In 1991 there was a simultaneous publication in French (*Ma création, Mon voyage: Commentaires intimes*) and Italian (*La mia opera, Il mio viaggio: Commento intimo*) of a lavishly produced album of colour reproductions of Kantor’s paintings overseen by the artist himself before his death and including a further selection of his writings. In 1990 a book on Kantor’s work was published in Japan (*Getjutsuka Jo, Kutabare*, translated by Hidenaga Ōhtori) and in the following year *Het circus van de dood*, a translation of a selection of Kantor’s writings by Johan de Boose was published in Holland. Importantly, the first edition in Poland of Kantor’s complete writings was published by the Cricoteka in three volumes edited by Pleśniarowicz between 2000 and 2005.

In addition to French and German interest in Kantor, following his stay in Florence where he prepared *Wielopole, Wielopole* at the invitation of the municipal authorities, there has been a wealth of Italian publications about him, especially albums of photographs of the ‘theatre of death’ performances from *The Dead Class* onwards (for example, see Maurizio Buscarino 1981, 1997 and 2001, and Romano Martinis 1982 and 2001, and books concerning Kantor’s stay in Italy (for example the three volumes of *Memorio del teatro* edited by Luigi Arpini, Józef Chrobak and Valerio Valoriani respectively, published in 2002).

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14 The only full-length study devoted explicitly to the topic of philosophy in relation to Kantor’s work is also German: Dietmar Wiewióra’s 1998 *Materie, kollektive Erinnerung und individuelle Existenz im Theater von Tadeusz Kantor, 1983–1991* (Matter, collective memory and individual existence in the theater of Tadeusz Kantor, 1983–1991).
As already indicated, the nature of the critical response to Kantor has been characterised by a certain fragmentation that arises out of Poland’s specific situation in the twentieth century. What should have been a culture free to mediate between ‘East’ and ‘West’, a role it was actively fulfilling during its independence of the inter-war period, instead became one of the states embroiled in the combination of stagnation and resistance characterising the satellites of the Soviet bloc between 1945 and 1989. Consequently, the translation of the Polish literature on Kantor into English has been slow and incomplete and, save for three English translations of key Polish texts, largely remains so. Related to this, the barrier of the Iron Curtain meant that the number of foreigners able to engage with Kantor’s work were, until relatively recently, few. Also, because of the nature of Poland’s partitions, English has not historically been one of its natural ‘second languages’, whereas French, German and Russian have. Consequently, it is not surprising that the critical appreciation of Kantor outside of Poland has historically emanated from France and Germany (Kantor himself spoke and read French and German fluently).

There are, to date, six books on Kantor available in English. The first of these to be published was George M. Hyde’s and Mariusz Tchorek’s edited translation of Kantor’s partytura for Wielopole, Wielopole. This was published in 1990 as Wielopole/Wielopole. An exercise in theatre.\textsuperscript{15} This was followed in 1993 by Michal Kobialka’s book A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos 1944–1990 Tadeusz Kantor. This is a large collection of Kobialka’s edited and ‘authorised’ (though often idiosyncratic) translations of Kantor’s manifestos and related writings followed by three long critical essays which offer contextualisation and a postmodernising interpretation of Kantor and his work. This publication has meant that the English-speaking reader’s access to Kantor’s written work is almost entirely via Kobialka’s translations. The third book to be published in English was William Brand’s excellent translation of Pleśniarowicz’s revised and expanded edition of his 1990 book Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora, published by the Cricoteka in 1994 as The Dead Memory

\textsuperscript{15} See Appendix 1.7 for further information on this text.
Machine: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre of Death (1994a, republished in a further revised second edition by Black Mountain Press in 2004 using the same translator). Pleśniarowicz’s book (especially in its 2004 edition) is undoubtably the fullest account of Kantor’s life and work currently available in English. Understandably however, from a Polish academic, it assumes an intimate knowledge of Polish culture. Also, because it was published in Poland it was difficult to obtain until the publication of its second edition a decade later. These three books have essentially formed the gateway to Kantor for the Anglo-American readership until relatively recently and, as such, form a matrix of problems for the reception and interpretation of Kantor and his work. They have been followed by three more books, all published in Britain or the United States: Krzysztof Miklaszewski’s 1992 Polish book Spotkania z Tadeuszem Kantorem (Meetings with Tadeusz Kantor) was edited and translated by Hyde as Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor and published in 2002. This was a valuable addition as it contained useful interviews with Kantor and contextual material regarding his later performances and tours, providing a useful source of Kantor’s views outside of his own writing. Kantor’s interviews are frequently a critical source of information. He often elaborates on ideas from his work and writings and expands into areas about which he otherwise remains silent. Miklaszewski, an art historian, journalist and filmmaker, toured for a time with Kantor as one of his actors and therefore his own essays in this volume provide a useful first-hand insight into some of Kantor’s work. In 2009 Kobialka published his second book dedicated to Kantor, Further On Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre, containing new translations of Kantor’s writings with (inexplicably) some republished from the earlier book together with five chapters continuing the author’s stated project of postmodernising Kantor. In 2010, Noel Witts has produced a short volume for the Routledge Performance Practitioners series simply titled Tadeusz Kantor, which draws heavily on Pleśniarowicz’s 2004 book as well as work in Kobialka’s first book and Hyde’s translation of Miklaszewski’s collection. Finally, following the exhibition An Impossible Journey: The Art and Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor and accompanying symposium Kantor Was Here in 2009 at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts in Norwich
an illustrated collection of essays was published (2011) entitled Kantor Was Here: Tadeusz Kantor in Great Britain, edited by Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius with Natalia Zarzecka, the current director of the Cricoteka archive in Kraków. This is easily the most extensive and lavishly produced book on Kantor in English with a welcome British perspective. In the editors’ words, ‘the volume is a collage of memories, interview, newly unveiled archival material, as well as new critical approaches to Kantor’s art’ (Murawska-Muthesius and Zarzecka 2011: 9). It contains papers given at the symposium with essays commissioned for the book. The contributions include short essays by Hyde and Witts, contributions from Richard Demarco, Richard Gough and David Gothard, an interview with Nicholas Serota, and interesting perspectives from art historians, curators and archivists, which counterbalance the usual interpretation of Kantor in Great Britain as primarily a theatre director. However, although the contributions provide a range of valuable British perspectives that complements the work of Pleśniarowicz and Kobialka, the book as a whole does not constitute a new coherent study of Kantor.

Obviously there is much that is valuable in these six books. However, except for Kantor Was Here, they all approach Kantor and his work from the perspective of his later theatrical work, particularly the major five performance spectacles that constitute his ‘theatre of death’ cycle. Consequently it is not surprising that the perception of Kantor in the English-speaking world is that he is a theatre director, or a ‘man of the theatre’. Pleśniarowicz and Kobialka are theatre historians (although the former worked closely with Kantor from the inception of the Cricoteka in 1980 until his death) and Witts’ background is also as a professor of performing arts. Miklaszewski, although sensitive to Kantor’s interest in art is predominantly involved with Kantor’s work as an actor in some of his key productions. Hyde, perhaps alone of this group of authors publishing in English, is unusual in that his background is as a professor of comparative literature rather than someone operating within the theatre or performing arts domain. As I will later discuss, Hyde’s background, as attested by the editors of the volume of essays dedicated to him (Bystydzieńska and Harris 1999) means
that, of all the authors mentioned, he is best qualified to contextualise Kantor and his work for an English-speaking audience.

With the work of Pleśniarowicz (1994 and 2004) and Kobialka (1993 and 2009), the problem is again that, as Polish nationals, they do not share Hyde’s awareness and sensitivity to the inherent difficulty that the intricate complexities of Polish culture presents to the Anglo-American reader. As such, Pleśniarowicz and Kobialka’s books, useful as they each are, suffer from the unintentional assumption of a Polish-literate readership. As Paul Allain notes in his recent review of Witts' book (2010: 301) Kantor is an ‘inaccessible’ figure in need of appropriate contextualisation (although again he is described as a ‘director/artist’ as opposed to ‘artist/director’ or rather, as Kantor maintained just ‘artist’).

Unfortunately, as Teemu Paavolainen notes in his recent doctoral thesis, Witts’ book is ‘abounding in mistakes well beyond the systematic misspelling of some Polish names’ (Paavolainen 2011: 249, fn. 1). And, although his contextualisation is in one sense, as Allain notes, ‘full and rich’ it is predominantly descriptive and unanalytical and is little more than a précis of the much fuller and more authoritative context supplied by Pleśniarowicz in his 2004 book from whom Witts draws so heavily.

With Witts book there is also the problem of the intended readership. As Allain notes, Witts’ book forms part of a Routledge series aimed at the further education market ‘familiar to most drama teachers and students’ and, in the closing statement of his review he hopes that: ‘Kantor and his actor/mannequins can now return from the dead in classes across the world’ (Allain 2010: 301). And this on the basis of a library of (until very recently) five books in English? Such a treatment, I would argue, needs to wait until the interpretation and understanding of Kantor has progressed. So far, the metaphysical dimension of Kantor and a full appreciation of the particularities of his context have been provided predominantly by Polish authors writing in, or being translated into English, one from a modernist, the other from a postmodernist perspective. Hyde’s contribution, excellent though it is, is too brief, and Witts’ is a student-oriented textbook.
One can think of different categories for the English discourse on Kantor that include the six books so far discussed. This field of discourse can be divided into three broad categories. First are those essays and books originally published in another language for a native audience and only subsequently translated into English for republication for an English-speaking audience as well as those published only as English translations. These consist of essays and interviews such as: Teresa Krzemień ‘The Actor Becomes an Object’ (1975, originally published in 1974 as ‘Przedmiot staja się aktorem’ (The Object Becomes the Actor) in Kultura); Bogdan Gieraczyński ‘Kantor’s Art is in a Blind Alley or is it That We Are Afraid of Ourselves … Bodan Gieraczyński talks to Tadeusz Kantor (1981); Jan Kott ‘The Theater of Essence: Kantor and Brook’ (1983, originally published in 1983 as ‘Teatr esencji: Kantor i Brook’ in Zeszyty Literackie, no. 2), ‘Tadeusz Kantor’ (1991a) and ‘Kantor, Memory, Memoire’ (1991b); Andrzej Żurowski “Pulling Faces at the Audience”: the Lonely Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor’ (1985); Barbara Sawa ‘Art is a kind of exhibition’ (1990, originally published in Polish in 1988 in Polityka as ‘Sztuka musi być personalna’ (Art Should Be Personal)); Irina Maślińska ‘Art Is a Crime’ (1991, originally published in 1990 as ‘Sztuka jest przestępstwem’ in Polityka). This category would also include books that are published in bilingual versions with English translations but are only available in the country of origin, for example: Jarosław Suchan (ed.) Tadeusz Kantor. Niemożliwe/Impossible (2000); Romano Martinis and Silvia Parlagreco (ed.) Tadeusz Kantor—Cricot 2 (2001); and Suchan (ed.) Tadeusz Kantor. Interior of Imagination (2005). In this category there tends to be little or no concession made to non-Polish or non-continental-European readers.

Of this category the 1985 essay by Andrzej Żurowski is particularly noteworthy in its identification of ‘a law of shock’ that reigned after the almost universal adulation that greeted the advent of The Dead Class in 1975, an event that, according to the theatre critic Tomasz Raczek, whom Żurowski cites: ‘stupefied the art critics, in most cases leaving them completely ignorant and helpless in the face of a new phenomenon’ (Raczek in Żurowski 1985: 364). Żurowski concurs observing that The Dead Class ‘caused such a surprise that
the resulting critical helplessness produced unreserved admiration devoid of any broader reflection or attempts at an intellectual analysis. This was the law of shock. It is time we recovered from it' (Ibid.: 365). Żurowski’s response to this 'law of shock’ and ‘critical helplessness’ is to concentrate his discussion on ‘a certain element of Tadeusz Kantor’ work—in The Dead Class, Wielopole, Wielopole, and Where are the Snows of Yesteryear?—that repels me so strongly that I cannot view these productions objectively’ (Ibid.: 364). This ‘certain element’ is the fact of Kantor’s actual on-stage presence in his own performances. It is this that struck most reviewers in the press on Kantor’s appearances in the United Kingdom, and it is this aspect of Kantor’s work that I will discuss at some length in chapter three.

A second category of writings on Kantor in English is represented by the essays and books by Polish authors or authors of Polish origin written in English (or specifically for translation into English). Publications in this category, besides those already dealt with, include Kobialka, ‘Let the Artists Die? An Interview with Tadeusz Kantor’ (1986), his 1993 book already mentioned, ‘Forget Kantor’ (1994a) and ‘Of Lost Memories and Representational Practices’ (1994b); and Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz’s 2004 book. In this category the authors have tried to adapt their work for an English-speaking audience by including some contextualising biographical and explanatory material, although this is open to the problems mentioned above.

Thirdly, there are publications originally written in English by native English-speaking authors. In addition to those works already cited that fall into this category it currently includes essays and one book: Hyde’s ‘A new lease of death: Kantor’s “Wielopole/Wielopole”’ (1985, republished as the introduction to Hyde and Tchorek 1990), ‘The Word Unheard: “Form” in Modern Polish Drama’ (1988) and a short obituary in Plays and Players, ‘Tadeusz Kantor’ (1991). Hyde also contributed a lengthy essay to European Theatre 1960–1990 Cross Cultural Perspectives edited by Ralph Yarrow (1992) entitled ‘Poland (Dead Souls Under Western Eyes)’; four sections of this essay were devoted to Kantor with the respective titles of: ‘Tadeusz Kantor: Death and the

The English-speaking discourse should therefore technically be defined in terms of the second and third category above, with the translated discourse from the first category informing it. Consequently the translated discourse originating from Poland and the continent stands at a remove from a readership in Britain and the United States, as do, to a lesser extent, the English language publications from the Polish authors (category two). As I have pointed out above, Kantor’s art and theatre enjoyed popularity in continental Europe long before it did in Britain or the United States. The continental bias of the literature on Kantor is therefore to be expected. It is probably also the case that the continental intelligentsia enjoy an easier affinity with the European avant-garde movements such as Dada, Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivism and Surrealism from which Kantor’s art derives (as Kobialka notes, 1993: 388–389 fn.2). Whilst it is to be expected that Polish authors will enjoy a privileged familiarity with their own history and culture there is also a certain shared understanding of European modernism throughout Western and Central Europe. Such a close familiarity with this specifically European culture is not so obviously the case in Britain or the United States. In these countries there is a tendency for European cultural modernism to be perceived as ‘other’, although in different ways: in Britain artists such as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth or Henry Moore used to be seen as either marginal or not ‘English’ (see below), whilst North American artists such as Jackson Pollock, William De Kooning or
Mark Rothko, came to be perceived as ‘New American Painting’, and therefore not ‘European’ (although undeniably owing a debt to European modernist abstraction) (Langmuir and Lynton 2000: 5). The significance of this is the question of how much the cultural perspectives between British or American authors who write about Kantor, and their continental or Polish counterparts are shared or divergent. Conversely, the potential problems with Polish or continental commentators writing on Kantor may be a lack of sensitivity to, or awareness of, the Anglo-American cultural perspective, whilst in other ways being closer to Kantor’s European modernist sources.

For example, from the English perspective there is a historical tendency to distrust continental-European avant-garde movements. The painter Ben Nicholson and the sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore are key figures in twentieth-century art who attempted to establish a European-style modernism in England during the 1930s. According to Emma Barker in her 2004 essay “English” abstraction: Nicholson, Hepworth and Moore in the 1930s:

A recurrent theme in discussion of their work has, however, been the assumption of a fundamental opposition between international modernism, as exemplified by abstract art, on the one hand, and a national tradition, typically identified as ‘English’ and associated with landscape, on the other. Hence the abstract works produced by Nicholson and Hepworth during the 1930s have been seen to involve (in the words of Charles Harrison) ‘the very extinction of Englishness’.

(Barker in Edwards and Wood 2004: 273)

Consequently, although there was an attempt by a minority of British artists to work in the tradition of the European avant-garde they were either marginalised or seen as unique individual artists rather than as part of the continental tradition. This attitude is encapsulated by a comment from Paul Nash made in 1932: ‘From all foreign influences, abstractions and the school of Paris, good Lord deliver us’ (Nash 1932: 322, cited in Barker Ibid.; emphasis in original).

The discourse on Kantor to date has therefore been predominantly Polish, French, German or Italian in origin. In the current English-speaking discourse on Kantor the main points of reference therefore remain: Hyde and Tchorek’s

As previously noted, Hyde and Tchorek’s book is an edited and translated version of Kantor’s *partytura* (score) for his 1980 production published in Poland in 1984. Useful as this is as a key English resource on Kantor it is not a translation of all the material included in the Polish publication.16 However, the English publication does include an excellent short introduction from one of the editors, Hyde: ‘A new lease of death: Kantor’s “Wielopole/Wielopole”’, an essay originally published in 1985 in the journal *Comparative Criticism*. Hyde has so far been the only British writer, until Noel Witts’ recent book (2010), to write extensively on Kantor. (Witts had published nothing substantial on Kantor until his 2010 book.) From 1976 to 1979 Hyde worked as a visiting British Council Lecturer in English Literature at the Marie Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin. He returned to Poland later and from 1992–1993 was a visiting British Council Professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. As a Senior Lecturer at the University of East Anglia from 1970 Hyde published a series of essays and reviews about Polish authors and Polish theatre and introduced an English-speaking audience to the work of Polish writers such as Cyprian Norwid, Schulz, Gombrowicz, Tadeusz Konwicki, Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz as well as Tadeusz Kantor (Bystydzieńska and Harris 1999: 8).

According to Grażyna Bystydzieńska and Emma Harris, Hyde ‘fell under the spell of a culture in which he found “surreal and subversive forms that kept the avant-garde alive longer than anywhere else in Europe, not just as a trend but almost as if it was the bread and butter of the culture”’ (1999: 8). It is Hyde’s exposure to these avant-garde trends and his understanding of them in situ—as being alive in Polish culture—that makes him such a sensitive commentator on Kantor. Hyde said that he felt that, in Poland, he was still living in the heyday of

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16 See Pleśniarowicz (2004: 232, fn. 596). For detail of material omitted see Appendix 1.7.
European modernism, and that his ‘favourite academic literary issues were those of the world outside my window’ (Ibid.: 8).

Having lived in Poland myself in the early 1980s, just after the period that Hyde is describing, I can attest to this peculiarity of Polish culture. The feeling that the avant-garde is ‘bread and butter of the culture’ is perhaps not so evident in Poland now, freed from the yoke of communism and entangled in consumer capitalism, but it was a tangible and almost magical phenomenon during Kantor’s lifetime. Understanding this difference between Polish and British culture is one of Hyde’s strengths, and his essays on Kantor offer valuable insights for the Anglo-American audience. Hyde’s account of his time in Poland in the ‘Afterword’ to Bystydzieńska and Harris 1999 is an evocative picture of the existential and metaphysical qualities of life in Poland as perceived by a Western outsider, and is a useful companion to Timothy Garton Ash’s essays on his experiences in Poland behind the Iron Curtain in his 1999 collection of essays The Uses of Adversity. Unfortunately Hyde’s writings on Kantor, as already noted, amount to only five pieces. In 1985 he published a short essay, ‘A new lease of death: Tadeusz Kantor and Wielopole/ Wielopole’ (this was reprinted as the introduction to his 1990 book with Tchorek). In 1999 a volume of essays in English translation was published in Poland and dedicated to Hyde in which, according to the editors, Hyde’s six-and-a-half-page introduction ‘in itself constitutes a significant monograph in English on Kantor’s theatre’ (Bystydzieńska and Harris 1999: 8). The editors of From Norwid to Kantor: Essays on Polish Modernism Dedicated to Professor G. M. Hyde, go on to quote from a review by Professor Włodzimierz Bolecki in Życie Warszawy:

Hyde’s excellent introduction deserves attention; this is a searching study of the whole theatrical history of this Polish director. Hyde shows with insight and precision the links between Kantor’s theatre and the twentieth century avant-garde in painting (cubism, dadaism, Constructivism, surrealism, art informel etc.) and in the theatre (Craig); he also shows the links with the Polish literary tradition (Wyspiański, Witkacy, Schulz, Gombrowicz) and Polish painting (Chwistek, Czyżewski, Kobro, Strzemiński). Hyde’s interpretation of the sources of the symbolism are
penetrating and represent a highly pertinent approach to the work of this great director.

(Bolecki cited in Bystydzieńska and Harris 1999: 8, fn. 2)

As noted above the original 1985 essay was followed by essays published in 1988, 1991, and 1992, followed by the translator’s preface and editorial material in Miklaszewski 2002.

Hyde’s contribution to elucidating Kantor’s work is undoubtably the most helpful for the English-speaking reader. It is a shame that, owing to the relative brevity of his writings on Kantor it does not have the density of valuable detail as exemplified by Pleśniarowicz’s translated writings. Hyde has an appropriate sense of the need to unpack the Polish references for the non-Polish-literate reader together with a sensitivity to the metaphysical import of Kantor’s work itself. In the rest of this chapter I will deal the issues that arise from a consideration of the particular critical approaches to Kantor’s work taken by Hyde, Kobialka, Pleśniarowicz and Witts.

One strategy that has been used to interpret Kantor is to examine his work through an existing critical discourse. In his 1993 book, Kobialka complements his descriptive accounts of Kantor’s key performances with an analysis based on a poststructuralist/postmodernist reading of Kantor’s work that draws heavily on readings of the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. It is the problem of appropriateness of discourse that is most particular to Kobialka’s reading. In his 1996 review of Kobialka’s book Jeffrey Lawson rightly argues that ‘Kobialka’s principal assertion is that Kantor’s work anticipated much that came to be claimed as the province of postmodernism. By the time of Kantor’s Theatre of Death, Kantor was able to play out an encounter between “the Self, the three-dimensional body, and the Other, the multidimensional memory”’ (Lawson 1996: 150 citing Kobialka 1993: 312–13). Lawson points out that the orientation of the perspective in Kantor’s writings looks backwards across the landscape of the twentieth-century avant-gardes rather than forwards. If Kantor’s and his work is presented from Kobialka’s position what is foregrounded is the discourse of Foucauldian and Deleuzian poststructuralism in such a way that the discourse becomes distracting. For example there are
more references by Kobialka to Foucault in the index to his book than there are to either Schulz or Gombrowicz, two of Kantor's major influences. This is in contrast to Hyde, Gerould and Pleśnierowicz who all recognise the important place of Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz and Schulz in Kantor's range of influences. There are four references in Kobialka to Gombrowicz, only one of which is a reference to *Ferdydurke*, which, as has been discussed, was one of the key sources for *The Dead Class*. There are only three references to Schulz, one of which mentions 'The Treatise on the Mannequins [sic]'. There are no references to 'The Old Age Pensioner', one of the principle Schulzian sources for *The Dead Class*, or to 'The Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass', which was surely one of the main sources for Kantor's concept of the metaphysics of death. There is consequently no meaningful discussion of Gombrowicz or Schulz, their influence or the way elements of their work were used by Kantor in Kobialka's 1993 discussions. There are ten references to Witkiewicz, seven of which are to *Tumor Brainiowicz*, another of the principle sources for *The Dead Class*. However, as five of Kantor's productions used Witkiewicz plays as their principle springboard (apart from *The Dead Class* which was the first production to incorporate ideas from other authors in equal partnership) it is surprising that there are not more references. There is no discussion of Witkiewicz such as Hyde attempts in his 1988 essay, and nowhere is there the detailed analysis of the way Kantor uses textual fragments from *Tumor Brainiowicz* in *The Dead Class*, as there is in Pleśnierowicz (2004).

Kobialka's discussion of Kantor's *Informel* period may serve as an example of how his use of a Foucauldian reading can prove a distraction. While discussing Kantor's 1961 *informel* production of Witkacy's *Country House* and its 1961 manifesto Kobialka cites phrase taken from Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972):

> Matter, always changing and fluid, contains in itself all possible past, present, and future structures, which constitute, as Michel Foucault observes, 'unlimited, apparently formless fields of discourse.' Matter inhabits its own world, whose horizon is not limited by external referents.
The original context of Foucault’s ‘observation’, in the translation cited by Kobialka, is as follows:

But what, in fact, have I been speaking about so far? What has been the object of my inquiry? And what did I intend to describe? ‘Statements’—both in that discontinuity that frees them from all the forms in which one was so ready to allow them to be caught, and in the general, unlimited, apparently formless fields of discourse.

(Foucault 1972: 79)

Foucault, it transpires, is not here discussing matter, but rather ‘statements’ in ‘formless fields of discourse’. This is confusing given that discourse normally has a referent whilst it is at least debatable if the same can be said of matter. Whilst Kobialka is right to point out the importance of informe for Kantor it is difficult to understand why Kobialka doesn’t explore Kantor’s matrix of sources in Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, the relation between these and the impact on Kantor of the Palais de la Découverte scientific exhibition. This would surely also have been an ideal place to cite Schulz whose aesthetic authority on the nature of matter is central to his fictional universe. Schulz as a Polish source for the idea of formlessness predates Kantor’s visit to the Parisian Palais de la Découverte in 1947, which became one of the catalysts for his conception of matter (Kantor had been reading Schulz in the late 1930s (Plesniarowicz 2004: 27)). Schulz would seem a more appropriate illustration than Foucault, who is clearly writing about something different. Perhaps, in using Foucault so heavily, Kobialka is attempting to locate Kantor in post-modern contemporary theory to give the artist’s ideas (and hence, by implication, Polish ideas) a ‘fashionable’ and ‘up-to-date’ gloss? I will return to this possibility later in this chapter.

Perhaps this was the case for Kantor too, for in his own way, as Hyde has pointed out, Kantor wanted to both stay true to his Polish roots whilst at the same time to position himself as part of the international avant-garde tradition. Perhaps it is for this reason that mentions of Gombrowicz and Schulz, of Constructivism and Jewishness tend to appear only in interviews and not in his
own manifestos and publications. During a 1988 interview Kantor comments on important trends for him in Poland:

In drama it would be Wyspiański, in painting—Malczewski. Bruno Schulz in prose. I mentioned Schulz before, but I want to add a few words now. When I created a notion of the reality of the lowest rank, I realised I was inspired by the Polish inter-war tradition and particularly by Schulz’s notion of degraded reality. The difference between Schulz and me is that each of us had a different point of departure. The important thing, however, is that I do not feel isolated with my thoughts: I feel I am a part of a certain cultural tradition, and this matters very much to me.

(Kantor in Sawa 1990: 66)

Gombrowicz and Schulz do not begin to be mentioned by Kantor until the early 1970s when they become ‘participants’ in the dramatic séance of The Dead Class, after which Schulz alone begins to be mentioned by Kantor in interviews. The fact that Kantor does not directly reference these Polish writers and artists in the theatre pieces after 1975, does not mean that their influence is not present. Kantor was a showman and self-publicist. Although it is commonly agreed that he was a ‘great artist and theatre director’, Kantor was extremely keen to portray himself as such. One of the ways in which this desire manifested itself was in Kantor’s almost obsessive desire to be, and to be seen to be, completely original, and more specifically, originally avant-garde. As Jeff Lawson points out in his review of Kobialka’s 1993 book, ‘Kantor’s writings were colored by his need to be completely original and avant-garde’ himself (1996: 150). This no doubt stems in part from accusations from other artists and critics that he was merely a follower of fashion, a dabbler who brought back the latest trinkets of avant-garde styling from his trips abroad. Jarosław Suchan, in his essay accompanying the 2000 exhibition Tadeusz Kantor: Impossible, notes that Bożena Kowalska considered Kantor, in her book Polska awangarda malarska 1945–1980: Szanse I mity (Polish avant-garde painting 1945–1980: Opportunities and myths) as ‘a peddler of the avant-garde, the advocate of novelty, the artist deprived of his own artistic expression, a chameleon that changed with every next fashion coming from Paris or New York’ (Kowalska cited in Suchan 2000: 90). Such an impression of Kantor also stems from the
misinterpretation of his work and false comparisons made with other figures.\textsuperscript{17} This issue is completely missed by Kobialka, and not foregrounded in other commentators.

A further problem that follows on from the apparent success of Kantor’s self-publicity is a general uncritical acceptance of Kantor’s account of his own artistic development. There is a sense in which all of Kantor’s favourable commentators, Hyde, Miklaszewski and Pleśniarowicz included, to an extent suffer from Raczek’s ‘law of shock’ mentioned in the Żurowski essay discussed earlier: they all seemed swept into an uncritical helplessness in the face of Kantor’s unquestioned ‘genius’. Lawson is critical of Kobialka’s tacit acceptance of Kantor’s claim, for example, ‘to have anticipated if not discovered many of the defining aspects of 20\textsuperscript{th}-century art and theatre, such as the use of environments, found objects and even happenings’ (Ibid.). With respect to the avant-garde strategies of utilising readymades and found objects, there is a sense in which Kantor’s versions of these strategies are subtly different from earlier incarnations of similarly named tactics (the same can be argued for Kantor’s version of other strategies such as \textit{informel}, packaging and happenings). Kobialka does not tackle this particular problem of originality in Kantor, and Lawson correctly admonishes him for just recounting ‘how Kantor wanted to be remembered’ and not dealing with ‘the gaps that exist between that remembrance and the facts of art and theatrical history’ (Ibid.). As Lawson observes, ‘Kantor’s desire for originality infects Kobialka’s work’ (Ibid.: 151).

One strategy for addressing the problem of taking Kantor’s account of himself at face value would be to read his work within the rich matrix of contexts that it arose out of. Such an approach would produce insights into his major later works by reading them both against his earlier work and the various source contexts. Seeing more clearly the presence of the influences in Kantor’s work, however ghostly or transformed, will provide a richer and deeper understanding.

That Kobialka is committed to a postmodern reading of Kantor continued to be evident in his keynote conference presentations (for example, at the \textit{Past

\textsuperscript{17} See Appendix 1.8 regarding Kantor and Grotowski.
Masters: Tadeusz Kantor and Cricot 2 in Aberystwyth, 2000, and at The Anatomical Theatre Revisited in Amsterdam, 2006) and subsequent journal contributions (for example 'Of the Memory of the Human Unhoused in Being' (2000), 'Tadeusz Kantor’s Practice: A Postmodern Notebook’ (2006) and ‘Delerium of the Flesh: “All the Dead Voices” in the Space of the Now’ (2008)). Many of these writings have now been subsumed in his latest book on Kantor, Further On, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre, published in 2009. The preface to this new book announces Kobialka’s wish ‘to explore further [Kantor’s] relationship to what we call today postmodern practice or theory’ (2009: ix). This is the crux, for, although Kobialka rightly criticises Hans-Thies Lehmann’s recent ‘postdramatic’ reading of Kantor (2006) for locating ‘Kantor’s practice within traditional dramatic theatre conditions […] grounded in representational practices’ (Ibid.), his entire attempt to do so is itself grounded in postmodern discourse. It is not that this is necessarily wrong or uninteresting; it does, however, impose a layer of discourse onto Kantor’s work that obscures the very radical nature that it is his intention to reveal. Kobialka would seem to have a political agenda that he seeks to ally with Kantor’s anti-commodificational stance. This is all very laudable, but it misses the step of understanding the nature of Kantor’s radicality in a more fundamental and sympathetic way. When Kobialka articulates his arguments within the discourse of, say, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard he misses out on what I will show is the more sympathetic resonances that Kantor has with Heidegger, the father in fact, from which these poststructuralists, deconstructionists and postmodernists arguably derive. In basing my critique of what Kobialka calls ‘representational practices’ upon Heideggerian discourse rather than on what has come after, I am accessing the matrix of concerns in Modernism that were Kantor’s own. Whether or not, or how much, Kantor prefigured postmodernism, is a later consideration. In saying that ‘Kantor’s theatre created a possibility of seeing what cannot really be grasped or understood because in its most concrete stage form it shows “nothing” or, at best, nostalgia for the impossible’, Kobialka comes very close to
the concerns of this thesis. However, in ‘territorialising’ Kantor as a postmodernist *avant la lettre* he diverges from my approach.

Kobialka goes beyond *A Journey Through Other Spaces* in his latest book. He reproduces some of his translations from the older book and includes many valuable new ones (a curious duplication that is not explained): in this way the dominance of Kobialka’s English translations of Kantor’s writing is further advanced. However, there is a significant difference in the scope and arrangement of the new volume in comparison to the 1993 book. In the earlier volume, Kantor’s writings had pride of place, with Kobialka’s three critical essays—‘The Quest for the Self: Thresholds and Transformations’, ‘The Quest for the Other: Space/Memory’ and ‘Found Reality’—occupying the position of a lengthy afterword to the translations of Kantor’s writings. In the new book, however, which sits unambiguously under his authorship,18 his translations and essays are interspersed with each other, this notwithstanding the fact that the essays themselves are already copiously illustrated with Kobialka’s translations from Kantor’s writings. In his preface he states that ‘it is my hope that this book will be seen as a performance of the complex palimpsest of Kantor’s work and my encounter with this work’ (Ibid.: xiv). Although it is useful to have these new translation, it would have been more useful to have full translations of Pleśniarowicz’s three-volume edition of Kantor’s complete writings published in 2004–2005, and a separate book that more clearly deliniated Kobialka’s argument as an approach to Kantor and his work, rather than the implication in the current volume that it is part of, or symbiotic with it.

Kobialka’s preoccupation with a postmodernising approach to Kantor and his work may be seen as an interesting indication of a particular kind of recent Polish national bias observed by the Polish literary historian and theorist Włodzimierz Bolecki in his 1999 essay ‘Post-modernising modernism’ (in: Bystydzieńska and Harris 1999: 127–142). Bolecki notes that in Poland:

> in the early 1990s, political change went hand in hand with change in the aesthetic and artistic sphere. A new era

18 See Appendix 1.9 regarding the information given on the cover of Kobialka 1993.
required a new name, and when this could not be found in politics, it was found in literature and art. The statement that we were living in a new era, in the ‘post-modern era’—a statement that had already become seriously banal in the West in cultural studies and the sociology of culture—sounded like a revelation in Poland at the beginning of the 1990s.

(Ibid.: 127)

Although resident in the United States since 1982 when he began his doctoral studies, Kobialka (his name would seem to be an Anglicised spelling of the Polish ‘Michał Kobialka’ (see Kobialka 2009: xvi)), is originally Polish, studying English and American literature at Warsaw University. As such the double-edged sword of his Polish cultural literacy—the fact that familiarity can make it difficult to know what needs explaining to a non-native readership—is potentially compounded by the particular cultural phenomenon noted by Bolecki. For Bolecki the trend for postmodernism constitutes a paradox because, as he notes, ‘Polish literature in recent years has […] produced very few works that could be unquestionably categorised as post-modernist’ (Bolecki 1999: 27). In consequence, he argues, critics, ‘especially younger ones’ (Ibid.) have been forced to ‘search back for examples from the past’ and that it is therefore ‘not recent writing that is regarded as typical of Polish post-modernism, but the work of three of the best-known writers of the twentieth century: Witkacy [Witkiewicz], Gombrowicz and Schulz’ (Ibid.). It is exactly these three figures that, as I shall shortly discuss, constitute the key Polish-modernist influence on Kantor’s work. However, as Bolecki contends:

Nearly all the critics consider these three writers to have been forerunners of Polish post-modernism, because of certain characteristic elements in their poetics: parody, inter-textuality, anti-mimeticism, multiple signification, puns, mixing high and low culture, making fun of the existing cultural hierarchies etc.

(Ibid.: 128)

19 In her recently published essay ‘Kantor’s Art from Informel to Installation’, Sarah Wilson notes in referencing Kobialka’s 1993 book that ‘a frustrating lack of apparatus hampers non-Polish scholars here’ (Wilson 2011: 138 fn. 6).
Bolecki concedes that superficially this argument seems credible on the basis of the particular radicality of these writers’ work, which seems to engage with the contradictions in modernism that tend to have been later described by post-modernist discourse. However, as Bolecki points out:

If Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz can be treated today as forerunners of post-modernism, this means only that phenomena which are today called post-modernist were components of Polish modernism. And so: is this post-modernism? Or should we rather call it unexplored modernism?

(Ibid.)

For Bolecki, the paradox of the ‘post-modernisation’ of these Polish modernist figures centres around what he identifies as the fact that ‘in Polish literary history there is no concept of modernism that would explain the specific nature of the work of these writers’ owing to ‘a gap in Polish literary history between, roughly speaking, the year 1918 (the end of Młoda Polska [Young Poland]) and the 1980s and 1990s, which are currently seen as the period of post-modernist literature’ (Ibid.: 133–134). For Bolecki, Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz and Schulz represent ‘the three most important variants of the tradition of mature (for it is not even possible to call it late) modernism, which has never been analysed in Poland’ (Ibid.: 134). Bolecki traces the history of the particular types of the grotesque in these three writers back to antecedents within traditions in Easter Europe itself and particularly within the Russian literary tradition. This was a tradition that operated on the basis of a ‘destruction of the illusion of realism’ (Ibid.: 138), a feature of Kantor’s work that Kobialka identifies as anticipating the postmodern.

In his desire to present Kantor as a postmodern figure, Kobialka continues his practice of selective reference to the major theorists of postmodernism. In one case, early on in his preface, Kobialka asks: ‘Could it be that Kantor’s theatre […] elaborated an initial forgetting, that forgetting which was so poignantly described by Jean-François Lyotard on the pages of The Postmodern Explained?’ (Kobialka 2009: x). The ‘initial forgetting’ that is referred to here occurs in the last paragraph of a letter from Lyotard to
Jessamyn Blau on 1 May 1985 containing ‘notes on the meaning of “post-”’ (Lyotard 1992: 93), in which Lyotard ends by exhorting the necessity of a full engagement with the modernist avant-gardes:

You can see that when it is understood in this way, the ‘post-’ of ‘postmodern’ does not signify a movement of repetition but a procedure in ‘ana-’: a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an ‘initial forgetting’.

(Lyotard 1992: 93)

So, the ‘initial forgetting’ is, according to Lyotard, an act of remembrance (anamnesis), and a process of critical engagement with the past of the avant-gardes. This rather makes exactly the point that Bolecki is making against the kind of postmodernising that Kobialka can be seen to be engaging in.

Another key point that stems from Kobialka’s postmodernising position on Kantor is the question of subjectivity. Kobialka’s particular reading of postmodernism, of Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault, is one that is based on the tradition deriving from the North American reception of continental philosophy, one that refracted these thinkers through the discourses of literary theory and cultural studies. As such one of the key tenets of this tendency is that of desubjectification, the erasure of the self. As such, Kobialka’s overall argument would seem to be very similar to mine. However, when Heidegger is seen as the immediate source for the philosophers variously categorised as ‘poststructuralist’ (Deleuze, Foucault), ‘deconstructionist’ (Derrida), ‘postmodern’ (Lyotard) their discourse can be read as part of a different tradition, one I argue that has more in common with Kantor’s concerns (as opposed to Kobialka’s). As Bolecki has observed: ‘For the post-modernists, “subject” and “subjectivity” are empty words, for the subject does not exist—this is one of the slogans of post-modernism, being at the same time a defining characteristic of its negative anthropology’ (1999: 140). However, as I will go on to elaborate in chapter three, Heidegger’s conception of ‘the nothing’ of human being is a curiously, paradoxically positive one. Similarly, as Bolecki notes is that of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, for whom ‘the subject, the individual, individuality, are the most important categories of their thinking and their
art’ (Ibid.). It is no coincidence that as direct influences on Kantor, his thinking and art is informed by a similarly strong sense of the individual. Moreover, unlike Kobialka’s desire to see Kantor as a prophetic critic of post-industrial society, the figures that inspired him were, like Kantor himself, products of, as Bolecki notes, ‘late Eastern European feudalism and not industrialism’. The worlds that they found themselves in they attempted to confront, in the case of Gombrowicz and Schulz, with experiments in the presentation of reality or, in the case of Schulz, to respond in the form of an escape ‘into the past […] into the hiding places of symbolism and myth, treated as forgotten reservoirs of a true Sacred Sense’ (Ibid.: 141). What is the case in each of these three figures of the inter-war Polish avant-garde is that theirs is a uniquely Polish body of work, as Bolecki puts it, ‘full of meanings, ideas and many of the most important problems which shaped the European formation of modernism’ (Ibid.). The fact that they helped shape Kantor’s aesthetic concerns needs to be acknowledged and his work needs to be seen within this particular modernist context, rather than one in which it is seen as participating in nascent postmodern concerns.

I have indicated some of the ways in which Kantor is a unique artistic figure, in the sense that his work, although apparently obscure, has had an almost universal appeal to an international audience. However, to understand Kantor from an Anglo-American perspective, necessitates overcoming the ‘law of shock’, the problem identified by Żurowski as one of remaining at the level of a ‘critical helplessness’ that produces ‘unreserved admiration devoid of any broader reflection or attempts at an intellectual analysis’ (1985: 365). To recover from this critical malaise it is necessary to understand Tadeusz Kantor and his work contextually: to understand something of the ground from which it arose. For example, Kantor’s work looks unusual. This is partly because in Poland during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s under the rule of real socialism, looking unusual was merely one of the national reflex strategies for confounding censorship. In a 1981 interview with the Party censor ‘K–62’ published in Encounter the censor (who preferred to use his old code number) revealed the whole things was ‘like a game, where one party tries to get the better of the other’, that:
In my times, the principle on Mysia Street [the location of the Censorship Office in Warsaw], was that if a censor did not understand what he was reading, the article might be let through as such, because the average reader wouldn’t understand either. We think that we are more intelligent than the average reader. [...] Fools are not employed there. [...] And quite frequently, the higher up you go the more liberal it gets. A censor crosses something out, and the Chief Censor restores it.

(‘K-62’ 1981: 12)

This reflex for being indirect had been learned by generations of Polish artists and intellectuals under the two Partitions, and by Kantor’s generation under Nazi occupation and the Soviet Imperium. As revealed by ‘K-62’, this was also clearly a ‘game’ played by both sides. Hyde has noted:

State socialism was much more that just another form of government. It drew heavily upon the iconography both of this world and of the next to justify its mysterious ways. It generated its own Aesopic language, which dealt in indirections and allusions rather than calling a spade a spade.

(Hyde 1992: 199)

Such a strategy of resistance can be seen as a fundamental aspect of the existential struggle of everyday life in Poland for so much of its troubled history. I use the word ‘existential’ here in the sense that the everyday fabric of existence is rendered more vivid in terms of the contingent choices that every individual is forced to make under the pressure of the particular reality they find themselves under: be it occupation by a foreign power or control by the state itself. Once the procuring of such ordinary items as meat, sugar or toilet rolls becomes an important matter of negotiation for each individual, the randomness of life and the consequences of one’s own and others’ decisions take on a different tenor from that of a less pressurised, less exceptional normality. The balance between the necessity for individual choice and responsibility and the awareness of its consequences and potential futility are all too apparent.

20 See Appendix 1.10 on the partitioning of Poland.

21 I experienced this reality at first hand whilst living in Poland in 1982–1983, during the period of Martial Law.
my opinion it is the sensitivity to such peculiarities of everyday Polish life in the mid-twentieth-century that lies behind Kantor’s claim to be ‘almost an existentialist’ (Kantor in: Bablet 1991). If this is the case Kantor’s work needs to be seen in relation to the reality of Polish life, so that his formal experimentation can be seen as grounded in his situation rather than as a series of isolated artistic fripperies.

The situation of Kantor as an artist practising during the conditions of communist-era Poland can therefore be viewed as ‘existential’. However, more generally, any engagement with the hermeneutic project of trying to understand someone or something could also be seen as existential. Instead of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s assertion that ‘… it is still the author who “determines” the meaning’ of a work’ (1967: 23), and the hermeneutic relativity that comes in the wake of Gadamer’s assertion of the importance of the historicity of the interpreter, I want to recognise the agency of both the artist/author and the audience/interpreter. Gadamer writes that ‘If we define the task of hermeneutics as the bridging of personal or historical distance between minds, then the experience of art would seem to fall entirely outside its province’ (cited in Ling 1977: 95). An alternative perspective from phenomenology is Heidegger’s in Being and Time where he argues that ‘phenomenology’ means, ‘making manifest that which shows itself’ (1962: 58). Such a project is existential in the sense that, as Eric Matthews explains in his book The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty: ‘the subject that engages in phenomenology is not a pure consciousness, contemplating that which “appears” to it, but a being who is actually part of the reality whose nature he or she seeks to grasp, a being who is “in the world”, an “existing” being’ (Matthews 2002: 27). When encountering one of Kantor’s performances (whether through the memory of a live performance or by way of video, photograph, exhibition or text) a form of the paradoxical hermeneutic circle is therefore encountered where any understanding of the piece must emerge from some fragment of the mutual soil. As noted in chapter one, Kantor commented: ‘I must then reach someone—or not’ (Kantor in: Krzemień 1975: 39). But how are the audiences to reach him if they can only understand what they witness through their own experience?
Heidegger, regarding the problem of understanding the concept of ‘being’, points out that there is already knowledge of what it is to ‘be’ because the individual is already caught in the middle of his or her own process of ‘being’. In volume four of his lectures on Nietzsche he argues that the word ‘is’: ‘drifts about as the most threadbare word in language, although it sustains all saying, and not only in the sense of spoken language’ (Heidegger 1991b, Vol. IV: 188). It is consequently difficult to see or understand ‘being’ as a concept in its own right. The implication is that in order to understand something the interpreter has to already have a prior understanding of their own situation and of themselves—the ‘I’ that is in that situation. In one sense this means understanding the particularities of individual personal experience as well as those of the object of understanding, but also those more fundamental and universal aspects of existential experience that link individual human beings together. The tendency of Kantor’s critics to detail particularities in the performances tends to lead them to a reading of surface detail which often appears to make no sense (even when, in many instances, this may even have been part of the artist’s strategy) and leads to the superficial conclusion that what is being seen is novel and strange. For example B. A. Young in his review of *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* published on Friday August 29, 1980 in the *Financial Times* complained that he found Kantor’s work difficult to follow, that its style was ‘antipathetic’ to him, that the production seemed ‘sloppy’ and that ‘there is no depth in the acting, which runs to funny voices and funny walks’. Young was also unimpressed by Kantor’s presence on stage ‘pretending to direct operations already performed, even conducting the taped music’ (Young 1980: 15). His impression of Kantor’s stage presence as ‘pointless or arrogant’ was not one that myself, my friends and most critics shared of the same performance. Young’s position is one that is taken up by Andrzej Żurowski in his 1985 essay already briefly discussed, which I will deal with in detail in chapter three. Such critics often report a sense that something powerful and important was ‘going on’ but are unable to find the discourse to articulate it. Heidegger suggests that to solve the problem of understanding it is necessary to begin by acknowledging the problem of understanding itself. He argues for an existential
hermeneutics that will look into the phenomenon not just of the object of interpretation but of the phenomenon of the interpreting subject also. In order to reach an understanding that is sensitive to the original soil from which the artistic phenomenon grew, an understanding of those elements of the historicity of the interpreter’s own situation, which at the same time speak to common human dilemmas, is therefore also necessary. Understanding Kantor, I suggest, especially requires an explicit recognition of this process. If there are no significant elements in the spectator’s personal experience that in some way parallel those that informed Kantor then there is no possibility of his ‘speaking’ to his audience and interpreters.

When I lived in Poland in 1982–3 during the Martial Law period, my experience of such things as queuing, rationing, riots and demonstrations, flares, tear-gas and of clandestine culture was that they were alien and sometimes frightening phenomena. However, it is rare, if not impossible, for any experience to be completely alien. Although I was a foreigner in a foreign land, I was nevertheless with other human beings. There were differences but there were similarities beneath the differences. Of course I had queued before (although not in queues of this scale); like anyone else I had wanted things I could not have; I had witnessed, albeit from a distance, the unrest and civil disturbance of the English football riots of the 1970s. There was enough of a similarity between my own experience and these events for me to make some sort of connection with them. In the difference between things there can be a blurred boundary between difference-in-degree and difference-in-kind. In this limbo it can be possible to make some sort of connection between things or experiences that on the surface appear irreconcilably different. Whatever happened to me in Poland then, however novel, was happening to me—a young man of a certain age, nationality and background—and I therefore had to make sense of it in terms of my own experience or make no sense of it at all. This is also the case when an audience witnesses a spectacle from outside of

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22 Poland at this time was infamous for its shortages of food and other basic consumer items. Such a situation necessitated rationing, the legendary queuing, and combined with the political unrest, this led to frequent demonstrations and riots. All of this I experienced at first hand.
their normal cultural experience. However, the situation is somewhat different in that the audience are not embedded in that experience as would be the case if they had been living in the country from which the production originated. There is only the duration of the performance for the spectator to form an initial sense of the action of the event. It is this sense that will live on in memory to become the basis of subsequent reflections on the performance. The brain must try to make sense of the information that it receives but it can only relate this to information that it has already. If a meaningful connection is to be made between artist and audience there must be something present in the work that can act as *envoi* to bridge the separation between self and other, i.e. some representative element that will allow something from the work to penetrate from the other side of the mirrored surface of appearance. With such an *envoi* the surface of appearance will merely reflect the audience’s existing preconceptions. It is in this sense that I see the need for greater contextualisation of Kantor’s work in terms of the occupation, the Holocaust and key cultural and aesthetic influences to begin to solve the problems of understanding Kantor and interpreting his work.\(^{23}\)

There are various contexts in which Kantor has been situated or has situated himself, and these need to be elaborated before any universals can be extracted from them. As Hyde has indicated in his 1985 essay (251), an understanding of Kantor requires that he be situated in relation to both the mainstream of European avant-gardes and his own Polishness. In this sense Kantor is both rooted and rootless: he interprets his own Polishness (and its relation with the Jewish presence in Poland) through the lens of the avant-garde, but at the same time his interpretation of the avant-garde is marked by his Polishness. Such a complex, intertwined duality also marks Kantor’s aesthetic allegiances. He has repeatedly stated\(^ {24}\) that he is caught in a tension

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\(^{23}\) The Heideggerian-hermeneutic philosophical context that I employ I see as an implicit ground for the social, cultural and aesthetic contexts argued for here.

\(^{24}\) As stated earlier, my strategy is to take Kantor’s statements about himself as phenomena in themselves, to bracket the questions of factual veracity and, instead, to read them in the context of his *oeuvre* as a whole and the matrix of contexts out of which it arose.
between the contradictions of Symbolism and the abstraction of the Bauhaus and Constructivism, for example: ‘In my development there is always this contradiction between Symbolism and abstract art’ (Kantor in Hertz 1985–1986: 14). Also between the absurdist nihilism of existentialism and the Church, for example: ‘I used to be an existentialist. But not a faithful one. The same I can say about the Church’ (Kantor in Sawa 1990: 68). And again, between the Church and the Synagogue: ‘Yes, the church and the synagogue are equally important. I wrote once that I had been growing up in the shadow of the church and the synagogue …’ (Kantor in Sawa 1990: 69). The pursuit of any one of these contextual axes has the tendency to move away from the others because of the particular nature of its own preoccupations. Kantor, however, lived with these contradictions, and his work arose out of them. In a sense there was a continual dialogue in Kantor’s work between the provincial and the metropolitan, the national and international; between a Sartrean atheistic existentialism and Catholicism; between Christianity and Judaism; between Symbolism and Constructivism; and between a string of related antinomies such as: fiction and reality, appearance and illusion, the living and the dead. If the work bears the stamp of this babel of apparently contradictory binary concepts then it should not be considered without due reference to them.

Along with Daniel Gerould (to be discussed presently), Hyde, as noted above, has done the most in attempting to keep each of these contextual axes in focus in the range of essays that he has written. In his 1988 essay, ‘The word unheard: “Form” in modern Polish drama’, Hyde provides the fullest English account yet of how the peculiarities of Polish Romanticism feed into the modern and early modern avant-garde artists who were Kantor’s main influences and sources. The three figures of Polish Romanticism: Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859) produced a body of poetic dramas that gave Poland its peculiar messianic and matyrological sense of identity which informed the characterisation of partitioned Poland as ‘the Christ of nations’ (Miłosz 1983: 223; Davies 2001: 237). These themes were, in turn,

25 Kantor’s third theatre production was of Słowacki’s Balladyna (1839) in the Clandestine Independent Theatre in 1942.
picked up and developed by Poland’s *Młoda Polska* (‘Young Poland’) movement, a version of the Decadent and Symbolist zeitgeist in the Europe of the 1890s, especially by its leading figure, the painter, playwright and theatre designer Wyspiański, whose 1904 play, *The Return of Odysseus*, Kantor had staged with his Clandestine Independent Theatre during the occupation, and whose paintings, dramas and ideas in general formed one of the key inspirations for Kantor’s own work. Hyde is the only critic so far to examine and unravel the modernist themes from those of the Polish Romanticism received by way of Wyspiański. According to the theatre director Leon Schiller (1887–1954), Wyspiański ‘… went further than the postulates of Craig’ in realising the idea of a pure autonomous theatre (cited in Milosz 1983: 354), an idea which informed Kantor’s preoccupation with autonomous theatre through first Witkiewicz in the 1920s, and later the first Cricot group in the 1930s. Hyde sees a connection between Craig’s idea of the *über-marionette* and the *chochoł* or Straw Man26 in Wyspiański’s most famous work *Wesele* (The Wedding, 1901), who leads a trancelike dance of the wedding guests at the finale of the play. Although Hyde is making a connection here between the figure of the Straw Man and the somnambulistic dancing of the guests with the *übermarionette*, he points out that ‘Craig’s essay is essentially a plea for a return to the mythic roots of tragedy, [while] its reception in Polish literature is more complex’ (Hyde 1988: 720). Craig was undoubtably influential in Poland as in the rest of Europe and Russia, but he intersects with a particularly national version of the Romantic metaphor of an alienating force which rules over human beings by turning them into puppets.27 Such a perspective is represented at the end of the hotel ballroom scene in Jerzy Andrzejewski’s 1948 novel *Ashes and Diamonds*:

A heavy, indolent fever settled on the crowd like a dream. All around, in the smoke and half-light, frozen figures stood petrified, heads bowed, with listening faces, staring eyes, some full of tears, others glassy and unseeing. People who had been drunk a little earlier now looked

26 ‘… an animated version of the straw coverings put over young trees and bushes in Poland to protect them from frost’ (Hyde 1988: 720).

27 See Milosz 1983: 356. Appendix 1.11 gives his account of the scene in Wyspiański’s play.
sober. The song, carried on the little childish voice, had pushed back time, had opened up the past now tragically lost in fear and platitudes, in lies and stupidity, in the fumes of alcohol, in easy love and easy money, in cloudy illusions and vain, blind griefs, in all this confused life which was leading to what? Remembrance seized them all. The shadows of the voices of the dead, of houses that no longer existed. The shadows of landscapes, or of their own fates. But no joy had emerged from those years. Life was continuing. (Andrzejewski 1991: 153)

This is a haunting image of public mourning for the fate of Poland combined with an accusation of the failure of the strategies of futility and apathy. This has become an image close to the hearts of most Poles (Wesele, along with the works of the major Romantic poets and Schulz mentioned above, is a set text for Polish schoolchildren, as Shakespeare is in British schools). Although Kantor claimed not to have been influenced by Wesele as such, and made, as far as I am aware, no mention of Andrzejewski’s novel, it is hard not to see a premonition of The Dead Class with its circling procession of somnambulistic corpse-actors. Here is Kantor’s account of one of the recurring scenes from The Dead Class, ‘A Toast’:

The banal and sentimental waltz—’If only the old days were back’ becomes a desperate and futile call, through constant and endless repetition, unbearable, hypnotising, it almost revives the time past, lost and dead. On stage, for a brief span of time we witness An undisputable miracle … The Old People get up from their desks slowly, the further back the desks are, the higher they rise, a wall of people animated by the sounds of the waltz soars up, bent with age, the figures suddenly straighten up, look up, their eyes gleaming, their hands raised as if for a toast, we may be sure now that those people have found the time of their youth…. dead … But the tones of the waltz are fading away, the illusion disintegrates,
the old people collapse onto their desks
which become what they were originally supposed
to be.... wrecks ....
[...]
in the end everything reaches the point of
inertia that ruled at the beginning.

(Kantor (n.d.) The Dead Class: 26; Polish text in Kantor
2004: 61–62)

Both Andrzejewski’s and Kantor’s figures are reminiscent of Wyspiański’s
‘dreamlike dance of “hollow men” that, according to Czesław Miłosz, symbolises
the inertia of Polish society’ (Miłosz 1983: 357).

Alongside Hyde, Daniel Gerould is so far the only American author to offer
sensitive and useful contextualisation of Kantor’s Polish cultural context. Apart
from three essays on Kantor (1980, 1986 and 1995), Gerould’s work has
concentrated mainly on the figure of Witkiewicz as well as other twentieth
in the Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor’, is a valuable and insightful discussion and
illustration of the Polish cultural sources and pictorial influences in Kantor’s
work. Gerould is the only American author who has provided any in-depth
explanation of key Polish artists and writers such as the painters Jacek
Malczewski and Edward Okuń, the painter, stage designer and playwright
Wyspiański and the novelist, dramatist, painter and philosopher Witkacy to
illustrate how features in their work can be seen to relate to the peculiarities of
Kantor’s own. Gerould notes that Malczewski’s work is ‘both abstract and
existential on the one hand and precise and contextual on the other’ (Gerould
1995: 177), qualities also inherent in Kantor’s work. Malczewski’s painting
Melancholy (1890–94), reproduced in Gerould’s essay, is virtually a visual
manifesto for the form of Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’. The painting, mentioned by
Kantor as a work he admired, depicts a swirling procession of figures emanating
from the figure of Malczewski himself sitting at his easel in the background,
creating the scene he himself is depicted in. Malczewski appears again,
doubled at the head of the procession, involved in the dying fall of the struggle
for independence, whilst the figure of Death looks on from the window. Looking
at this painting one can see links to the trope of the circular procession
discussed above in the work of Wyspiański and Andrzejewski as well as a precedent for the swirling, repetitive processions featured in *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole, Wielopole*, and of Kantor’s inclusion of himself within these works. In elucidating ‘parallels between the theatrical images of Tadeusz Kantor and those of his Kraków predecessors’ Gerould highlights ‘the creative presence of symbolist iconography and aesthetics’ in Kantor’s work (1995: 186). Gerould’s essay, like much of Hyde’s work discussed earlier, is a point of reference for anyone outside of Polish culture trying to understand Kantor’s peculiar fusion of Polish Symbolist and European and Russian avant-garde tendencies.

Hyde goes on to discuss in his 1988 essay how the Romantic tradition in Poland was taken up and cross-fertilised by the leading three figures of the 1930s Polish avant-garde (mentioned by Bolecki in his critique of the postmodernising tendency in recent Polish critical literature discussed above): Gombrowicz (1904–1969), Schulz (1892–1942) and Witkiewicz (1885–1939). These three avant-garde figures, who met and corresponded regularly during the 1930s, constitute a particularly Polish form of modernism. Their respective aesthetic concerns form, as already noted, an important central influence in Kantor’s work that requires careful consideration. Later in this thesis I will consider in more detail the influence of Schulz, but before I do so I will briefly introduce the three figures together.

Gombrowicz was a novelist and playwright from a wealthy landowning family and was an influential figure of the 1930s following the publication of his novel *Ferdydurke* whose protagonist, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, is taken back to school and the world of immaturity by his old professor. Gombrowicz found himself in Argentina at the outbreak of war in 1939 and, choosing not to return to Poland he continued writing as an emigré in Buenos Aires and later Paris until his death in 1969. Gombrowicz’s *Dzienniki* (Diaries 1953–1969) and three of his subsequent novels, *Trans-Atlantyk* (Trans-
Atlantic, 1953), Pornografia (Pornography, 1960) and Kosmos (Cosmos, 1965) have been critically well-received and highly influential.

Schulz was an artist and writer who worked as an art teacher in a school in the provincial Galician town of Drohobycz, now in the Ukraine. An assimilated Jew, in a town with a large Jewish population, in his fictions and drawings Schulz portrayed a highly charged version of his home life and town seen through the eyes of his childhood self. This highly ‘mythologised reality’ became hugely influential in Poland following the publication, aided by Witkiewicz, of two collections of Schulz’s short fictions Sklepy cynamonowe in 1934 (The Cinnamon Shops, published in the United Kingdom and North America as The Street of Crocodiles) and Sanatorium pod klepsydrą in 1937 (The Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass). Both Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz championed the cause of this provincial Jewish school teacher and Schulz became something of a cause célèbre. Schulz was shot on a street corner by a Gestapo officer in Drohobycz in 1942.29

Witkiewicz was the senior and more famous figure of the three and encouraged and helped Schulz and Gombrowicz in their work and its publication. Witkiewicz was the son of a famous painter, architect and art critic, also called Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915) and the son created the name ‘Witkacy’ for himself out of the first part of his last name and the last part of his middle name, Ignacy, to distinguish himself from his father. He grew up in the bohemian environment of the south-Polish Tatra Mountain resort of Zakopane where he was friends with the composer Karol Szymanowski. In 1914 Witkiewicz was invited by another friend, the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, to accompany him as draughtsman and photographer on an expedition to Oceania in the South Pacific. The outbreak of the First World War brought an end to this tropical adventure. As Witkiewicz had been born in Warsaw, which was part of the Russian partition, he was technically a Russian subject. Against his patriotic father’s wishes he volunteered to serve in the Russian Imperial army. He attended officer’s training school in Saint Petersburg

and was commissioned as an officer in the reserve regiment of the elite Pavlovsky Guard. He was wounded in 1916 and received the Order of St. Anne, fourth class. During his long convalescence he developed his artistic and philosophical interests and visited the Shchukin collection of modern art in Moscow, where he saw Picasso’s paintings. Witkiewicz lived through the last days of the old order and the revolutions in Saint Petersburg, where, in 1917, following the first revolution in February, he was appointed political commissar of his regiment, a short lived and precarious position. He was discharged from the army in November 1917, and survived the rest of the period living with Polish residents in Saint Petersburg until he was able to return to Poland in June 1918 (see Gerould 1981: 13–14, and 1993: 76–78, and in Witkiewicz 1993a: 31–34). Following the First World War he supported himself largely through portrait painting and became known in Poland as a painter, playwright, novelist and philosopher and an active member of the Polish avant-garde group of the 1920s the Formists. In 1939, whilst fleeing eastwards from the Nazi invasion, Witkiewicz committed suicide on learning of Stalin’s invasion (Gerould 1993: 274–275).

The creative cauldron of influence formed by these three figures is extremely important for the foundation and development of Kantor’s aesthetic. In the remainder of this chapter I will briefly consider their importance as influences for Kantor. I will focus here mainly on Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz and briefly indicate why I choose to focus on the influence of Schulz in later chapters of this thesis rather than on them.

**Witkacy**

The concerns of Polish Romanticism, as Hyde shows, were transmitted through Wyspiański and the ‘Young Poland’ movement to surface in the peculiar work of Witkacy. Witkacy was an artist of central importance for Kantor: ‘Witkiewicz, Witkiewicz and once more Witkiewicz. He is such an interesting writer that there ought to be a theatre devoted just to him. We want to be such a theatre’ (Kantor in *Echo Krakowa* (March 30, 1967) cited in Pleśniarowicz 2004: 175). All of Kantor’s theatre productions from *The Cuttlefish*, the first production of Cricot 2
in 1956, up to and including *The Dead Class* in 1975 ‘played with’ (Kantor’s phrase) Witkacy’s dramas in his theatre works. This obvious prominence of Witkacy in Kantor’s work has tended to obscure the fact that Schulz and Gombrowicz were also important, because, in a sense the influence of one implies the influence of all three due to the interconnectedness of their ideas in the 1930s. Despite the prominence of Witkacy in Kantor’s work there has been relatively little examination of this aesthetic relationship. Pleśniarowicz (2004) gives due weight to the importance of Witkacy in Kantor’s biography, and is so far the only author published in English to have attempted to disentangle the nature of the presence of Witkacy’s drama *Tumor Możgowicz* (Tumor Brianiowicz, 1921) in *The Dead Class*. However, his account tends to assume a familiarity with Witkacy’s work and is therefore relatively difficult to follow for the non-Polish-literate reader. So far Hyde and Gerould are the only Anglo-American authors to discuss the almost symbiotic relationship between the two artists’ work. As Gerould has commented:

what Kantor discovered in Witkiewicz was something that lies behind and beneath the dialogue and surface of the plays. He penetrated to their underlying rhythms and theatrical mechanisms, and it was these Witkacian secrets that Kantor assimilated and made his own. Thus, it was that in his productions of Witkacy Kantor revealed the deepest wellsprings of Witkacy’s art.

(Gerould 1995: 186)

Gerould goes on to catalogue some of Witkacy’s theatrical devices and inventions that can be seen to be used by Kantor in his own work:

1. The idea of the theatrical event as a dramatic séance and performance as a mediumistic summoning of the dead.
2. The risen corpse, returning to the world of the living not as a ghost but a normal human being.
3. The figure of the chthonic [belonging to the underworld] cook or servant in touch with the dark forces of death and given to ominous entrances and exits.
4. Mechanical doubles, cloned puppets, and marionettes.
5. The theatricality of packing and unpacking the human body.
6. A decorative principle of characterisation, based on repetition of gesture and sharply defined outline.

7. The use of trashy rhymes and doggerel verse.

(From Gerould 1985: 186–187)

In this list can be seen many of the characteristics not only of *The Dead Class*, but of all of Kantor’s post-Witkiewicz period productions which followed it, with their performers’ jerky and puppet-like manner of movement, the use of repetition in gesture and action, ‘trashy’ or nonsensical speech and dialogue, the fetishising of wrapping and packing. The return of the dead to the living was a trope that Kantor explicitly employed in a number of different forms from *The Dead Class* onwards. Following the return of the dead to their classroom in *The Dead Class*, Kantor staged a ‘return’ of his dead family to the family room in *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980, the repetition of the name in the title indicating the particular nature of the return). In *Let the Artists Die* (1985) General Piłsudski (the first leader of the Second Republic) and Veit Stoss (c1450–1533, the medieval Nuremberg artist who created the giant altarpiece in Kraków’s St Mary’s Basilica) ‘return’ from the Dead, as does Odysseus in *I Shall Never Return* (1988), and Jarema, Stern30 and Meyerhold in *Today is My Birthday* (1991). Finally the ‘chthonic’ figures of the Charlady (*The Dead Class*), the Photographer’s Widow (*Wielopole, Wielopole*), the Constructivist Innkeeper (*I Shall Never Return*)—along with various other figures—take on the role of mediating between the world of the living and the world of the dead. With this comprehensive assimilation of the elements of Witkacy’s aesthetic, Kantor, according to Gerould:

Disregarding the outer trappings of Witkacy’s dramas, grasped their inner physical theatricality, which corresponded closely with his own vision and production after production he demonstrated the power of these conceptions. It is thanks to Kantor that the most profound aspects of Witkacy’s art were realised on stage. Posthumously, Witkacy came back at Kantor’s bidding. That is how two artists could work together even after one of them had died. And need I say that, in collaborating with Witkacy, Kantor became uniquely himself?

30 Jarema and Stern were members of the original 1930s Cricot group of artists.
It is hard to deny that Witkacy’s aesthetic informs Kantor’s work in fundamental ways. In many ways a paradoxical figure, Witkacy, as noted above, had been an Officer in the Russian Imperial Army and was elected Political Commissar in his post-Tsarist regiment in February 1917 (see Gerould 1981: 13–14, and 1993: 77, and in Witkiewicz 1993a: 31). Despite his ‘revolutionary’ and avant-garde disposition as an artist, he was something of an anti-Constructivist, although he associated with the Formists in the early 1920s, in many ways a group somewhat aligned with Constructivist tendencies in Poland. His paintings could veer towards an extreme, somewhat Surrealist style, often informed by hallucinogenic drugs such as peyote, which he intentionally took to affect his work. Furthermore, as Hyde shows in his discussion of Witkacy’s Kurka Wodna (‘The Water Hen’) (1921), Witkacy transformed the themes of Polish Romanticism in particular ways which also informed Kantor’s work. In this way Witkacy may be seen as a key, and peculiarly Polish, source of Kantor’s Symbolist-Surrealist influence.

Witkacy developed an elaborate theory of art which he named Czysta Forma (‘Pure Form’), a complex theory, developed in opposition to the theory of ‘the multiplicity of reality’ (wielości rzeczywistości) in art developed by fellow artist Leon Chwistek (1884–1944)31 whose theories of form were heavily metaphysical in character (Bartelik 2005: 66). Pure Form was perhaps inspired in part by the Cubist and Futurist’s fragmentation of the pictorial plane into multiple ‘conflicting and interacting’ components (Hyde 1988: 721). However, Witkacy took this fragmentation further in applying it to dramatic form where, in his plays multiple realities and times collide in the same scenic space and the personal identity of dramatic characters ‘does not so much develop as mutate’ (ibid.), a strategy that tends to attack ‘the whole idea of one’s own unity and identity’ (Gerould in Witkiewicz 1989: xliii). The aim was for the work to operate on the spectator through the internal dynamics of its construction rather than through the reading of any discursive content of notional subject matter.

31 Chwistek was a philosopher and mathematician as well as a critic and painter. He was a member of the Formists, a group of artists active in Kraków between the world wars.
and to communicate a sense of ‘the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence’ (see Gerould’s Introduction in Witkiewicz 1989: xliii). This theory can be seen to have informed Kantor in significant ways apart from providing a source for the strategy of layering multiple realities within the stage space and the principle of using dynamic structure and rhythm as compositional devices rather than a conventional narrative approach.

Witkacy’s philosophical interests also provide one of the sources for the metaphysical and existential quality of Kantor’s work. Witkacy’s art, as Marek Bartelik amongst others has pointed out, was rooted in the ontological problem of human existence (Bartelik 2005: 54). In the face of the metaphysical anxiety concerning the strangeness of existence, Hyde argues, ‘Witkacy’s marionettes speak endlessly without communication, shut into the “formal” world of ritual gestures. They are simulacra of human beings straining to discover an image of themselves that might fit the facts’ (Hyde 1988: 721).

**Informe**

The matrix of influences brought to Kantor by Witkacy is related to similar concerns in the work of Gombrowicz and Schulz. These concerns may be related, although not unproblematically, to the concept defined in a short 1929 essay in *Documents* by Georges Bataille as *informe* or ‘formlessness’ (in 1985: 31). Each in their individual manner, Gombrowicz, Schulz and Witkacy independently developed this idea of the marginal-yet-powerful potentiality. Without explicitly identifying their focus on *informe*, for Hyde, it was these ‘three Polish writers of genius who constitute a kind of modernist pantheon’ and he saw Kantor as their direct successor (1990: 11). As he notes, the core idea of *The Dead Class*, Kantor’s key work that produced what Raczek called the ‘law of shock’ affecting both critics and audiences, was where:

> adults return to the schoolroom and rediscover their capacity for futile vindictiveness, aggression, competitiveness, owes much to Gombrowicz’s absurdist first novel, *Ferdydurke*, with its bitter celebration of

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32 The critical debate surrounding Bataille’s *informe* and its problematic relationship to *art informel* will be examined in more detail in chapter five.
humanity’s eternal attachment to its own immaturity, intensified in the face of an ignorant and obscurantist authority that tries to turn everyone into an eternal schoolboy. … Here is the ‘marginality’ of which Kantor says that it is central to the real experience of the modern world, where truth has retreated to the boundary. Schulz, for example, writes from within a world where not to be of the centre is the only tenable kind of centrality. His takes of provincial inertia and paralysis are at the same time celebrations of the power of the imagination: they confirm Walter Benjamin’s thesis that ‘Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience’. The life of Schulz’s characters (if they may be called characters) is lived somewhere between the Baudelainian extremes of ennui, spleen and ideal. It is as if modernist literature had found a local habitation and a name among the Jewish and Judeo-Christian communities of Polish Galicia.

(Hyde 1990: 11)

Perhaps this habitation lies within the domain mapped out by Bataille in his definition of Informe. As noted in chapter one, Kantor’s experience of the Nazi occupation of Kraków had a profound and enduring effect on his artistic sensibilities. This sensitivity to the provisional nature of existence informed Kantor’s visit to the Palais de la Découverte in Paris, which in turn fuelled his sense of the metamorphic qualities of space and matter. However, it would be a mistake to assume that this radical conception of reality came only from his experience. It is evidently present in the work of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, each in different ways. It is therefore not accidental that the three figures are cited by Kantor as being ‘participants in the performance’ of The Dead Class. For Gombrowicz, whose 1937 novel Ferdydurke, as noted by Hyde above, provides one of the sources for The Dead Class, informe was
immatuility, or greenness, a state of seething potentiality, unfinished and incomplete (Hyde 1988: 724). In Gombrowicz’s novel the adult hero is returned to this green state by being sent back to school, where the subversive and scatological anarchy of the playground with its games and rhymes stands for the idea of formlessness. Rules and the order of routine are required to contain this vitalistic force. This conception of the immaturity of youth as having a potent, subversive force owing to its state of incompleteness is given a more
poetic and sinister rendering in Gombrowicz’s 1960 novel *Pornografia*. Set in the Polish countryside during the Nazi occupation the novel hinges around the potential erotic attraction between two adolescents and how it is fuelled and used by the middle-aged narrator and his friend Frederick both for their own metaphysical entertainment and to achieve a political execution within the Resistance. There is a continued sense that beneath the surface appearance of reality, there are darker forces waiting to erupt in violent and unexpected ways and it is this force that is channelled and unleashed through the manipulation of the adolescents’ ‘unfinished’ state. This sense of a chaos, bubbling and fermenting beneath the surface of the respectable reality of society is further elaborated in what many regard as Gombrowicz’s masterpiece *Cosmos* (1965).

A similar sense of the marginal yet vital potentiality inherent in the underlying formlessness of space and matter also informs Schulz’s fictional writing and drawing. It is through the influence of Schulz, as I will argue in chapter five, that Kantor’s most profound sense of *informe* derives. The reasons for this are the correspondences between Schulz’s biographical situation and Kantor’s. It is worth remembering that Gombrowicz came from a wealthy background of landowners and estates and that Witkacy came from a relatively bohemian and privileged background and was deemed suitable as officer material for the Russian Imperial army. These two young men automatically had an entrée into Warsaw society and were able to move in literary circles with ease. Schulz, on the other hand, was part of the assimilated Jewish community in the provincial Galician town of Drohobycz, formally part of the Austro-Hungarian partition (part of Poland between the wars, then briefly Russian, then German and then finally Ukrainian). In his *Diaries* years later, Gombrowicz examines his assessment of the differences between himself and Schulz:

> Bruno was a man who was denying himself. I was a man seeking himself. He wanted annihilation. I wanted realization. He was born to be a slave. I was born to be a master. He wanted denigration. I wanted to be ‘above’ and ‘superior to’. He was of the Jewish race, I was from a family of Polish gentry.

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33 For details of Schulz’s biography see Ficowski 2002, chapter 2 ‘Bruno, Son of Jacob’.
Schulz’s background as the son of a cloth merchant was the relatively modest Jewish mercantile class of ‘small town shopkeepers and impoverished artisans’ (Ficowski 2002: 34) and he was forced to earn a living, even after his literary success in the mid-1930s, teaching drawing in the local school. It was his friend Debra Vogel who championed Schulz’s talent and, with the intervention of the sculptor Magdalena Gross, managed to encourage him to travel from Drohobycz to Warsaw for an introduction to the writer Zofia Nałkowska who found him his first publisher. In this sense Kantor has a more profound personal affinity with Schulz than with either Gombrowicz or Witkacy beyond that of their artistic influence. However, it is the particularities of Schulz’s assimilated Jewish background that make him especially pertinent to Kantor’s work. As a Jew Schulz did not speak Yiddish yet was fluent in Polish and German. Yet as a Jew he occupied the peculiar liminal ground of the assimilated: neither exactly Polish, nor exactly Jewish. For all the peculiarities of Witkacy’s and Gombrowicz’s lives, the particular dwelling in the near-zero identity of the liminality of Jewish assimilation—where either side of the dividing line is ‘other’—is a specific and poignant quality in Schulz’s peculiar aesthetic.

To continue Gombrowicz’s assessment from his Diaries:

No, he was not made to dominate! A tiny gnome with an enormous head, appearing too scared to dare exist, he was ejected from life and crouched along its peripheries. Bruno did not acknowledge his rights to exist, he sought his own annihilation—not that he wanted to commit suicide; he merely ‘strove’ for nonbeing with all his might (and this is precisely what made him, Heidegger-style, so sensitive to being). In my opinion there was no instinct that moves a sick animal to separate, remove itself. He was superfluous. He was extraneous. It is possible that his masochism also had a different aspect, I don't know, but it most certainly was homage paid to the powers of being that were trampling him.

(Ibid.: 6–7)

This quality intersects with Kantor’s life in three key areas. Firstly, his childhood living conditions in Wielopole, which, although much smaller, was a similarly provincial Galician milieu to that of Drohobycz, where Kantor lived, according to
his own report, ‘in the shadow of the church and the synagogue’ (Kantor interviewed in 1988, in Sawa 1990: 69). Secondly, his living conditions in Kraków during the time of Nazi occupation when he worked in a disused synagogue, lived for a time next to the Jewish ghetto wall and was frequently mistaken as a Jew by certain elements on the street, and where he learned of his estranged father’s murder in Auschwitz. And thirdly, the period of the early 1970s when he was beginning to formulate the ideas for his ‘theatre of death’ and The Dead Class, where Schulz tangibly returns as a ‘participant of the performance’ alongside Gombrowicz and Witkacy and lends to that performance, and to those subsequently, a particular quality. These three key periods in Kantor’s life each echo aspects of Schulz’s biography and work. In the case of the childhood and occupation periods Kantor’s situation mirrors, to an extent, positive and negative forms of liminality respectively, whilst it is Kantor’s approach to old age during the 1970s that triggers a turn towards Schulz’s aesthetic and temporal strategy of challenging death through a return to childhood that so permeates the latter’s work.

There is a further sense in which Schulz ‘fits’ Kantor as the model of a creative artist in terms of both his work and his personal philosophy of the act of creation. This is the sense in which both artists see their role as one of acting as a messenger or intermediary between spirit and matter. In his diaries Gombrowicz refutes this aspect of Schulz:

Hermes, Sandauer calls him. No, no, to my mind there wasn’t much Hermes in him; he was useless as an intermediary between spirit and matter. In fact, his perverse attitude to being (the Heideggerian question ‘Why does Something and not Nothing exist?’ could be the motto of his work) resulted in the fact that matter for him became illuminated by the spirit, and the spirit was incarnated, but this Hermes-like process is spiced with the desire to ‘debilitate’ being: matter is corrupt, diseased, or insidiously hostile, or mystifying, and the spiritual world is transformed into an utterly sensual phantasmagoria of color and light, its spiritual purpose is corrupted. To replace existence with half-existence, or with the appearance of existence—such were Bruno’s secret dreams. He also wanted to weaken matter as well as
spirit. We often discussed various moral and social issues but behind everything he said crouched the passivity of someone brought to ruin. As an artist he was completely fixed in the very material of his work, in his own game and internal arrangements, when he wrote a story he had no other law beyond the immanent law of the unfolding form. A false ascetic, sensuous saint, lascivious monk, nihilistic fullfiller. And he knew this.

(Ibid.: 8)

But Gombrowicz (despite correctly noting Schulz’s proximity to Heidegger) is surely incorrect in his dismissal of Artur Sandauer’s assessment in his 1964 essay ‘Rzeczywistość zdegradowana (Rzecz o Brunonie Schulzu)’ (Degraded Reality—A Study of Bruno Schulz). In this essay Sandauer cites Thomas Mann’s view that ‘the artist is a kind of Hermes midway between the lower and upper realm, between the subconscious and consciousness, body and spirit’ (Sandauer 1971: 96; my translation), and describes the figure of the artist as ‘one who descended into the underworld of instinct, to the most material layers of personality—and brings them out, dripping with darkness, into the light of day’ (Ibid.; my translation). Later in the essay he then explicitly identifies Schulz as ‘a kind of Hermes […] “using heretical and illicit methods” […] an artist-Hermes circulating between light and darkness’ (Ibid.: 96 and 99; my translation). Kantor too, in his location of his art in the regions of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and his use of ‘heretical and illicit methods’ in assisting in the passage of his art of the ‘poor object’ across this ‘garbage dump’ of form from eternity into the world—the manner in which he renders the concreteness of his objects and environments meaningful—can also be seen in the role of Hermes the messenger. Although Kantor may not share Schulz’s particular masochistic tendencies (or at least not in an entirely or overtly erotic form) he nevertheless, in his own particular way, shares in this messenger-like role. This is a role that, as I will discuss in chapter four, is far from straightforward.

It is therefore the tacit presence of Schulz in Kantor’s work that I recognise as most important as a vital influence, and one so far insufficiently acknowledged and explored. To return to Benjamin’s notion that ‘all genuine works of art have their siblings in the realm of philosophy’: I would argue that
artists and writers too can realise, through their work, philosophical concerns and be siblings to each other. In this sense, in terms of artistic influence within Kantor’s own culture, I see Schulz as the true ‘artistic sibling’ of Kantor’s art, and that Gombrowicz and Witkacy are at the very least only half-, possibly only ‘step-brothers’. Schulz is aesthetically for Kantor what Heidegger is philosophically. Kantor may have ‘played’ with Witkacy, and this may have defined his theatrical work between 1955 and 1973, but he is not, essentially, ‘Witkacian’. He may have designed for official theatre productions of Gombrowicz’s plays, and harboured desires to produce his own productions of Gombrowicz’s work, but he is not, essentially, ‘Gombrowiczian’. However, in the centrality of the particular form of formlessness that is articulated by his ideas of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and the ‘poor object’ and their combination in his late work in the form of his ‘poor little room of the imagination’, I argue that Kantor is, essentially, ‘Schulzian’.

**The aims of this study**

The peculiarity of Kantor’s work therefore lies in the use he makes of a combination of personal memory and Polish nationality together with his idiosyncratic interpretation of a variety of historical avant-garde strategies ranging from Symbolism to Constructivism. This is a mixture that has markedly metaphysical resonances. I have also already noted that some of the apparent difficulty and randomness in Kantor’s work, for an Anglo-American spectator can, in part, be understood as a typically Polish strategy for dealing with German occupation and Stalinist annexation. What I want to show is that Kantor’s metaphysical and mystical tendencies are comprehensible when placed in a historical context of Polish experience and the intellectual history of Kantor’s lifetime together with key aspects of his biography. This clarification can then be used to generate greater insight into the major performance works of Kantor’s later life. I will argue that, while this work was ‘understood’ by audiences around the world on an intuitive level, it is possible to make the mechanisms of Kantor’s work more extant by using such a contextualising strategy. The simultaneous aim of this thesis, however, is to show how the
specificities of Kantor’s historical situation also reach outwards, to questions and dilemmas that affect human being.

An obvious question is why hasn’t such a contextualising strategy already been accomplished? There have been a variety of reasons for the relative lack of success to date in this regard. There has been a lack of detailed discussion around the subject of the Holocaust as an influence on Kantor’s work. The implications of the biographical details concerning Kantor’s living situation during the Nazi occupation have yet to be fully considered. Related to the issue of the Holocaust, the complex and problematic situation of the Jewish presence in Poland has also so far received little attention in relation to Kantor. This is especially pertinent to my argument given the centrality of the Jewish writer and artist Schulz in Kantor’s work, which despite Hyde’s 1988 essay and Pleśnjarowicz’s coverage of this area (2004, the fullest to date), has not been sufficiently foregrounded. As I discuss in chapter five, there is a far deeper influence from Schulz than has previously been acknowledged (apart, perhaps, from Kantor himself). Together this matrix of contexts will illuminate Kantor’s work.
CHAPTER 3. THE ONTOLOGICAL CONTEXT: JUST ‘PULLING FACES AT THE AUDIENCE’? THE PROBLEM OF RESPONSE TO KANTOR’S WORK

Introduction
In 1985 Andrzej Żurowski, the then head of the Polish section of the International Association of Theatre Critics, published an essay in New Theatre Quarterly entitled “Pulling Faces at the Audience”: the Lonely Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor. The essay makes a refreshing change from much of the discourse on Kantor to date as in it (as noted in the previous chapter) Żurowski attempts to temper the awe in which Kantor had begun to be held since the premiere of his 1975 performance work The Dead Class. Żurowski’s essay takes the form of a critique of some of the peculiarities of Kantor’s work and particularly questions ‘some of the premises behind the creator’s presence on his own stage’ (1985: 364). Żurowski’s essential point is that in including himself within the performance work in this way, Kantor creates a problematic doubling of roles. However, as I will show, such a criticism can itself be seen to be based on a tacit conceptual assumption: the idea that there is already a ‘doubling’ between reality and appearance. This conceptual assumption of a ‘double reality’—a ‘real’ reality that lies behind or beneath the surface veils of ‘apparent’ reality occurs in the development of ideas concerning representation within the history of the metaphysical tradition. This tradition stretches from Plato to what Derrida has termed, in his discussion of Heidegger’s ‘The Age of the World Picture’, a ‘subjectivity of the Cartesian-Hegelian type’ (Derrida 2007: 107). Such conceptual assumptions have remained prevalent to date despite the influence of Heidegger’s radical critique of representation and the prominence of certain strands of post-Heideggerian discourse that seek to develop it.


Kantor, from early on,\textsuperscript{36} was directly opposed to the idea of representation in the sense that conceives of the work of art as a ‘mirror’ of reality. In a conversation in 1972 with Miklaszewski, Kantor remarked that ‘The autonomous theatre I have in mind is a theatre which does not take the form of a reproducing apparatus, i.e., a scientific interpretation of literature, but possesses its own independent reality’ (Kantor in Miklaszewski 2002: 10). According to the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou, in his \textit{Handbook of Inaesthetics} (2005: 3–4) the Aristotelian revision of this apparatus lies in the recognition in mimesis of its own mimetic essence—that it does not purport to be ‘truth’, that ‘the \textit{purpose [destination]} of art is not in the least truth’ (Ibid.: 4; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, although this mimetic conception of art may have been tamed in Aristotle’s conception, as enshrined by Hamlet’s advice to the Players the idea retains elements of its Platonic origins. As I will discuss in more detail below, Plato’s famous critique of art in Book X of \textit{The Republic} proposed that art was merely the thirdhand imitation of reality and the artist essentially merely a charlatan and faker. In his zeal on this central issue Kantor developed an aesthetic strategy that, I will argue, can be understood to equal the radicalism of Heidegger’s critique. This argument can be illuminated from the perspective of Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian philosophy and especially in recent discourse, particularly that of Agamben. When aspects of Kantor’s artistic strategy are examined in the light of the implications of the radical perspective from this Heideggerian tradition, it becomes possible, I will argue, to better understand the Kantorian pronouncements that Żurowski finds so distracting and contextualise them in both his life and work as a whole: to understand that Kantor was not ‘pulling faces at the audience’ with his work and that the ‘loneliness’ of his ‘theatre’ was, and continues to be, a symptom of the radical nature of the artist and his work. Before examining Żurowski’s essay in detail, I

\textsuperscript{36} It is apparent from comments about his education as an art student at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts that Kantor was unhappy with the conventional conception of art as a mirror held up to reality. This is probably what led him to take refuge from the more traditional professors and the hegemony of Post-Impressionism and place himself under the guidance of the more radically oriented professor of stage design Karol Frycz. Kantor’s early experiments with Constructivism, the Bauhaus and abstraction generally can be viewed as a strategy of rebellion against the idea of art-as-copy (see, for example, Borowski 1982: 19, Pleśniarowicz 1997: 29–31 and 2004: 23–29).
will first trace some of the issues concerning the idea of representation from a Heideggerian perspective.

**A critique of representation**

Following Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of the post-Platonic tradition, there has been a trend in continental philosophy to offer critiques of the representational basis of Western metaphysics. Such critiques form the tenor of the ‘existenz-philosophie’ underlying the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Badiou. Whilst not normally regarded under the common banner of Existentialism, all of these philosophers prioritise the *performative* character of being over notions of its *substantial* or *essentialist* character: of *doing* as the basis of *being*. As the Nietzschean formulation in the thirteenth section of the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* famously states: ‘[…] there is no “being” behind the doing, acting, becoming’ (Nietzsche 1998: 29).

Such an *existentialist* ontology would appear to be radically at odds with the *representational* theory of being and the implications of this difference are still being explored. The theory of representation is enshrined in Plato’s allegory of the cave in Book X of *The Republic* (514a–520a). In this allegory the ordinary experience of reality is likened to the situation of the experience of apparent reality available to prisoners trapped in a cave. Bound and forced to look only in one direction the prisoners see shadows cast on the cave wall by the light of a fire burning behind them. Sounds issue from behind the prisoners and reflect back to them from the cave wall, and the prisoners perceive these as coming from the shadows on the wall. Thus their assumption is that the apparitions of shadows and echoing sounds are not shadows or echoes but reality itself. (Plato’s allegory, which seems so elegant when reduced to its common formula of ‘our reality is but a shadow of the real’, becomes ludicrously unworkable and incredible when analysed in any practical detail. For example: who are the prisoners? How do they eat, drink, attend to their bodily functions, or reproduce? What is the status of the puppeteers: captors or subjects? And, if the Sun stands for ‘Truth’ or ‘God’, who or what is in charge of the Cave’s
arrangements?) However, as Heidegger has shown in his essay ‘Plato’s Doctrine of Truth’ (1998b), the detail is important, for the prisoners and their perception of shadows are but one small part of a larger conceptual whole. It is in Heidegger’s analysis of this whole that ‘representation’ can be understood in a non-representational way. As Plato’s dialogue itself is at pains to point out, this second-hand reality is at a further remove from ‘true’ reality because the origin of the shadows is not reality itself, but a model of reality performed by puppeteers operating behind the screen of a wall between the fire and the prisoners’ backs. Thus the shadow of a horse cast onto the cave wall and perceived by the prisoners as a ‘real’ horse, is not the shadow of an actual horse at all, but the shadow of a model of a horse. In Plato’s model, true reality is not in the fire-lit realm of the cave, but in the world outside the cave illuminated by the sun, the only source of ‘true’ or ‘real’ light; the fire is in fact a second-rate substitute for the sun. The prisoners’ reality is therefore a subset of a subset of reality: it is not ‘not-reality’ but rather just one of the ‘“realities”-within-reality’ in the economy of the allegory as a whole. Heidegger, in his 1940 essay ‘Plato’s Doctrine of Truth’ analysing this allegory describes its initial interpretation in traditional representational terms:

The cavelike abode is the ‘image’ for τὴν … δι ἄνευς φανομένης ἔδραν, ‘the place of our dwelling which (in an everyday way) is revealed to sight as we look around.’ The fire in the cave, which burns above those who dwell there, is the ‘image’ for the sun. The vault of the cave represents the dome of the heavens. People live under this dome, assigned to the earth and bound to it. What surrounds and concerns them there is, for them, ‘the real’ [‘das Wirkliche’], i.e., that which is. In this cavelike dwelling they feel that they are ‘in the world’ and ‘at home’ and here they find what they can rely on.

(Heidegger 1998d: 164)
However, this ‘image’ of reality is given a narrative dimension in the dialogue recounting ‘a story of passages from one dwelling place to another. Thus this story is divided in a general way into a series of four different dwelling places in specific gradations of up and down’ (Ibid.: 168). Heidegger goes on to detail these four stages:

1. The condition of imprisonment in which ‘People live chained inside the cave engrossed in what they immediately encounter’ (Ibid.: 168).

2. The initial unchaining of a prisoner who although still confined to the cave, is now free to turn around and perceive the immediate source of the shadow-reality (Ibid.: 168).

3. The leading of the prisoner out of the cave and ‘into the open’ (Ibid.: 169).

4. ‘The return to the cave and the battle waged within the cave between the liberator and the prisoners who resist all liberation […]’ (Ibid.: 171).

Thus, what is often reduced to an ‘image’ of reality, merely an implied simile that reality ‘is like’ the condition of prisoners in a cave who perceive shadows as real, becomes, when taken in its narrative context, a more complex whole. This narrative articulation, according to Heidegger’s reading, opens up the possibility for a nonrepresentational interpretation of the allegory:

This ‘allegory’ can have the structure of a cave image at all only because it is antecedently co-determined by the fundamental experience of ἀλήθεια [alētheia], the unhiddenness of beings, which was something self-evident for the Greeks. For what else is the underground

37 In this thesis I try to remain aware of a potential distinction between ‘image’ and ‘representation’ following the analysis that derives from the understanding of ‘image’ in icons, which will form a later theme in chapter six. Unfortunately, as Derrida (2007) has observed, the term ‘representation’ is inherently ambiguous and translation strategies unavoidably compound the problem. An ‘image’ understood in terms of iconography is not a ‘representation’ in the sense of a ‘copy’, or ‘imitation’ in the pejorative sense. An iconic image is something that partakes directly with its ‘original’ via an unbroken connection. It is therefore not something separate from its source but rather a direct extension of it, in the same sense that a river is not separate from its source. The interpretation of ‘representation’ has a direct bearing on the concepts of ‘art’, ‘artist’ and ‘spectator’ as I will argue later.

38 The importance of ‘the open’ will be further explored later, particularly in chapter seven.
cave except something open in itself that remains at the same time covered by a vault and, despite the entrance, walled off and enclosed by the surrounding earth? This cave-like enclosure that is open within itself, and that which it surrounds and therefore hides, both refer at the same time to an outside, the unhidden that is spread out in the light above ground. Only the essence of truth understood in the original Greek sense of ἀλήθεια—the unhiddenness that is related to the hidden (to something dissembled and disguised)—has an essential relation to this image of an underground cave.

(Heidegger 1998d: 172)

When understood from the perspective of its narrative totality, Plato’s allegory can be seen to be concerned not with a representational account of reality, but with an account that is at pains to lay out the ground for the conditions of reality such that appearances can be deceptive as part of the natural order of things. However, Plato’s enduring image of the cave has instead come to be understood as the representation of reality as representation. This is not, of course the only possible interpretation of the allegory, as Heidegger was at pains to point out, but its interpretation in this one particular direction was cemented by other aspects of Plato’s argument.

In the allegory of the divided line (The Republic 509d–513e) existence is divided principally into the visible and the invisible, and it is made clear that ‘true’ reality lies in the upper portion of the line, the invisible world of the eidei, the αἱ ἱδέαι—‘forms’ or ‘ideas’—that are alone the true origin of all appearances. The forms are, therefore, the originary substance, the true essence of the beings that appear in the world. In the notorious critique of art at the end of The Republic (Book X, 595a–607b) after the allegories of the cave and the line, all art is portrayed as being of ontologically low rank on the basis of it being a copy-of-a-copy. The famous analogy of the bed is invoked in which the ‘real’ bed is the ‘form’ or ‘idea’ of a bed, of which there is but one. Then there is ‘the bed made by the carpenter’, which is a copy of the original idea and of which there can be many. Lastly, occupying the ontological bottom rung of this ladder

of representational being is the painter’s representation of a bed in the painting: a copy of a copy. In this scheme the artists’ efforts are doubly suspect because they are not only twice removed from the truth, but also because, it is argued, they are actively attempting to appear real. There is therefore a suspicion of fraud that taints the artist in the Republic, and this is one of the reasons that artists and poets were to be excluded from the ideal state (Book III: 398a).

**The ethical implications of representation**

What is at stake in the Platonic ontology of representation is not just the downgrading of art as imitation but an ontological understanding that creates the possibility for the deprivation of human being itself. This representational ontology can be seen to underwrite Agamben’s concept of bare life, the figure of the homo sacer and Kantor’s aesthetics of the poor object and the reality of the lowest rank (to be discussed in more detail in chapter five). In the Platonic scheme art is characterised as ontologically inferior precisely to protect the source of truth, the forms, as the archē—the origin—of all things. Under this conception ‘Truth’ cannot reside in the world of appearances. The forms are the true substance of reality—the guarantors of authentic being and, according to Platonic metaphysics, they lie beyond appearances in the realm of ideas. The fact that Aristotelian philosophy ‘internalises’ this doctrine of form by combining it with substances occurring within nature does not remove the problems of representational ontology. Substance, the first and most fundamental of Aristotle’s ten categories and the essence of being, still lies hidden beneath the veil of appearances. So, although for Aristotelian ontology and for the Stoics and Epicureans who followed, imitation and representation were not regarded as necessarily ontologically suspect, the doctrine of a substance that somehow lay potentially concealed by appearance nevertheless persisted and survived. In the Modern era a particular form of dualistic doctrine became associated with the work of the French philosopher René Descartes who is often seen to have
inaugurated it.\textsuperscript{40} This ‘Cartesian’ doctrine reformed Aristotle’s dualistic system of hylomorphism (the doctrine that every thing is a combination of matter and form or soul) with a psychophysical substance dualism that reconceptualised the soul and limited it to the human mind. In one sense this can be seen as a combining of features of Platonism and Aristotelianism, with the Cartesian conception of the mind, the descendant of Plato’s forms, having its origin in God, whilst matter came to be seen as wholly the product of nature (although, of course, having its ultimate origin in the Divine, which sets it in motion as part of creation). Descartes’ revision of Aristotelian metaphysics performed a particular internalisation of the essence of human being: this essence, he famously reasoned, was a non-physical soul or mind, \textit{res cogitans}, a ‘thinking substance’ unique to human being. Everything else was \textit{res extensa}, ‘extended substance’ (see \textit{Sixth Meditation} in Cottingham et al. 1984: 54). Although Descartes later struggled to reassert a form of psychophysical unity to human being, famously in his letters to Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, his earlier rationalisation of Aristotle’s metaphysics left a vivid image of human being as an incorporeal soul housed within a mechanical-animal body.\textsuperscript{41} The essential substance of the individual human being, the soul, remained hidden, while the world of material objects was governed by the internal mechanical movement of minute corpuscles (the particles or atoms of matter). The outward form of objects concealed this internal movement, that had been set in motion originally by God. Human being itself, however, became a rationalising conscious presence that interacted with this mechanical world of material objects, which it represented to itself through the sensory mechanisms of its material animal-

\textsuperscript{40} In recent scholarship ‘Cartesian Dualism’ has been increasingly thought of as a ‘foundling child’, that is, that the idea was ‘abroad’ in Northern European intellectual circles before Descartes articulated it in his \textit{Discourse on Method} (1637) and \textit{Meditations on First Philosophy} (1641). See John Cottingham (ed.) (1992) \textit{Cambridge Companion to Descartes} and Jonathan Sawday (1995) \textit{The Body Emblazoned. The Culture of Dissection in the Renaissance}: 158 and 296, ff. 18.

\textsuperscript{41} Paradoxically, although Descartes actually wrote in the \textit{Sixth Meditation}, ‘that I [i.e. his mind or soul] am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship [the translators note that the French version has ‘… as a pilot in his ship’], but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit’ (Cottingham et al 1984: 56), it is the contrary view of the ‘I’ or ‘soul’ lodged in the mechanical body exactly like a pilot in a ship but separate from it that has prevailed.
robot body. The *substance* of human being in the modern age now resided in its incorporeal, God-given soul, hidden within a mechanical body. As Descartes observed in his *Second Meditation*:

> But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves […]. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.

(Descartes in: Cottingham et al 1984: 11)

In essence, Descartes’ metaphysics of human being can also be seen as a particular internalisation of Plato’s image of the cave (and one that attempts to disentangle the mingling of soul and matter in Aristotle’s doctrine of hylomorphism): where, for Plato’s prisoners, the representational mechanism was played out in the cave, in Descartes’ schema, it is mediated via the bodily senses, which must be interpreted by the soul or mind. Although both extended and thinking substances are theoretically united in God as their source, the newly *subjective* experience of human being is fragmented into each body-trapped soul.

Why does the conception of substance matter? The answer is because, as Heidegger and the followers of this motif in his work have observed, the development of the concept of substance in Western metaphysics has occurred in a manner that means it has become inseparable from the concept of representation, as Jacques Derrida has observed in his 1980 address ‘Envoi’: ‘It is thus only in the modern period (Cartesian or post-Cartesian) that what-is is determined as an object present *before* and *for* a subject in the form of *repraesentatio* or *Vorstellen*’ (Derrida 2007: 105). This dissociation of substance from appearance, what Agamben has called ‘that original fracture of presence’ (Agamben 1993a: 136), is demonstrated in Descartes’ example

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42 In this sense, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Spinoza are as one in that for all of them, in essence, the fundamental substance of all things is the primary Being of God.
above of seeing in the street no more than ‘hats and coats which could conceal automatons’. It is a dissociation or fracture that means that being can apparently only be mediated by potentially misleading representation. When this happens, being becomes subject to representation, and in this, subjectification enters a labyrinth of confusion in which it becomes extremely vulnerable. This problem arises, as Charles Guignon observes in his discussion of Heidegger’s critique of representation, because ‘concealment occurs when a particular form of presenting come to be taken as the ultimate truth about things’ (2006b: 18). For Heidegger, being, understood principally in terms of its appearance, ‘cloaks itself as appearance insofar as it shows itself up as being’ (Heidegger 1987: 109). In this way, as Guignon points out:

what shows up at a particular time presents itself as the last word about reality, as the ‘only game in town,’ with the result that the current epoch’s interpretation of reality comes to be taken as self-evident and beyond discussion.

(Guignon 2006b: 19)

The point for Heidegger in his *destruktion* of Western metaphysics was to liberate the idea of being from the totalising hegemony of the post-Platonic tradition of representational metaphysics. This representational tradition as Derrida, amongst others has argued, has led directly to:

the substitution of subjects identifiable with one another and all the more replaceable in that they are objectifiable (and here we have the other side of the democratic and parliamentary ethics of representation, that is to say, the horror of calculable subjectivities, innumerable but that can be numbered, computed, the crowds in concentration camps or in the computers of the police or other agencies, the world of the masses and the mass media, which would also be a world of calculable and representable subjectivity, the world of semiotics, of computer science, and of communications).

(Derrida 2007: 113)

As an example of the horrible power of the ethics of representation one particular testimony recorded by Charles Reznikoff in his documentary poem *Holocaust* will perhaps suffice:
The commander of a camp, among his amusements, as in other camps had a large dog and at the cry of ‘Jude,’ that is, ‘Jew,’ the dog would attack the man and tear off pieces of flesh. In another camp, the Jews who had just come kept seeing a dog—the dog belonged to the S.S. man in charge of the ‘showers,’ that is, the gas chambers; the S.S. man would call the dog ‘Mensch,’ that is, ‘man,’; and whenever he set the dog on a Jew he would say, ‘Man, get that dog!’

(Reznikoff 2010: 53)

As Himmler argued in his reflections on racial theory in 1939: ‘we must not endow these people with decent German thoughts and logical conclusions of which they are not capable, but we must take them as they really are’ (cited in Davies 1981: 445). The idea of a people being taken ‘as they really are’ could not exist without its basis in substance ontology. To be taken ‘as they really are’ in this case meant to be taken as non-human, as lacking that essence of human being that would entitle them to equal treatment with the truly German. In Descartes’ time physiologists, and it is rumoured, even Descartes himself, felt perfectly able to vivisect a dog, ignoring its cries under the knife as being merely the reflex product of an animal-robot mechanism: animals, and therefore dogs, did not have souls and therefore any apparently ‘emotional’ display was merely an appearance and had no basis in subjective substance. In their account of German racial policies of the early 1940s, Of Pure Blood (1976), Marc Hillel and Clarissa Henry observe that in order to ‘avoid mistakes which might subsequently occur in the selection of subjects suitable for “Germanization”,’ the RuSHA [Rasse und Siedlungshauptamt, Head Office for Race and Settlement] in 1942 distributed a pamphlet, The Sub-Human [Der Untermensch], to those responsible for that selection (Hillel and Henry 1976: 32). This pamphlet stated:

The sub-human, that biologically seemingly complete similar creation of nature with hands, feet and a kind of brain, with eyes and a mouth, is nevertheless a completely different,
dreadful creature. He is only a rough copy of a human being, with human-like facial traits but nonetheless morally and mentally lower than any animal. Within this creature there is a fearful chaos of wild, uninhibited passions, nameless destructiveness, the most primitive desires, the nakedest vulgarity. Sub-human, otherwise nothing. For all that bear a human face are not equal. Woe to him who forgets it.

(Quoted in Hillel and Henry 1976: 32)

For the German state in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the biopolitical representation of certain races apparently made possible a form of treatment not unlike Descartes’ (possibly apocryphal) treatment of a dog. The metaphysics of representation opened up the possibility of a world of metamorphoses in which gas chambers were turned into showers, dogs became ‘men’, and Jews were first turned into animals before being further metamorphosed into lampshades and soap: the labyrinth of representation in which ‘human being’ becomes lost. As I will discuss further in chapter five, Kantor’s direct experience of the reality of the Nazi treatment of the Jews in occupied Kraków was of critical importance in the formation of his aesthetic.

For the subjects caught up in this labyrinth of representation one form of resistance was to subvert representational ontology itself. One model for such a non-, or anti-representational strategy lies in Heidegger’s alternative reading of Plato informed by the perspective of pre-Socratic philosophy. This sees being in more performative terms, as a dynamic process of concealment and unconcealment. In Heidegger’s revision Being—in the sense of kosmos, the totality of all that exists—becomes the generator of truth such that individual beings—such as you, I, and the other apparent objects in the world—each

43 I am aware of the terrible irony that the model I am proposing for the resistance of representational atrocities perpetrated in the name of the German Nazi party comes from someone who was, however briefly, an early member of that party. However, as Derrida has noted ‘The problem opened up by Heidegger is to my knowledge the only one today to treat representation as a whole’ (Derrida 2007: 114).

44 This strategy attempts to re-think Plato as he may have been operating in the intellectual climate of his time, where the ideas of the pre-Socratic philosophers, dominated by Parmenides and Heraclitus, held sway un-eclipsed by the institutionalised tradition of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics through which the Western tradition has subsequently come to view the field. The pre-Socratics fragments are used by Heidegger and those working in his tradition as critical levers to pry open and loosen traditional post-Platonic interpretations of Plato’s thought.
participate equally in the shared clearing of Being itself. In this way, truth becomes not something fixed that can inhere in the individual being’s substance —be it abstract form, or hylomorphic entity—an essence that had to be discerned as to whether or not it was in agreement with its appearance. Instead truth becomes something generated through the performance of Being and beings as a whole. Just as the image of Plato’s allegory of the cave is a condensation of a narrative whole, so the representations of human being as a ‘this’ or a ‘that’ are but versions of an image that condenses the essence of human being from a larger temporal whole. The implications of this ontological scheme are such as to undercut representational ontology as a whole and touch a range of fields apparently unconnected. As Derrida has noted: ‘The same chain, if we assume that its consequences hang together and if we follow the development of the Heideggerian motif, traverses a certain system of political, pictorial, theatrical, or aesthetic representation in general’ (Derrida 2007: 113). An understanding of this reorientation of perspective on human being will, I will argue, help illuminate the apparent peculiarities of Kantor’s art. This is an art that exploited the strategies of both the first and second avant-gardes to détourner a particular representation of certain categories of human being. In this way Kantor’s art serves as a form of resistance to the pejorative representation of these certain categories as ‘rough copies’, as a formless and ‘fearful chaos of wild, uninhibited passions, nameless destructiveness, the most primitive desires, the nakedest vulgarity’: the category branded as ‘Sub-human, otherwise nothing’. Kantor’s art is one that features in painting, in sculptural objects, in happenings and in theatrical performances, multiple doublings of human figures, both in the flesh and in wax, bodies wrapped and bandaged, space, matter, character and plot ‘minced’ into formlessness; form rendered into nothing, but a nothing that is paradoxically yet something.

45 The term is from déroutement, ‘hijacking’, which can be interpreted as the turning of something from its initial purposes to one’s own (see Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman 1956). Debord (1995) later stated: ‘The device of déroutement restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths—or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies’ (thesis 206 in Debord 1995: 144–145). See also Wark 2011: 35 and 37–38.
The ἔθος (ēthos) of human being

The peculiarities of Kantor’s work, with its apparently fragmented presentation of human being, and its confusion between human being and inanimate objects, can be understood as an attempt to articulate the nature of human being in the Heideggerian sense outlined above. This is evident in the work produced throughout Kantor’s career but particularly in the performance works made during his last years: the five major performance spectacles made between 1975 and 1990. In these performances, which I will collectively refer to (following Pleśniarowicz in his 2004 book) as his ‘theatre of death’, a Heideggerian sense of human being is most clearly articulated. This sense of being remains, however, firmly grounded in Kantor’s wartime experience and receives a chief impetus from it, as I will argue in more detail in chapter five. Far from being pessimistic, as their collective title ‘theatre of death’ would suggest, this account celebrates both the paradoxical frailty and greatness of human being in all its contingent quotidian detail. In its own way, Kantor’s artistic output is more Comedia (in the sense of Dante’s epic poem) than Tragedia. In this attempt Kantor can be seen to be following Heidegger’s radical re-conceptualisation of human being as Dasein, a concept developed to focus on the proper place or dwelling of human being. Towards the end of his ‘Letter on “Humanism”’ Heidegger discusses the relationship between ontology and ethics by way of an analysis of Heraclitus’ fragment 119 in which he argues for a radical rereading:

The saying of Heraclitus (Fragment 119) goes ἔθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμον [ēthos anthropōi daimōn]. This is usually translated, ‘A man’s character is his daimon.’ This translation thinks in a modern way, not a Greek one. ἔθος means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which the human being dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to the essence of the human being, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. The abode of the human being contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to human being in his essence. According to Heraclitus’s phrase this is δαίμον [daimōn], the god. The fragment says: The human being dwells, insofar as he is a human being, in the nearness of god.

(Heidegger 1998c: 269)
Heraclitus’s fragment has been variously translated as ‘One’s bearing shapes one’s fate’ (Haxton in Heraclitus 2001: 83) or ‘Man’s character is his fate’ (Kahn 1979: 81), the connotation being that personal character traits will determine what will happen to an individual. Such a translation is clearly grounded in a representational ontology in which individual subjects are at the mercy of some inner substance in the form of ‘character’. Heidegger’s originary interpretation of ἔθος as ‘abode’ or ‘dwelling place’ instead of ‘bearing’ or ‘character’, upsets this familiar truism and immediately places human being within a more Nietzschean framework. Such a repositioning proposes an existentially performative ontology of human being, rather than one of an essentialist-substantialist nature. Similarly, the translation of daimōn as ‘the god’, or ‘the unfamiliar one’, forces a reorientation of the idea of ‘fate’. Later in the same essay, Heidegger refines his translation still further to read: ‘The (familiar) abode for humans is the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one)’ (Heidegger 1998c: 271). Rather than a trite moral proverb, Heraclitus’s fragment begins to be revealed as an ontological statement about the space or place in which human being exists. Heidegger’s bringing into relation of the familiar and the unfamiliar, human being and ‘god’, upsets the conventionally unidirectional manner in which human being is thought of with respect to time: here the finite, human being, is brought into close proximity with the eternal, ‘god’.

The conventional idea that human being consists of an individual’s experiencing of a string of ‘nows’ strung like pearls along the forward-arcing linear reach of time does not always agree with actual experience. As Kantor shows in his ‘theatre of death’ (and as I will discuss in more detail in the next section in relation to memory), human being is circumscribed in eternity by its finitude, but within this bubble of time, an increasingly ‘dead’ past, is illuminated and animated by the act of memory within which the play of being exists. Dasein, or human being, is, literally, being ‘here’ or ‘there’. This dwelling place is not only always ‘now’, but also always ‘then’. However, the ‘then’ is, in its pastness and deadness, always a harbinger of the ‘when’, the fact of finitude, the fact of death.
The conventional idea of death is of an end awaiting the individual at some point in the future. However, in his discussion of a related fragment (Fragment 25) the Heraclitean commentator, Charles H. Kahn, discusses the translation of the Greek word *moira* in its relation to the concept of death in a way that complements Heidegger’s reading of *ēthos*:

The meaning of *moros* as ‘portion’ or ‘lot’ survives only in a few technical uses; from Homer on, the term acquires the literary sense of ‘doom’ or ‘violent death’. The cognate *moira* does have a wide range of uses in which the etymological value is preserved: ‘part’, ‘share’, ‘fraction’, hence ‘allotted region’, ‘territory’, or ‘share of esteem’, ‘social class’. But *moira* in poetry characteristically refers to the personal fate of a man, his allotted share of life delimited by the moment of death.

(Kahn 1979: 231–232)

The idea of *moira*, or death, as defining the *ēthos*—the dwelling of human being—offers a radically different view of death, and in turn informs Heidegger’s account of *Dasein*. If the dwelling place of human being is not, in essence, a home in the normal domestic sense of a house or a flat, but rather ‘the open region’ ‘in the nearness of god’, then this ‘region’ is surely *Dasein*’s ‘allotted share of life’. In this sense ‘death’ is another manner of thinking about *ēthos*, which, in turn is itself another manner of thinking about the nature of human being. In this manner of thinking, human being, or *Dasein*, is not an individual in the present, but that individual’s history and potential as well.

Agamben, in his essay ‘*Se*: Hegel’s Absolute and Heidegger’s *Ereignis*’ (in Agamben 1999c: 116–137), offers further reflections on Heidegger’s reading of the Heraclitus fragment and in particular the question of the term *daimōn*:

As for the term *daimōn*, it neither simply indicates a divine figure nor merely refers to the one who determines destiny. Considered according to its etymological root (which refers it to the verb *daiomai*, ‘to divide, lacerate’), *daimōn* means ‘the lacerator, he who divides and fractures.’ [...] Only insofar as it is what divides can the *daimōn* also be what assigns a fate and what destines (*daiomai* first means ‘to divide,’ then ‘to assign’ [...]). Once restored to its etymological origin, Heraclitus’s fragment then reads: ‘For man, *ēthos*, the dwelling
in the “self” that is what is most proper and habitual for him, is what lacerates and divides, the principle and place of a fracture.’ Man is such that, to be *himself*, he must necessarily divide himself.’

(Agamben 1999c: 117–118)

Agamben’s reading of Heraclitus’ fragment could serve as a gloss on the image of human being found in Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’, where, in each of the five major spectacles human being is fractured, divided, doubled and lacerated by the vicissitudes of fate. In this sense Heidegger’s thinking can be seen to be in proximity to Kantor’s conception of his performance work where he saw an equation between art, eternity and death. In Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’ the ‘individual’ human being is fractured into its memories (both real and imagined), into its past, present and future selves and into heroic and mythological models, where time is elastic and the future, present and past dwell simultaneously in the same space.

Memories as ‘found objects’: the concept of memory in the light of the *ēthos* of human being

The sense of *ēthos* discussed in the last section is encapsulated in a poetic image from Bede’s *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In Book II, chapter 13, during King Edwin’s council with his chiefs over accepting the Christian faith, one of his men says:

> This is how the present life of man on earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all.

(Bede 1999: 95)

The flight path of the sparrow through the warmth of the hall is suggestive of the linear arc of time mentioned above. However, in this image, the totality of
human life is likened to only that portion of the flight path within the hall. The entire life of human being is equated with the flitting of an instant. It is as if the string of ‘nows’ is contracted, or perhaps expanded, into a sense of one ‘now’.

In his essay ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum’ Agamben notes that while ‘the classical representation of time is a circle, the image guiding the Christian conceptualization of it is a straight line’ (Agamben 2007a: 103). This Christian conceptualisation of time derives from Aristotle’s discussion of the topics of time and continuity in *Physics IV* (chapters 10–14) and *VI* (chapters 1–3) respectively (Aristotle 1996: 102–117; 138–146).

Augustine’s discussion in Book XI of his *Confessions* elaborated on the paradoxes of time discussed by Aristotle but relates them to personal experience and thereby introduces a phenomenological and existential dimension to the discussion (1961: 253–280). The spatial representation of time as a line creates problems because the continuous succession of the string of ‘nows’ become equated with the idea of geometrical points, which, in being sublated to the geometry of the line cease to exist. This is a problem for Augustine’s argument, taken up and elaborated by Heidegger: ‘What is this now […]? […] Am I the now? Is every other person the now? Then time would indeed be I myself, and every other person would be time. And in our being with one another we would be time—everyone and no one’ (Heidegger 1992: 5).

However, from the experiential perspective, time can be seen to have a distinctly non-linear quality, not circular in the sense understood by Antiquity (as Agamben notes), but rather one that loops back on itself in a way that envelops the individual human experience and makes a dwelling for it. Over the course of life’s span, the perspective on time gradually shifts from one that looks forward with expectancy towards a future opened up before it, to one that is oriented in the opposite direction, where human being turns around on itself to look backwards at what is increasingly the larger ‘portion’ of the ‘allotted share’—the expanse of the past now opening behind it. In this sense, human being comes

46 ‘It seems to me, then, that time is merely an extension, though of what it is an extension I do not know. I begin to wonder whether it is an extension of the mind itself’ (Augustine 1961: 274; this passage is also cited in Heidegger 1962: 480).
to occupy the situation of Walter Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’, who advances backwards into the future, its face ‘turned towards the past’, gazing at the rubble of history in its wake (Benjamin 2006b: 392). This change of direction, from expectancy to a regard of the past, is a function of memory, and becomes increasingly dominant over the course of life. In this sense human being, from its subjective perspective, comes to dwell increasingly in memory.

For Augustine, memory is ‘like a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds’ (Augustine 1961: 214). However, the function of memory is not merely as a vault for the past in which human being dwells. One aspect of memory is that it also transforms the past into a mirror that reflects, in some way, the future now encroaching with increasing speed from behind. In this way, human being is literally in time—suspended in a moving area of temporal awareness, stretched like an expanding and contracting elastic bubble between what is past and what is to come. This is another sense in which the notion of the individual as discreet spatio-temporal being—as an essential substance occupying a ‘here and now’ is problematised. For Augustine ‘neither the future nor the past exist, and therefore it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present and future’ (1966: 269). Instead, he argues, there is only a present ‘now’ in which the acts of memory, sense perception and expectation are performed (ibid.). However, it was exactly this ‘now’, the Aristotelian nῦn, occupying as it does the no-place of a stigmē or geometrical point that both thinkers found so perplexing: the non-existence of the ‘fleeting now’. In his discussion Agamben cites Hegel's development and response to this idea:

Hegel thinks of time in terms of the Aristotelian model of the precise instant. Against the Aristotelian nῦn, he sets the now in correspondence; and, as Aristotle conceived the nῦn as stigmē, so he conceives the now as a point. This now, which ‘is nothing other than the passage of its being into nothingness, and from nothingness into its being’, is eternity as ‘true present’.

(Agamben 2007a: 107, Hegel quotations unreferenced in original)
However, the ‘now’ occupied by the subject is arguably composed of greater or lesser expanses of the past from which expectations are derived and projected as a potential future.\footnote{The conception of time that I articulate here owes a great deal to Agamben’s discussion of messianic time—the time of the ‘now’—in Agamben 2005a: 61–72. An enriched conception of time is also present in the work of Schulz, who will be discussed in more detail in chapter five. In the second story in the collection \textit{Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass} (1937), entitled ‘Genialna epoka’ (The Age of Genius), Schulz begins by stating: ‘Ordinary facts are arranged within time, strung along its length as on a thread’ but then moves to suggest that there are ‘parallel streams of time within a two-track time […] branchlines of time, somewhat illegal and suspect’ that exist for the ‘contraband of supernumerary events that cannot be registered’ (Schulz 1988b: 140).} This complex self-performance of intra- and extra-reflexivity is a peculiarity of human consciousness: a looping of the self into itself in an endless recasting. This understanding of the relation of human being to time, via memory, is one in which the idea of a specifically human being is the product of a reflexive self-recognition: to be human is to recognise oneself as human.\footnote{This formulation echoes Agamben’s critique (in Agamben 2004a: 25–26) of Linneus’ attempts to define human being, and his characterisation of the ‘anthropological machine’ and will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.} Both the idea of the species, and the conceptual understanding of the self are based on a self-reflexive performance, itself apparently based on nothing. As Agamben notes in his discussion of Hegel’s treatment of time:

> Defining time in this way as a negation of negation, Hegel cannot avoid taking to its extreme conclusion the nullification of experience by time implicit in its determination as a continuous succession of precise instants. ‘Time’, he writes in a passage from the \textit{Encyclopaedia} which still resonates with an—albeit subdued and consciously assumed—Augustinian anxiety in the face of time’s fleeting essence, ‘is the thing existing which is not when it is, and is when it is not: a half-glimpsed becoming.’ As such, this negative being which ‘is not and is not what is’ is formally homologous to man.

\textit{(Agamben 2007a: 107, Hegel quotations unreferenced in original)}

In his \textit{détournement} of avant-garde strategies, Kantor is effectively re-performing the idea of the human—‘a half-glimpsed becoming’—out of the ‘nothing’ of the \textit{informe} or formlessness.
One of the distinguishing characteristics of Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’ was his extension of his technique of the ‘found object’ to include memories, as well as spaces, situations and character (historical and fictional). For Kantor, memories were treated as real objects in the present, and not as nostalgic references to a lost past. In this sense Kantor is following Augustine who, in the *Confessions* maintained that: ‘the present of past things is the memory’ (Augustine 1961: 269). As such, memories for Kantor were not understood as ‘copies’ in the pejorative sense, as inferior, second-rate substitutes for some authentic original. Such a tension still exists, however, in that in Kantor’s work, the stigma of memory-as-poor-copy is retained but instead forms part of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’. This is managed by the acknowledgement that memories are not ‘real’; or rather their realness lies in their very inauthenticity. The ‘reality’ of past events is in effect ‘played’ by untrustworthy and suspect elements (themselves real) that stand in for the ‘real’ events they depict. Kantor’s conceit for this is that of an ‘Agency for the hiring of the dear departed’, a troupe of second-rate travelling players, drunks, gamblers, whores and hypocrites who ply their trade in poor re-enactments (a trope he seems to have taken, at least in part, from the fictions of Schulz, as will be explored in chapter five):

> In memories
> truthful and magnanimous people do not exist.
> Let’s say it quite openly: the process of evoking memories is suspect and none too clean.
> It is simply a hiring agency.
> The memory makes use of «hired» characters.
> They are sinister individuals, mediocre and suspect creatures
> waiting to be «hired» like home helps «by the hour».
> Almost crumpled, dirty, badly dressed, sickly, bastardized, acting out badly the parts of people often near and dear to us.

(Kantor 1980: n.p., from the programme notes for *Wielopole, Wielopole*)

It is these ‘crumpled, dirty, badly dressed, sickly, bastardized’ players that are ‘hired’ to present Kantor’s memories in his ‘theatre of death’ and, simultaneously, to also present the condition of the artist, as Kantor viewed it,
as society’s ‘outsider’. In this way the memories function as ‘poor objects’ and not as realistic illusions. This reconceptualisation of memory into poor object allows Kantor to practice what he called a ‘constructivism of the emotions’ (Kantor interviewed by Denis Bablet in the documentary Bablet 1991). Memory for Kantor is therefore opposed to any notion of sentimental reminiscing.

Kantor dealt with this underlying reality of these various aspects of time in relation to human being in a number of ways in his ‘theatre of death’. One way was to use the idea of ‘memory plates’ (an idea taken from the glass negatives of nineteenth century plate cameras) to characterise memory as a collection of random ‘snapshots’ of the past that are shuffled and layered, one on top of the other, so that distinct events, distant in time from one another, can find themselves next to each other outside of their normal temporal sequence. In this way Kantor seized on an aspect of memory that is normally ignored: the fact that memory does not necessarily work in a straightforward, linear-historical manner, that people and places can find themselves in contact with one another in ways which ‘did not actually happen’ but which nevertheless follow a certain autonomous logic. In his writings from 1970–1980 gathered under the title *Theatrical Place*, Kantor articulates this notion of time in art:

In art, the logic of a phenomenon’s successful development does not often coincide with a linear chronology.

Often, I have the impression, which fascinates me, that TIME in art, in its course of events, encroaches upon the notion of eternity.

As if past and future did not exist in it.

As if the phenomenon of succession or progression did not exist in it.

It is only later, after it is already over, we arrange the facts and events according to the logic of our time, following our cause and effect.

All these explanations of the relationships between the ideas, my attempts at locating, defining, and analyzing them, help me identify for myself my expanding past, discover its transformations, which may lead me to new solutions.
With the passing of time, we realize that everything, however, always remains in this infinite interior.

Everything is intertwined—one could say: exists simultaneously. (Kantor 2009c: 360)

For example: the old people in The Dead Class share their childhood classroom with the carcasses of their dead youthful selves in the form of wax dummies; in Wielopole, Wielopole, the First World War Soldiers from a photograph, sent back by Kantor’s father from the front, inhabit a corner of the family room.

Kantor’s particular adaptation of photography in his idea of ‘memory plates’ is a metaphor for the way in which memory lends a temporally extended dimension to the nature of human being. In a recent essay, ‘The Last Judgment’ (in Agamben 2007b) Agamben makes a similar claim for photography, one which echoes the way in which Kantor’s work from The Dead Class onwards rolls the entire span of a human life, its past, present and future as contained within its ‘allotted portion’ or span into one image (or perhaps in Kantor’s case it is better to say one selection of images, or ‘snapshots’).

Agamben uses the example of Henri Daguerre’s famous daguerreotype, the Boulevard du Temple, ‘considered the first photograph in which a human figure appears’ (2007b: 23). Agamben goes on to describe what makes this image so haunting:

The silver plate represents the Boulevard du Temple, photographed by Daguerre from the window of his studio at a busy moment in the middle of the day. The boulevard should be crowded with people and carriages, and yet, because the cameras of the period required an extremely long exposure time, absolutely nothing of this moving mass is visible. Nothing, that is, except a small black silhouette on the sidewalk in the lower left-hand corner of the photograph. A man stopped to have his shoes shined, and must have stood still for quite a while, with his leg slightly raised to place his foot on the shoeshiner’s stool. (Agamben 2007b: 23–24)
Seizing on the uncanny presence of this one solitary figure Agamben then proceeds to elaborate a startling vision of humanity in which a sense of eternity is bound up with that of the mundane and the trivial activity of a single moment:

I could never have invented a more adequate image of the Last Judgment. The crowd of humans—indeed, all of humanity—is present, but it cannot be seen, because the judgment concerns a single person, a single life: precisely this one and no other. And when has that life, that person, been picked out, captured, and immortalized by the angel of the Last Judgment—who is also the angel of photography? While making the most banal and ordinary gesture, the gesture of having his shoes shined. In the supreme instant, man, each man, is given over forever to his smallest, most everyday gesture. And yet, thanks to the photographic lens, that gesture is now charged with the weight of an entire life; that insignificant or even silly moment collects and condenses in itself the meaning of an entire existence.

(Ibid.: 24)

Agamben’s version of the ‘Last Judgment’ and his identification of its angel as the ‘angel of photography’ could almost be a description of Kantor’s aesthetic. In this chapter I have concentrated on a critique of representation a means of identifying the way in which it distracts from other ways of conceptualising human being, particularly the idea developed from Heidegger and Agamben that the ‘now’ of the present is a peculiar nothingness that is somehow extended into the past and the future. This creates the possibility of a positive reading of the idea of ‘the nothing’ that will link with Kantor’s preoccupation with the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and the ‘poor object’ to be considered in more detail in chapters five and six. I merely pause to note here that that sense of poverty, or abjectness links with the sense of the ‘smallest, most everyday gesture’ that ‘condenses in itself the meaning of an entire existence’.

Kantor’s method of shuffling ‘memory plates’ could, in theory, produce an infinite drift of combinations and juxtapositions as the ‘memory plates’ endlessly shuffle themselves. Kantor’s method of ‘organisation’ for these ‘memory plates’, which initially, according to his method, ‘found’ him, was to ‘fix’ a particular combination, using a single concrete place upon which that combination of
plates could be layered and within which the elements could dwell and cohere. In an interview with Leslie Caplan and Krystyna Rabińska in 1980 Kantor stated: ‘In reminiscence there is never action, only photographic plates. […] I do not develop the photographic plate, I only lift it out of the reservoir of memory’ (Kantor interviewed in ‘Metoda klisz’ (Memory-Plate Method, Dialog 12 1980), cited by Pleśniarowicz in 2004: 187). In The Dead Class it was the schoolroom, stumbled upon by accident whilst on holiday on the Baltic coast, sparking a memory of his childhood schoolroom (see Kantor 1995). In Wielopole, Wielopole it was the family room of childhood in which he witnessed the dying of his Great Uncle (the priest of Wielopole). In Let the Artists Die it is a combination of places to do with dying: a cemetery, Kantor’s imagining of his future deathbed, a childhood playroom in which games of death are played with toy soldiers, a prison cell, a torture chamber which becomes a vision of Stoss’s altar piece of The Dormition of the Virgin Mother from the Basilica in Kraków’s main square. In I Shall Never Return the place is a dirty, low-life inn which is invaded by characters from Kantor’s earlier productions who themselves channel figures from the Greek myths. And, in Today is My Birthday it is the artist’s studio, a space designed to be shared by the artist, his self-portrait, Velázquez’s Infanta, a family photograph, colleagues from the 1950s Kraków Group and the Russian Constructivist theatre director Meyerhold.

Kantor used these concrete places as initial, organising devices, which could be transformed into other spaces as required by the developing logic arising from the interplay of the memory plates. The essence of the concrete place carried with it its own logic: a geometry not only of space and architecture but also of use and human dwelling. This actual and real logic—the autonomous logic of a concrete, real place—was employed by Kantor to choreograph the contents of the memory plates. In essence, the concrete place acts as a fixing pin that pierces the memory plates, installing them in a kind of stasis. In this way the place becomes a sort of antechamber of eternity, a key to the eternal dimension that Kantor attempts to evoke. Real elements of place illuminate—irradiate—the contents of the memory plates and show them up for the duration of the performance. This combination of memory plates and place
creates the possibility for the paradoxical creation of a fragmentary, eternal space that opens up for the audience during the performance to invoke wider social, political, cultural and historical events and contexts outside of Kantor’s direct experience. For example, the announcement of the declaration of the First World War and the Beadle’s singing of the Austro-Hungarian national anthem in *The Dead Class* locates the classroom in Galicia 1914, the year before Kantor’s birth. Kantor could not have remembered this classroom, as he could not have been there. However, provincial Galicia and the event of the First World War molded the character of the world he was born into and helped determine the fate of his father. Similarly, the world performed as *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* is one that existed before Kantor’s birth, but which directly informed his early childhood: he remembered the photograph of his father with the recruits, and he remembered soldiers marching around in the square of Wielopole; he remembered the family (minus his father) gathered around his Great Uncle, the priest’s deathbed. In *Let the Artists Die* the references to childhood are personal memories, but the reference to the author’s own death is obviously imaginary, though in some form inevitable. Kantor-the-child plays with his life-sized tin soldiers and leads them in a march with the figure of General Pilsudski, the hero who secured Poland’s independence following the Great War. The particular ‘leaden’ paint and makeup covering these soldiers also recalls the appearance of the photographs of the bodies uncovered at the site of the Katyń massacre during the Second World War, which were widely publicised in Polish newspapers (see Pleśniarowicz 2004: 248). The General in part stands as a remembered figment of the six-year old Kantor’s imagination. At the same time, in his on-stage reality, he is also the historically heroic figure of Poland, whose ‘dead’ status is emphasised by the skeletal form of his famous favourite white horse on which he rides. The scenes of prison and torture that follow relate to the loss of independence as well as to the condition of the artist seen as an outlaw spurned by society. The reference to the altarpiece is at once a reference to a local cultural and religious landmark in Kraków as well as to the medieval artist Stoss, references to Nuremberg and to eternity signified by the Ascension of the Virgin. *I Shall Never Return* refers again to its author’s death,
to his own previous artistic productions and to his estranged father’s death in Auschwitz. The three picture frames, which themselves ‘frame’ and install the artist’s studio in Today Is My Birthday become the site for the recreation of a family photograph of a birthday celebration, dating from before Kantor’s own birth. Later, an evocation of the war-wounded in a field hospital links the provincialism of Wielopole in the Chagall-like figure of the Jewish water-carrier, with Jehovah walking among his Creation. The figure of Velázquez’s Infanta, from Kantor’s series of paintings around the same theme, steps out of one of the frames. This studio-place becomes the site for the visitation by his artistic colleagues and inspirations, each invoking a particular kind of horror: Jarema, the cofounder with Kantor of Cricot 2 in the 1950s appears in the guise of an artistic commissar; Stern, another member of the Kraków group of artists, appears as a survivor from a mass grave. Meyerhold reads out his letter to Stalin pleading for mercy before his torture and execution is staged within one of the picture frames. All of this eventually leads to an evocation of the ‘gales of war’ and oppression that have blown through the twentieth century.

In each of the ‘theatre of death’ productions, there is a sense of a fullness, of a space of human being, that is replete and teeming with potential, with bustle and busyness, and at the same time punctuated periodically by a sense of silence that serves as a reminder of its ultimate encirclement of existence by eternity, the circumscription within which the finitude of human being is marked. The sense of fullness in this account of life-as-éthos would seem to run counter to Kantor’s aesthetic of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and the ‘poor object’, mentioned earlier, and the sense of the ‘bareness’ of ‘bare life’ with which I argue it equates. However, a relation to ‘bare life’ can be seen in that this apparent fullness, the fullness of memory, is what is normally seen as the consolation for loss. Memory is often seen as an emptiness full of ghosts, as in the familiar formulation of ‘all we have now are our memories’. However, viewed from the perspective of the Heraclitean-Heideggerian sense of human-being-as-éthos, it is possible to suggest a different understanding: that the reality of that which is regarded as lost—the reality of the ‘absent’ or ‘dearly departed’ as well as of the lost in the sense of ‘abjectness’—is merely a partial and apparent
aspect of a larger reality. The absence of the things that are lost, the dearly departed, is rather an illusion based on the traditional Western metaphysical understanding that represents human being as substance. Because the memory appears ‘insubstantial’ it is understood as ‘second rate’ and a ‘poor copy’ of the ‘real authentic individual’. However, the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ are arguably themselves ghostly presences if separated from their wider temporal étos. Kantor articulates this particular sense of plenitude in his programme notes to Let the Artists Die:

I [...] I am made up of numberless ranks of characters [...] A whole crowd walking into the depths of time [...] They are all me [...] What an extraordinary richness [...] I—the naked infant [...] I—the barefoot boy in short pants [...] I—in my school uniform [...] I, with a romantic forelock [...] I—and so on until today [...] I can feel the hand of invisible TIME, the cause of this richness, which nevertheless, mercilessly and ruthlessly, deprives me of this multiplicity, this abundance, these profiles, silhouettes, varieties, which impoverishes me into one figure, the present one [...] 

(Kantor, cited in Pleśniarowicz 2004: 251–252)

The sense here is not of an individual human being occupying a temporal nín or point-like present on a temporal line. It is rather a sense of a creative ‘richness’ that is nevertheless in the process of bringing about an inevitable impoverishment and destruction. The ‘nothingness’ that beckons from beyond the grave is thereby linked as part of a continuum with the ‘nothingness’ that constitutes the ‘extraordinary richness’ that walks ‘into the depths of time’. This effect is entirely dependent on Kantor’s presence within his own artworks, not just conceptually as in the passage just cited, but performatively in a variety of ways that are explored in this thesis. It is, however, precisely Kantor’s presence within his work that has troubled some critics, in particular Andrzej Żurowski, whose essay was cited at the beginning of this chapter and to whom I turn next.

Is Kantor really ‘Pulling faces at the audience’?

Andrzej Żurowski’s 1985 essay “Pulling Faces at the Audience”: the Lonely Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor’ provides an interesting case of a critic keen to pay
tribute to the peculiarities of the emergence of Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’. He does so through what I am arguing is the inappropriate strategy of attempting to find a way of placing it within a traditional theatrical framework and hence to understand it within a traditional representational framework. The second part of the title of Żurowski’s essay implies that Kantor is in a position of isolation, ostracised by the audience because he has, indirectly, pulled faces at them. Although insulting the audience has been a not-unfamiliar strategy of the avant-garde, there is perhaps the hint here of an implication that Kantor is pulling faces at his audience out of spite, that this might be a self-fulfilling situation: the artist feels forced to ‘pull faces’ because he is not understood and is shunned because he ‘pulls faces’. If this logic is followed it begs the question of which came first: the ‘pulling faces’ or the ‘loneliness’?

In the one black and white photograph in Żurowski’s essay (which faces the title page as it is printed in New Theatre Quarterly), Kantor is shown in the foreground of a performance of The Dead Class, his left hand raised in some gesture in the direction of the audience, his right hand, lowered palm down towards the floor seems a gesture aimed towards the performers in the school desks in the background behind him. These figures, the old men and women of the ‘dead classroom’, are caught in a state of agitation and are indeed seen grimacing or ‘pulling faces’. In this image, Kantor is captured apparently on the threshold between the viewer and his performers: in one sense separated from the audience, but also, due to the forced perspective resulting from the depth-of-field in the photograph, distanced from the actors in the background. Together with the title the image seems chosen to depict both Kantor’s loneliness, his apartness, and the act of conducting the pulling of faces at the audience. This seems to be what Żurowski finds so problematic and, indeed, repellant.

Żurowski’s main complaints about Kantor centre around this on-stage presence and, as he sees it, Kantor’s ‘pretence’ of conducting and somehow spontaneously arranging the performance. Initially, however, Żurowski’s praise for Kantor seems wholehearted:
Tadeusz Kantor’s Cricot-2 Theatre is among the most highly regarded phenomena in the contemporary theatrical landscape. The international resonance of Kantor’s successive productions, and the numerous prizes and distinctions that he has received in countries on several continents, testify to his position, especially among the avant-garde in that great tide of experimental theatre that tries to cross the barriers of existing conventions, find an adequate language, and broaden the system for transmission of those thoughts and emotions accessible to the art of the theatre.

(Żurowski 1985: 364)

Kantor’s ‘peculiarities’ are explained as a result of the interpretation by an uncomprehending traditional, academic literary approach to theatre-criticism:

Anyone anxious to respond to the production in the traditional linear way found a ragged, conceptually incoherent script full of inconsistencies, simplifications and incomprehensible episodes. This was the response of those drama critics who had grown up in the atmosphere of drama rather than theatre, who had produced philosophic exegeses, and who were helpless in the face of a theatre of visual narration.

(Ibid.: 364)

However, Żurowski’s account goes on to demonstrate a number of interesting qualifications. Having noted these apparent peculiarities of Kantor’s ‘theatrical’ work, he turns to peculiarities that he discerns in Kantor’s character itself concerning questions of his originality and his standing in the avant-garde. ‘What was he’, Żurowski asks, ‘a precursor or a catcher of fashionable finery who quickly and impressively transferred the fashion of the season from the West to his own studio?’ (Ibid.: 365). He notes Kantor’s ‘ostentatious indignation and public protest’ against the Ministry of Culture and Art honouring him ‘merely’ as a stage designer rather than as a director (Ibid.: 365–366). After asking if Kantor is ‘the last of the three Polish leaders of the avant-garde?’ (Ibid.: 366) (alongside Józef Szajna and Jerzy Grotowski), Żurowski

49 As previously noted, Kantor had been awarded medals for stage design during the 1950s and in 1962. It is not clear which award Żurowski is referring to in his essay because, according to Pleśniorowicz (2004: 126), in 1981, before the imposition of martial law, Kantor had been honoured by the Minister of Culture and Art for his painting.
then asks: ‘To what extent, indeed, can Kantor’s theatre be considered avant-garde or precursory?’ (Ibid.: 366). For Żurowski:

The function of the avant-garde, every avant-garde, [is] like that of a comet: it emerges suddenly, shooting out from nowhere, crosses the sky of art with a radiant brilliance, kindles the minds who observe it, and vanishes as rapidly as it came, a phenomenon as fascinating as it is transient. But the minds it has stirred remain and often create a current, an epoch in art, or merely a trend, after the comet has disappeared. That is the function that Grotowski’s theatre has performed in contemporary culture.

It is quite different with Kantor’s theatre, which is a ‘separate theatre’, a ‘lonely theatre’, around which one can see no meaningful movement, school, or following. This in itself is neither good nor bad: it is simply the case. But because of this, it is difficult to speak about the precursory or avant-garde character of Kantor’s beliefs. It would be better to speak about a uniqueness that broadens the artistic panorama of the period.

(Ibid.: 366–367)

The question that Żurowski raises here, of Kantor’s apparent aesthetic isolation, or ‘loneliness’ as he puts it, is an important and interesting one, and one that I will attempt to address in the concluding chapter. However, the possibility that Kantor’s apparent isolation is due to a particular and genuinely radical uniqueness remains unexplored by Żurowski.

In trying to account for what, in his view, is this ‘loneliness’ of Kantor’s theatre Żurowski attempts to strip away what he sees as: ‘the halo, the highly suspect wrapping, of theatrical manifestoes […] a harmless eccentricity with no negative influence on the spectator’s attitude towards the scenic works enwrapped, were it not for the prophetic tone of these programmes’ (Ibid.: 367). Then, before going on to present his central critique of Kantor, Żurowski, in passing, attacks what he calls the ‘embarrassingly childish provocations’ and ‘gimmicks’ which he sees as distracting additions to the work, for example, the
use of the identical twins\textsuperscript{50} in \textit{Wielopole, Wielopole} as ‘quasi-chance spectators’, which he thinks adds nothing. Kantor’s professional standing as an autonomous artist is in this way undermined, his manifestoes are accused of peddling ‘feeble para-existential thoughts’, their form a ‘perfect confusion of stylistic flourishes and a sham of graphic notion’ (Ibid.: 367), before Żurowski focuses his attention on the ‘element that is so central’ to the structure of Kantor’s productions ‘that it largely determines their reception as whole works’ (Ibid.: 367). This element that ‘repels me so strongly that I cannot view these productions objectively’ (Ibid.: 364), is Kantor’s inclusion of himself in his theatrical works.

Żurowski cites at length the description that Tomasz Raczek gives of this element (‘in good faith’ (Ibid.: 367)) in his 1982 essay from the newspaper \textit{Polityka}:

\begin{quote}
The postulate of palpability, of physical contact with his work has brought Kantor to a point where he finds it necessary to include … himself in the artistic action. In the Cricot-2 Theatre’s productions Kantor plays the role of a somewhat satanic Conductor-Demiurge who sets the world of marionettes and super-marionettes created in motion. Like Craig, he is anxious to control every gesture and every second of his actor’s work. He moves among them in silence, tense, watchful of their every movement. An imperious gesture of the hand or a convulsive bend of the fingers impose the pace, the direction, and the mood of successive scenes in his theatre. Kantor is no longer an actor in it. He remains its creator although he cannot avoid the need for a physical presence. From time to time he shifts a prop, he corrects something, folds, unfolds, handles. He makes it impossible to stage the play elsewhere, in a different production, without him.

(Raczek cited in Żurowski 1985: 367; ellipsis in original)\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

For anyone who has witnessed Kantor in \textit{The Dead Class} or \textit{Wielopole}, \textit{Wielopole} especially, either in live or recorded performances, Raczek’s

\textsuperscript{50} See Appendix 1.12 on the Janiccy twins and other apparent similarities to elements in Hergé’s \textit{Tintin} books.

\textsuperscript{51} For the Polish text see Appendix 1.13.
characterisation will be recognisable. However, the mention of ‘marionettes’ and
‘Demiurges’ with reference only to Edward Gordon Craig misses the fact that
one of the inspirations for Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’ was not so much the work
of Craig (suggested by Kantor himself, though somewhat dismissively, with his
reference to Craig in his *Manifesto of the Theatre of Death*) but rather that of
Schulz, and in particular his ‘Traktat o manekinach, albo wtóra księga
rodzaju’ (Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies, *or* The Second Book of Genesis) from
the short story ‘Manekiny’ (Tailors’ Dummies) in *Sklepy Cynamonowe*
(Cinnamon Shops, 1934).52 The strong presence of Schulzian echoes in
Kantor’s work will be explored in greater depth in chapter five. However, the
more relevant issue here is that Raczek’s account makes a number of
assumptions about the nature of the work that Kantor is appearing in. ‘Kantor is
no longer an actor’, Raczek states, as if he ever had been. ‘He makes it
impossible to stage the play elsewhere, in a different production, without him’.
The Polish word that Żurowski has chosen to translate, or have translated, as
‘play’ is teatr—‘theatre’; Raczek does not use either of the Polish words for
‘play’ (in the sense of the performance of a dramatic text)—sztuka or gra.
Raczek’s Polish more literally means that: ‘it makes it such that this theatre
cannot be realised elsewhere in a different staging’. Raczek’s complaint,
especially translated as it is in Żurowski’s essay, betrays the critical treatment of
the work in traditional theatrical terms, one whose conceptual framework sees a
theatrical performance as a performance of a dramatic text, realised by actors
playing roles in a set designed by a stage designer and whose movement is
coordinated within a mis-en-scène conceived by a director, both of whom
remain invisible off-stage. Because Kantor is ‘on stage’, for Raczek and
Żurowski, he must be an actor and his apparent rupturing of the normal role of
the actor by appearing as a creator who cannot avoid the ‘need for a physical

52 The English translation by Celina Wienewska of *Sklepy cynamonowe* (itself the title of one of
that collection’s stories) has been published in various editions always under the title *The Street
of Crocodiles*, after another story in that collection: ‘Ulica krokodyli’. As noted elsewhere,
‘Tailors’ Dummies’ is but one of the Schulzian sources for *The Dead Class*. Other obvious
influences are ‘Emeryt’ (The Old-Age Pensioner) and the longer eponymous story from Schulz’s
second published collection *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (The Sanitorium Under the Sign of the
Hourglass, 1937).
presence’ disturbs the normal pattern of theatrical performance according to this conception. Indeed, Raczek’s characterisation of Kantor’s on-stage presence is clearly one that understands it as an ‘act’, but a disruptive, dissonant, troublesome one.

Silently taking his cue from this subtext in Raczek’s account, Żurowski observes that these actions ‘give the whole an embarrassing flavour of mystification’ (Ibid.: 367):

For Kantor pretends to create the world presented, to improvise it on the spot, yet at the same time the work into whose plot he intrudes is strictly defined beforehand: the productions are precisely programmed and develop according to a meticulous plan. Within such a work the Creator’s faces and the Demiurge’s gestures become a tautological make-believe: they reduce the Demiurge to an imposter who, just before dawn, when the Sun is about to rise above the horizon anyway, makes a buffoonish gesture in front of the crowd of disciples and … the Sun appears above the horizon.

(Ibid.: 367–368)

Żurowski here echoes the criticism by B. A. Young in his review in the Financial Times of Wielopole, Wielopole at the 1980 Edinburgh Festival:

I don’t find Kantor’s work easy to follow, and its style is antipathetic to me. The production seems deliberately sloppy (although I can’t believe it was meant to be as sloppy as it looked on Wednesday), and Kantor’s constant presence on stage, tidying the scenery and pretending to direct operations already often performed, even conducting the taped music, seems to me either pointless or arrogant. There is no depth in the acting, which runs to funny voices and funny walks.

(Young 1980: 15)

Of course, Kantor had already choreographed just such a ‘buffoonish gesture’ in the Sea Concert segment of his Panoramic Sea Happening at Osieki on the Baltic coast in 1967, in which a conductor-figure was rowed out to sea and installed on a stepladder to ‘conduct’ the sea before an assembled public watching from deck chairs on the beach. Kantor would surely have been well aware of the pointlessness of this ‘act’—it was, presumably, rather the point of
that event. But of course, that was a ‘happening’ and therefore understood within the conceptual framework of avant-garde art, a framework in which it was already somewhat the norm to challenge the conventional conception of art-as-representation.

An alternative to Żurowski’s and Raczk’s critical standpoint can be found in Jarosław Suchan’s illuminating discussion of Kantor’s 1957 film collaboration with Mieczysław Wańkowski and Adam Nurzyński: Uwaga—Malarstwo! (Attention—Painting!)53 (Suchan 2005). Suchan is not a theatre critic or historian but an art historian and curator and, since 2006, director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódz. As he argues in his notes to an earlier exhibition of Kantor’s art, Tadeusz Kantor: Impossible (Bunkier Sztuki, Kraków 2000, and Ludwig Múzeum, Budapest 2001)

Sadly, owing to the character of most exhibitions, the complex and immensely rich phenomenon called Tadeusz Kantor has been slowly sinking into oblivion. By focusing on his theatre and sometimes on his painting, they perpetuate a distorted – since one-dimensional – image of the artist. Moreover, by removing his art from its neo-avant-garde context in which it was born, those exhibitions deprive it of its actuality.

(Suchan 2001: n.p.)

In his discussion of Kantor’s involvement in the film Attention—Painting!, Suchan carefully situates Kantor in relation to two other films of artists at work: Pablo Picasso and the treatment by Henri-Georges Clouzot in his 1956 film Le Mystère Picasso (‘The Mystery of Picasso’) on the one hand and to Jackson Pollock and the latter’s portrayal in film and photography by Hans Namuth. In his discussion of the areas of apparent similarity between the three films, Suchan argues that Attention—Painting! demonstrates certain radical concerns that situates it against the conceptions of the relation between artist and work implicit in the films of Picasso and Pollock. In all three films painting is shown in action, that is, in the act of its creation. However, as in the Picasso film, where

the painter is largely hidden from the camera’s gaze, Kantor remains largely unseen in Attention—Painting!, whereas in the Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg film Jackson Pollock (1951), the artist is, as it were, the centre of attention, always seen in the act of applying the paint. As Suchan argues:

Though Kantor was much closer to Pollock than to Picasso in 1957, Attention—Painting! has little to do with Pollock’s expressionism, especially in Namuth’s interpretation. It is not a film about the artist’s ‘self’ and his gesture, but solely about the painterly matter.

[...]

In this context, it is worth comparing the photographs of Pollock at work with the drawings that Kantor made—probably many years later—to illustrate the process of the making of Attention—Painting! The former show the painter move as if dancing alongside the canvas spread on the floor, pouring paint on it, with rhythmic gestures. His movements are violent, commanding, ‘male’: the critics likened them to shamanistic ritual, to cowboy bravado—in an allusion to the artist’s rustic childhood—and to the anarchic vitality of Stan Kowalski from Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire. How differently is the artist depicted in Kantor’s drawings: cringing behind a cylinder standing between him and the camera, crouched in an uncomfortable position below the edge of the frame, he resembles neither John Wayne’s characters nor the protagonist of Williams’s play. He is—sticking to film/theatre analogies—more like a prompter, invisibly feeding the lines to the leading actor.

(Suchan 2005: 57–58)

Żurowski’s portrayal of Kantor has more in common with the American critics’ portrayal of Pollock as a stage-hogging egomaniacal method-actor. In Suchan’s discussion, Kantor, in contrast to Pollock and Picasso, appears as a self-effacing servant of art, more as a ‘prompter’ than an ‘actor’. This last image, of Kantor crouching out of sight, whilst he applies paint to a spinning glass drum is totally at odds with the image that Żurowski suggests, of the preening charlatan, the imposter-Demiurge, pretending to create. Indeed, Żurowski’s idea of ‘creation’ and ‘improvisation’ would seem to be somewhat uninformed given the avant-garde context of the work to which he is referring. To be perfectly clear, I
understand Żurowski to be suggesting here that Kantor is staging a representation of himself creating *The Dead Class, ex nihilo*. Presented in this way the idea is clearly preposterous and it would seem to reveal that Żurowski was carried away by his own rhetoric. His characterisation also creates a false dichotomy between improvisation and the performance of rehearsed material. All live performance has an element of improvisation because of its very *liveness*. The symphony orchestra will have put in many hours of rehearsal with its conductor who accompanies them during the performance of a previously written score. However, no two performances, however ‘strictly defined’ and ‘meticulously planned’ beforehand, will be the same. Conductor and musician have to realise their plan *in the moment* of performance. In doing so, all manner of contingencies must be managed and solutions to overcoming them improvised, albeit within a tightly constrained framework. This ‘thinking in activity’ by the group is one of the elements that makes a live performance gripping. It was just this form of ‘thinking in activity’ that Kantor encouraged among his performers and that he aimed to facilitate by his on-stage presence.⁵⁴

Żurowski’s final insult is to suggest that, in choosing his on-stage strategy in the way that he does, Kantor is a ‘poseur’: that he affected his manner, as either ‘creator’ or ‘stage character’, merely in order to impress: ‘as if a little boy dressed up in a black suit and pretending before his friends that he was Satan himself, although at most he suggested the devil from a mystery play’ (Żurowski 1985: 368). Again, Żurowski identifies and interprets as negative an element of Kantor’s work that is positively central to it. This characterisation is reminiscent of the manner in which Kantor portrayed himself in his ‘Little Manifesto’ acceptance speech, delivered when he was presented with the Rembrandt Prize in 1978. That Kantor would consciously adopt this rôle for this occasion

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⁵⁴ The phrase ‘thinking in activity’ was coined by the American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey to describe his experience of lessons in the technique of Frederick Matthias Alexander (cited by Alexander 2001: 42). In his writing such as *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and *Experience and Nature* (1929) his account of the momentary aliveness of process and the illusory nature of the dichotomy between perceived ‘ends’ and ‘means’ echo similar concerns in the continental phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger.
would tend to indicate that this was central rather than peripheral to his artistic strategy. However, Żurowski ends his ‘wholehearted support’ of Kantor and his work with the view that ‘the same Kantor who struts, puts on airs, frightens and censures the stage as the Demiurge-Creator’ is the ‘same Kantor’ who:

prophesies ultimate truths in a stentorian voice in his manifestoes and interviews, as if he were not aware that crutches are an obstacle on one’s way to the pedestal. Walking with crutches, one may easily stumble on eulogists hanging around their knees.

(Żurowski 1985: 368)

These are somewhat odd final words with which to close a critical celebration of this stage of Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’, although the metaphor of ‘crutches’ is unintentionally apt. One interpretation of Żurowski’s intended meaning is that what he sees as Kantor’s irritating peculiarities are an unnecessary support for his art and, moreover, that it is this apparatus that, at least partly, is what is attractive to his supporters and that adds to the interpretative critical confusion that surrounds his work. However, lurking in this veiled insult is a truer portrait of Kantor, whose selected artistic medium was ‘reality of the lowest rank’: poor, crippled and discarded reality. Out of this artistic field Kantor also found himself: the poor, weak, crippled, stumbling and stuttering human being—Kantor’s idiosyncratic version of Hamlet’s ‘celebration’ of human being as simultaneously both the ‘paragon of animals’ and ‘quintessence of dust’ (Hamlet II.ii., ll. 309–310). As I shall show in the next chapter, Kantor’s ‘stumbling’ and ‘stuttering’ can be seen as a conscious part of his art.

I will return in chapters five, six and seven to the question of Kantor’s role alongside and within the performance space of his artworks—be they painting, sculpture, installation, happening or ‘theatrical’ performance. My aim here has been to set the ground for both my own discussion of Kantor’s work and of the dominant tenor of the discourse surrounding it. I have suggested that a particular post-Heideggerian philosophical perspective can illuminate Kantor and his work and serve to set this at odds with the kind of reading demonstrated by Żurowski. Żurowski’s reading operates within a normative, representational framework that views Kantor’s more ‘theatre’-based works within a conventional
context of theatrical and dramatic discourse, one that assumes such ontologically loaded elements as: ‘drama’, ‘plays’, ‘actors’, ‘acting’, ‘costumes’, ‘props’, ‘stages’ and ‘sets’. Żurowski’s account is fundamentally impoverished by his tacit framework. As an alternative I argue that the existential concerns of human being are fundamental to the wide spectrum of Kantor’s work and unite it as a whole. Central to these concerns is Kantor’s particular and radical critique of representation. It is this that unites questions of aesthetics with philosophical hermeneutics and the existential ethical concerns of post-Heideggerian philosophy that will be explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4. THE HERMENEUTIC CONTEXT. SPEAKING A ‘STAMMERING SPEECH’: TADEUSZ KANTOR AS MESSENGER

Introduction

The act of interpretation is not straightforward. It involves a mysterious movement of information, a transportation between two realms: a movement, one hopes, from the unknown to the known, a passage from darkness to light. However, the process is fraught with the potential for duplicity and intentional, as well as unintentional, misinformation. It is also not only the critic or interpreter of the unknown that performs this function, and who can become lost in the subtleties of its art. Artists and writers are also seen as messengers, or transmission-agents in the interpretation of the unknown. As the literary critic Frank Kermode points out in his 1979 book, *The Genesis of Secrecy*—which he describes as ‘an interpretation of interpretation’ (Kermode 1979: 2)—the god Hermes, the patron of interpreters, is also ‘the patron of thieves, merchants, and travelers; […] cunning, and occasionally violent: a trickster, a robber’ (Ibid.: 1).

Hermes is thus, according to Kermode, ‘the god of going-between: between the dead and the living, but also between the latent and the manifest […] between the text, whether plain or hermetic, and the dying generations of its readers’ (Ibid.: 2). I suggest that the figure of Hermes sounds suspiciously like Kantor himself, who likens his theatre to ‘the fairground booth’\textsuperscript{55} of rogues and thieves, foregrounding its place as a liminal zone comparable to the River Styx—a transitional space between the world of the living and the world of the dead. As portrayed in the photograph reproduced in Żurowski’s essay, Kantor himself appears as the ‘go-between’ or mediator between his actors and the audience.

Kantor supervised the literal sending of a message in his *List* (Letter) happening of 1967, in which a giant letter measuring fourteen-by-two metres was mischievously, but officially, posted and delivered by seven authentic postmen (necessary to carry such a large delivery) with a real police escort, through the streets of Warsaw from the main post office to the Foksal Gallery (see Pleśniarowicz 2004: 99–100 and Murawska-Muthesius and Zarzecka 2011: \textsuperscript{55} See, for example, Kantor 2009c: 338.)
143). In his predilection for characters from the ‘reality of the lowest rank’, and in his characterisation and concealed naming of his company in circus-like terms—‘Cricot 2’—Kantor’s ideas might be seen in relation to those of Mikhail Bakhtin. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin recognises the liminal nature of the figures of the medieval ‘carnivalesque’: ‘Clowns and fools [...] represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were’ (Rabelais 1984: 8). Viewed in this way, as noted in chapter two, Kantor, like Schulz, one of his key influences, is operating in the role of a Hermes-like messenger, mediating between the truth and appearance of being.

This chapter argues that fundamental to understanding Kantor’s work (and that of any artist) is the acknowledgement of the prior ground of understanding that already unites artist and spectator. This prior ground may be understood as the individual, existential experience of human being—of human existence itself, as introduced and articulated in the preceding chapter. As Badiou has stated (Badiou 2006: 1–2), regarding the metaphysical questions concerning the nature of human being, Heidegger is the defining philosopher of the twentieth-century. It is Heidegger—rather than Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, or any of the Analytic philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein—who has set the most fundamental questions concerning human being for our time. In this light, much thought that has been grouped variously under the banners of ‘Structuralism’, ‘Deconstruction’, ‘Post-Structuralism’ and ‘Post-Modernism’, is in a philosophical sense ‘post-Heideggerian’. It is in this sense that I use the term ‘post-Heideggerian’, and consequently, when I refer to philosophers such as Gadamer, Agamben and Badiou in this way, I do so with a sense of their Heideggerian heritage. This idea, the idea of an ontological basis for interpretation and understanding at the heart of this heritage, is based in Heidegger’s project of understanding in *Being and Time*—it is the idea of the priority of Being for beings. This, in turn, is the basis for the philosophical hermeneutics employed in this chapter, developed by Heidegger’s student, Gadamer.
When I began my attempts to understand Kantor, following my viewing of *Wielopole, Wielopole* in 1980, I had naively assumed that interpretation of Kantor’s work would be a relatively straightforward matter of decoding the ‘text’ of the performance. Over time, it became apparent that understanding Kantor’s work would necessitate the prior process of developing an understanding of key contexts: critical aspects of Polish culture such as the specific nature of Polish Romanticism and the Modernism of the Polish inter-war avant-garde, and especially significant ‘Eastern’ influences such as Russian Constructivism and icon art. However, this process of contextualisation in turn uncovered the necessity of developing a philosophical context within which to make sense of Kantor’s particular approach to art and art making. In his writings, it quickly becomes apparent that Kantor is as much concerned with the metaphysical questions surrounding the process of creation as with the apparent ‘product’. His national and international contexts helped form him as an artist, but in his artistic concerns there is always a metaphysical dimension that transcends mere context. Indeed, this sense of questioning invades the works themselves so that they can be seen to actively continue an interrogation of their own existence. This recognition of Kantor’s active questioning of his own creative process meant that, eventually, I was forced to consider the question of understanding and interpretation as a field of operation that involved both myself and my subject. In this chapter, which considers this field from a post-Heideggerian philosophical perspective, it is therefore appropriate to begin with an example of what might be seen as Kantor’s own hermeneutic procedure.

The chapter will focus on Kantor’s writing, in particular his 1978 ‘Little Manifesto’, which, I will show, explores the problematic of the artist’s experience in terms that parallel the concepts that Heidegger and Gadamer developed in their philosophy. The discussion draws on certain themes from post-Heideggerian philosophy, in particular, Agamben’s account of negativity in the metaphysics of presence, and his radical critique of aesthetics. I will further suggest that, as well as providing a useful framework for ‘understanding Tadeusz Kantor’, such a philosophical hermeneutic framework harmonises productively with Kantor’s own aesthetic and metaphysical concerns in a way
that the framework implied by Żurowski’s critique, discussed in chapter three, does not. Post-Heideggerian hermeneutics is based on Heidegger’s radical reorientation of understanding in *Being and Time*, from the domain of the question of epistemology (knowledge) to the domain of the question of ontology (Being). The problem of understanding anything, Heidegger argues, itself rests on the tacit problem of the understanding of the nature of Being itself. Consequently, both interpreter and object of interpretation share the same ground in the prior problem of Being. For Heidegger, there was always already a prior understanding between subject and object because of this shared communal ground of being. This shift or turn of hermeneutics from the epistemological to the ontological (and therefore metaphysical) was developed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (2004, originally published in German in 1960), and informed much Post-Structuralist philosophy. It is this implied continuity between artist and spectator that is discernible as a concern in Kantor’s artistic practice, and I shall explore this here as a sympathetic hermeneutic framework for understanding Kantor and his work.

**The ‘Little Manifesto’: A celebration of nothing**

On April 8, 1978, Kantor was awarded the Rembrandt Prize for outstanding contributions to art. It might be expected that an artist, upon public recognition of his greatness, might have something to say concerning the essence of his art, something that might aid public understanding. Indeed, Kantor did have something to say, and as a response to receiving this award he read out a specially prepared ‘Little Manifesto’, in effect, an acceptance speech. According to Piotr Piotrowski, the Rembrandt Prize ‘is also known as the “painting Nobel”, not only because of its prestige, but also because artists obtain it for particular achievements in painting’ (Piotrowski 2005: 33). Previous recipients of the prize were Paul Delvaux, Fausto Melotti, Ben Nicholson, Eduardo Chillida, Pierre Soulages and Dušan Džamonja. Kantor was awarded the prize for the ‘real contribution to shaping the image of art of our time’ (Chrobak et al. 2005: 148; my translation).56 In 1978 Kantor was enjoying international success following

56 See Appendix 1.14 for Polish text.
the tours of *The Dead Class*, and he was, according to Wiesław Borowski ‘somewhat confused’ (Ibid.) to be awarded a prize for his painting. Indeed, Kantor’s presentation of this manifesto itself represents a somewhat puzzling performance. Instead of thanking the international panel of the Goethe Foundation for the award, Kantor painted a strange picture of the artist ‘on trial’. The manifesto appears to end with a sort of disappearing act. The great artist stands before his audience and makes seemingly profound statements about fear and the nature of the artist. He attempts to redefine Dada for his audience, and suddenly finds that he has turned himself into the accused, has become a schoolboy again, has forgotten what he had to say, and appears to fade away to the nothing of the closing ellipsis. If the definition of ‘manifesto’ is ‘a public declaration of policy and aims’\(^{57}\) then what exactly is Kantor publicly declaring with such a disappearing act? The answer to this question lies in the realisation that in the course of this short text there are enacted a number of Kantorian concerns that can be seen to be shared with those of existential phenomenology, especially in the form inaugurated by Heidegger as elaborated in the previous chapter. Here is the text of the published manifesto together with Kantor’s prefatory remarks:

I wish to read you ladies and gentlemen, my Little Manifesto (I am still writing manifestos), which was written especially for this occasion.

Before I read it, however, to make it clearer I will take the liberty to remind you that the fundamental (if I could use this pathetic word) idea behind my creative work has been and is the idea of reality, which I labelled the Reality of the Lowest Rank.

It can be used to explain my paintings, emballages, poor objects, and equally poor characters, who, like the Prodigal Son, return home after a long journey. Today I would like to use the same metaphor to describe myself.

(Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 250)

**Little Manifesto**

It is not true

that MODERN man
is a spirit which has vanquished FEAR …
It is not true!
FEAR exists:
fear before the outside world,
fear before our destiny,
before death,
fear before the unknown,
before nothingness,
before the void …

It is not true
that the artist is a hero
or an audacious and intrepid conqueror
as a conventional legend would have it …
Believe me!
he is a POOR MAN
without arms and without defence
who has chosen his PLACE
face to face with FEAR
in full awareness!
It is from awareness
that fear is born.

I stand
before you
SEVERE BUT JUST JUDGES
I stand accused
and plunged in my FEAR …
And there is a difference between
the former dadaists from whom
I feel I am descended, and me:
‘Stand up!’—
cried Picabia
the Great mocker—
‘You are accused!’

And here is my correction
—today—
to that invocation
imposing in another time:
It is I that am judged and accused,
I stand before you
and must seek grounds and proofs
—I do not know—
for my innocence
or for my guilt …
I stand
as in the past,
standing behind my desk, in my classroom …
and I say:
'I've forgotten,
I did know, I did know
I assure you
Ladies and Gentlemen …

(Bablet 1991: 2:19:10, translation: Sally Jane Norman)

As already noted above, this seems a strange acceptance speech: it doesn’t contain any ‘thanks’, and the only ‘acceptance’ would appear to be the acceptance of fear, of accusation, and of defeat. It is clearly more of a performance than an acceptance speech. Why would a great artist wish to portray himself like a forgetful schoolboy? Of course, in 1978 Poland was still a part of the Soviet bloc. Any artist who did not toe the official party line did indeed stand accused, and the ‘fear’ that Kantor speaks of was then all too real. From this historical perspective the oblique strategies of Kantor’s ‘Little Manifesto’ may therefore be seen as simply an example of the veiled and allegorical methods that were employed by many artists resistant to the official regime. Kantor accepted the Rembrandt Prize at a ceremony held at the Sukiennice (Cloth) Hall in the centre of Krakow’s huge central Renaissance square. For Kantor and his sympathisers, there may have been a delicious sense of mischief in accepting this international honour in one of the central cultural institutions of the country that had, to say the least, been somewhat selective in its recognition of him as an artist. In his anti-acceptance speech, Kantor affects the disposition of a naughty schoolboy before his ‘masters’, feigning innocence as to why he is there. However, thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet bloc it is possible to discern a more fundamental message about the state of art and the artist in Kantor’s manifesto, one that can be set in a wider historical context.

The apparent paradox of Kantor’s manifesto is that it appears to be such a negative and inconsequential response, and yet it was consciously prepared

This is the current home of part of the Polish National Gallery of Art and a site of state functions since the Renaissance.

As already noted in chapter three Kantor had only received official recognition for his work as a set-designer in official theatres in the 1950s (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 60, and Stangret 1994: 4).
(‘written especially for this occasion’), and is somehow powerful and affecting. If it is to be considered as the product of the voice of Kantor as an artist—interpreting his own specific condition as an artist—then it might be profitable to enquire what sort of voice it is, or, more specifically to ask the question: out of what underlying hermeneutic context does the voice arise? In his 1989 Preface to *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (2007a) Agamben asks: ‘Is there a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey?’ (Agamben 2007a: 3–4). If Kantor’s ‘Little Manifesto’ is the ‘voice of the artist’, and the artist is, as the manifesto suggests, a category of human being, then it is odd that this voice ends up being the voice of a forgetful but well-meaning schoolboy. What then is the significance of the relation between the voice in Kantor’s manifesto, and the human voice of Agamben’s question? The comparison seems pertinent because Kantor clearly sets himself as an artist within the metaphysical context of human being in the first part of the manifesto. This context is one of humanity’s tremulous state of being in the face of fear. Before I return to discuss Kantor’s interpretation of this state it will be useful to analyse the manifesto more closely.

To reduce the structure of the manifesto’s argument to its barest outline it appears to consist of:

1. An assertion of the reality of existential fear for human beings
2. An assertion that artists are not heroes but poor defenceless beings who choose to stand opposite fear
3. A reversal of the Dadaist’s accusation of culture and society; Kantor asserts the opposite: that culture and society should accuse him!
4. The turn to the past, and the conceit of reverting to a forgetful schoolboy standing behind his desk

This brief structural outline of Kantor’s manifesto belies a more intricate design. The opening two paragraphs contain the negation of two assumptions: firstly, the assumption that ‘modern’ human being has conquered fear, and secondly,
the assumption that the artist, as a special category of modern human being, is
a ‘hero or an audacious and intrepid conqueror’, presumably one who has
‘vanquished fear’. The use of the term ‘modern’ immediately introduces a
temporal dimension, the implication being that in the past human being had not
conquered fear, and that one of the characteristics of ‘modernity’ is that fear has
been overcome so that humanity no longer dwells in apprehension. The winning
of this victory over fear by artists occurred in the past according to ‘conventional
legend’. This defeat of fear and the heroic nature of the artist are then both
negated. What is left in the place of these optimistic assumptions based on the
Enlightenment idea of progress is the artist as a ‘poor man’, opposed by a
seemingly triumphant and enduring ‘fear’. However, there is still a heroic
color to the ‘poor artist’ who has ‘chosen his place face to face with fear in
full awareness!’ But what becomes of this brave ‘poor artist’ who has chosen to
stand face to face with fear? He turns into a version of the schoolboy who has
forgotten his homework. To further understand this apparent regression, it is
necessary to follow the underlying development through the manifesto in terms
of its references to time.

The second half of the manifesto develops the temporal dimension
referred to in the opening sections at the same time as developing the
confrontational sense of trial—of accusation and defence. Firstly, there is the
appeal to the tradition of the first avant-garde of the Dadaists, and secondly,
there is the return to childhood. Viewed sequentially over the course of the
whole manifesto, the four (implicit and explicit) references to the past form a
progression from the general and large-scale perspective to the dimension of
the personal:

1. The implication of a pre-modern fearful past progressing to a fearless
   present (negated)

2. The legendary heroic artist who vanquished fear (negated)

3. The Dadaists who put society on trial (reversed or ‘corrected’)

4. The schoolboy who did know but has forgotten ...
As the manifesto moves towards its conclusion Kantor declares that he stands before his public ‘judged and accused’. But of what is he accused? And what is it that he has forgotten, but is sure that he once knew? There is a paradoxical, Kafkaesque quality to the questions raised by the manifesto’s closing section. In Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, Josef K. stands accused, and like Kantor, he knows not of what. From the perspective of Kafka, and the reader however, it is much clearer that Josef K. stands for humanity, and is judged, as a matter of course, just for being alive. (Anthony Perkins, the actor who played Josef K. in the Orson Welles 1963 film of *The Trial*, commented: ‘After a couple of days of shooting I said to Orson, “Don’t you think it’s going to be interpreted that K. is guilty?” He said, “He is guilty! He’s guilty as hell!”’60 One possible interpretation of *The Trial* is therefore that, because Josef K. fails to take responsibility for his existence, he is found guilty and executed. However, unlike Josef K., Kantor’s manifesto seems to close on a more optimistic note. As with much of Kantor’s work, the protagonist and Kantor are apparently identical. As has been noted, the manifesto is clearly a performance, but it is a self-performance. Whilst Josef K. never tires of proclaiming his innocence and demanding an explanation for his ‘arrest’, Kafka and the reader look on with ironic amusement. Kantor is, at least, not so sure whether he must seek ‘grounds or proofs’ for his innocence or for his guilt, and the engagement of the audience or reader would seem more empathic than ironic. The final ellipsis of the manifesto does not resemble the dying ‘like a dog’ of Kafka’s protagonist. If the manifesto, with its negation of enlightenment progress, seems somewhat nihilistic in the context of the celebratory occasion of its delivery, it is nevertheless still a strangely positive, optimistic kind of nihilism.

In his comments on Nietzsche in his essay ‘On the Question of Being’ (1955, in Heidegger 1998a: 291–322), Heidegger critiques the conception of nihilism—‘that uncanniest of guests’—as the culmination of the post-Platonic development of the Western metaphysical tradition. In his return to pre-Socratic conceptions of being, Heidegger sought to rethink the Platonic

60 See Appendix 1.15 for Perkins’ and Welles’ comments concerning Josef K.’s guilt.
and Aristotelian basis of metaphysics as it had been understood through subsequent traditions. In doing so, he made a virtue out of the sense of wonder generated by the pre-Socratic thinkers and of their sense of provisionality over the nature of being. According to Heidegger, the tradition that followed Aristotle interpreted the latter’s doctrine of substance in such a way that the idea of being became chained to it. The subject-object duality of the ensuing substance ontology became the ground for the nexus of apparent contradictions that continue to preoccupy ontological thinking: subject-object, life-death, mind-body, self-other, fiction-reality, and of course, artist-spectator.\footnote{For a more detailed explanation see Heidegger 1962 and Guignon: 2006: 1–41. For the relation of this to the artist-spectator dichotomy see Agamben 1999a, which is discussed later in this chapter.}

For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s nihilism, or at least the prevalent reception of it,\footnote{It would appear that Nietzsche was on the verge of redeeming nihilism himself before he became mentally incapable (see Agamben 1999a: 93).} was simply the culmination of a certain stale way of thinking that was grounded in a particular conception of being-as-substance. One way towards an understanding of the nature of the voice of the artist in Kantor’s ‘Little Manifesto’ is to understand how Kantor’s ‘regression’ to forgetful schoolboy can be seen not as negatively nihilistic but as a positive Heideggerian critique of the ontological situation he perceived himself to be in.

In his first book, \textit{The Man Without Content} (1999a, but first published in Italy in 1970), Agamben uses his reading of Heidegger to develop a radical critique of aesthetics that challenges traditional ideas about the artist, the artwork, and the spectator, and the nature of the relationship between them. Agamben traces the development of an ‘aesthetic alienation’ in which ‘art’ becomes split into art-as-it-is-lived-by-the-artist and art-as-it-is-perceived-by-the-spectator. Art comes to:

\begin{quote}
alternately [present] two sides that cannot be put back together into a unity. The side that faces the artist is the living reality in which he reads his promise of happiness; but the other side, the side which faces the spectator, is an assemblage of lifeless elements that can only mirror itself in the aesthetic judgement’s reflection of it.
\end{quote}
The ‘fear’ amidst which Kantor places himself metamorphoses into the ‘severe but just judges’ of his audience (in the sense that first he is standing before fear and then before his judges). The artistic ‘fear of failure’ is a double one because, on the one hand, in creating, the artist is pursuing a desired ‘promise of happiness’ (the successful creation of the artwork), a project that carries the risk of failure; but on the other hand, because the creation is in the context of the potential reception by the audience, the artist’s sense of success is in jeopardy because it may not coincide with that of the expectations of the spectator. Agamben recognises an increasing trend in the art of modernity that:

For the one who creates it, art becomes an increasingly uncanny experience, with respect to which speaking of interest is at the very least a euphemism, because what is at stake seems to be not in any way the production of a beautiful work but instead the life and death of the author, or at least his or her spiritual health. To the increasing innocence of the spectator’s experience in front of the beautiful object corresponds the increasing danger inherent in the artist’s experience for how art’s promesse de bonheur [promise of happiness] becomes the poison that contaminates and destroys his existence. The idea that extreme risk is implicit in the artist’s activity begins to gain currency, almost as though—so thought Baudelaire—it were a sort of duel to the death ‘où l’artiste crie de frayeur avant d’être vaincu’ ['where the artist cries out in fright before being defeated']

For Kantor, the confrontational trial staged in the ‘Little Manifesto’ can be seen as the harbinger for a series of works where he stages himself as a victim of confrontation either by proxy or in person. In Wielopole, Wielopole (1980), the next major theatrical spectacle following his receipt of the Rembrandt Prize, a village priest, a pregnant bride, and a rabbi are all, in a manner of speaking, put on trial and executed. In Let the Artists Die (1985), the figure of the medieval sculptor Stoss is invoked because of his gruesome punishment for bankruptcy at the hands of the Nuremberg authorities. In I Shall Never Return (1987) Kantor himself is put on trial, taunted and held to account by characters from his
previous productions. Ten years after his delivery of the ‘Little Manifesto’, one of a series of paintings from the series Dalej już nic … (Further on, Nothing …), entitled Pewnego dnia żoldak napoleoński z obrazu Goi wtargnął do mego pokoju (One day Napoleon’s soldier from Goya’s painting invaded my room, 1988), depicts the Bohemian figure of Kantor standing in frail defiance as one of the soldiers from Goya’s 1814 painting The Executions of the Defenders of Madrid takes aim at him. Kantor was clearly an artist who understood the activity of art as one of ‘extreme risk’, as a ‘duel to the death’.

But what is worth such ‘extreme risk’? What is ‘the promise of happiness’ that draws artists into their trial? As a counter to the fragmenting effect of aesthetic alienation Agamben returns to a conception of art and artistic practice derived from Ancient Greece. The term ποίησις (poiēsis) designated the productive activity of human being—the bringing forth into being of something that did not previously exist. It meant production in the sense of any truth-making or truth-revealing activity, not just in the more limited literary sense commonly understood today. The term was then understood in relation to τέχνη (techne), art, craft or skill, without distinction between ‘artist’ and ‘craftsman’ as this is currently understood. In this way, human being is seen, in itself, as a poiētic activity, a continual bringing into being—the revealing of the truth of an existential self. Human being exists in and as a shared clearing, illuminated and revealed by being itself. In this context ποίησις (poiēsis), pro-ductive activity, functions as a shared, communal enterprise, and not as the solipsistic self-expression of a notional and egotistical ‘artistic will’. This idea invites a more communal and inclusive sense of art and artistic practice in which any human activity can potentially be considered ‘poetic’ and anybody can potentially be understood as engaged in artistic practice. Viewed in this way there is a direct continuum between what is commonly thought of as everyday practice and what is commonly thought of as artistic practice. The ‘promise of happiness’ lies in engaging with the shared bringing into activity of human being, a fundamental engagement with reality itself as illuminated by us.
It might at first seem difficult to equate Kantor with this originally *poiētic* or pro-ductive conception of art. He consciously adopted the pose of the ‘Great Artist’, choosing to model himself, in part, on the figure of Edward Gordon Craig with his overcoat, hat and long scarf.\(^63\) And, as video footage of rehearsals with his company attest,\(^64\) Kantor was the epitome of the didactic, autocratic director. Nevertheless, he did have, from the very beginning, a very radical and metaphysical conception of ‘art’ that was based on the idea of the process of rehearsal—of exploration, rather than product: ‘Nothing should remain but REHEARSALS, and only REHEARSALS: Just normal rehearsals, often unsuccessful, full of mistakes, corrections, changes, alternative versions, and snags. We must acknowledge the REHEARSAL, with its intensity and agitation, as true art’ (Kantor 1990: 142).\(^65\) In prioritising process over product in the particular way that he did, Kantor was able to maintain the *poiētic* character of a critical engagement with reality. The ‘true artist’ for Kantor was one who consciously placed him or herself in the way of engagement with this continual flux of the reality of being: ‘to catch … all the incandescent particles of imagination, of scepticism, of resolution, of capitulation, of rapture, of euphoria, which are generated by the actual process of creation’ (Kantor 1990: 142).\(^66\) His particular innovation was to manage the flux of the creative process, of reality, in such a way that the very process could be installed in what would normally be understood as the artistic ‘product’. Viewed from this perspective it is possible to see the ‘Little Manifesto’ as an example of this methodology. As Kantor states in his prefatory remarks, he wishes to use the metaphor of the ‘Reality of the

\(^{63}\) See Appendix 1.16 regarding Kantor and Craig.

\(^{64}\) Many hours of video footage of rehearsals for Kantor’s major performance spectacles from *Let the Artists Die* onwards were recorded. This material is available in the Cricoteka archive on ulica Kanonicza. An edited version of video footage shot of Kantor’s rehearsals for *Today is My Birthday* was released as *Próby tylko próby …* (Rehearsals, only rehearsals …, directed by Andrzej Sapija 1992, DVD release 2006).

\(^{65}\) This idea was enshrined in Kantor’s *Anti or Popular Exhibition* of 1963 in which what was exhibited were not finished works but rather the detritus of the creative process.

\(^{66}\) Kantor also characteristically added: ‘I am anxious to differentiate between my own case and a widespread trend which you can look up in any encyclopaedia of contemporary art under the heading *Process Art*’ (Kantor Ibid.).
Lowest Rank’ to describe himself, and in the manifesto, he renders himself before his audience as a ‘poor man’. This ‘poor man’ becomes a forgetful schoolboy who in turn melts into the nothingness of the ellipsis. Kantor finds himself as his own ‘poor object’ and makes himself disappear: in this process he installs himself within the work.

As I will elaborate in the next chapter, Kantor’s metaphysics of the ‘Reality of the Lowest Rank’, along with the associated ideas of the ‘poor object’, and ‘poor’ or ‘degraded’ reality, are derived from the metaphysics of Schulz, and from issues to do with Kantor’s experience of the comparative realities for German, Polish and Jewish populations during the Occupation. To anticipate that discussion briefly here, the taking on of the low rank as a positive can be seen as a form of resistance, where open aspiration or competition for high rank is impossible. However, in a more fundamental sense, ‘high rank’ is undesirable in so far as it is erected on undesirable and suspicious foundations, and is based on a false, corrupt or otherwise unpalatable conception of reality. The German occupying population in Kraków in the early 1940s may have assumed for themselves and temporarily enjoyed the ‘high rank’ privileges of a ‘master race’, but those in the ‘lower ranks’ at least knew that those above them were morally bankrupt. ‘Low rank’ and humiliation were essential components of Kantor’s artistic practice, as evidenced by his statement that ‘greatness comes from utter humiliation’ in his reference to Wyspiański’s stained glass window of the skeletal King Casimir the Great (Kantor 1987: 10–11).67

The voice of the artist
In his fourth book, Language and Death: The Place of Negativity (1982, English translation published 1991), Agamben discusses the curiously double negative foundation of the metaphysics of presence that he sees as inherent in human being. Taking its cue from a phrase in Heidegger’s On the Way to Language —‘The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought’ (Heidegger 1971: 107–8)—Agamben’s discussion

67 Kantor’s reference to Wyspiański’s stained glass window design will be discussed in chapter five.
traces the strangely elusive nature of the presence of human being as it shifts between voice and language. Agamben foregrounds the curious fact that the physical voice that produces language is left behind in its act of the production of language, the production of meaning, which, in turn, forms a discourse that cannot speak of its physical-vocal origins: ‘Logic demonstrates that language is not my voice. The voice—it says—once was, but is no more, nor can it ever be again. Language takes place in the non-place of the voice’ (Agamben 1991: 108; emphasis in original). In answer to the question posed earlier about the existence and nature of a distinctly human voice, Agamben argues that paradoxically, the essential voice of human being is ‘a silent and unspeakable voice’ (Agamben 1991: 85), the existence of which creates the potential for the speaking of language, which, in turn, as Heidegger has famously stated, ‘is the house of being’, and that in ‘its home human beings dwell’ (Heidegger 1998c: 239). It is the clearing in which being realises itself. In a final poetic coda to his book, Agamben paints a picture of a metaphysics of presence, or rather, a poetics of being, that has its reality in a suspension:

What remains in suspense, what dangles in thought? We can only think, in language, because language is and yet is not our voice. There is a certain suspense, an unresolved question, in language: whether or not it is our voice, as baying is the voice of the ass or chirping is the voice of the cricket. So when we speak we cannot do away with thought or hold our words in suspense. Thought is the suspension of the voice in language.

[…] we are ourselves suspended in language […].

(Agamben 1991: 107)

Agamben’s poetic embracing of the negativity of human being seems to me to strike a positive chord that can illuminate the mystery of Kantor’s ‘disappearance’ at the end of the ‘Little Manifesto’. In a period when the idea of human being, as ‘subject’, is continually being explained away as a social, political or neural construction, or as a commodified product, such an ‘idea’ is powerless to oppose its negation in so far as it finds no ownership, or personal investment in society, the market, in neurophysiology or evolutionary
psychology. If human being has no substance of its own, then, insofar as it subscribes to a substance ontology, it is a poor, homeless non-thing. However, if it is not a substance, but a being suspended between language and thought, then our being lies not in any substance but in the process of becoming itself, the same ‘home’ as the home that Kantor makes for himself in his conception of his art as rehearsal. Agamben’s metaphor for this concept of being is of a walk in the woods:

suddenly we hear the flapping of wings or the wind in the grass. A pheasant lifts off and then disappears instantly among the trees, a porcupine buries in the thick underbrush, the dry leaves crackle as a snake slithers away. Not the encounter, but this flight of invisible animals is thought. [No], it was not our voice. We came as close as possible to language, we almost brushed against it, held it in suspense: but we never reached our encounter and now we turn back, untroubled, toward home.

(Agamben 1991: 108)

The approach that Kantor demonstrates with his ‘Little Manifesto’, and in the rest of his artistic practice, and the approach that, as I have argued in the previous chapter, I feel is necessary to understand his work, can be considered together as part of the joint hermeneutic project that is enabled by Heidegger’s radical reconceptualisation of human being. In this light Kantor’s oeuvre can be seen as a form of post-Heideggerian deconstructive enquiry into the truth of human being. Without interpreters of his work engaging in their own version of the same hermeneutic process, attempts at understanding will always stumble.

In his essay on the ‘The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem’, Gadamer makes the following observation on the apparent fragmentation of reason through the variety of languages:

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68 This is an awareness that has come to the fore in recent literature and, indeed, uncharacteristically appears to be alluded to in Kobialka’s second book on Kantor in his preface (2009: x). See for example: Midgley 2010, Robinson 2010 and Tallis 2011.

69 It would appear that there is an error in the published English translation. The original Italian text reads: ‘No, non era la nostra voce’ (Agamben 2008: 139), which would translate as ‘No, it was not our voice’, as opposed to ‘Not, it was not our voice’ as is printed in the 1991 translation.
To master the foreign language means precisely that when we engage in speaking it in the foreign land, we do not constantly consult inwardly our own world and its vocabulary. The better we know the language, the less such a side glance at our native language is perceptible, and only because we never know foreign languages well enough do we always have something of this feeling. But it is nevertheless already speaking, even if perhaps a stammering speaking, for stammering is the obstruction of a desire to speak and is thus opened into the infinite realm of possible expression. Any language in which we live is infinite in this sense, and it is completely mistaken to infer that reason is fragmented because there are various languages. Just the opposite is the case. Precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our being, which is evident even in the variety of languages, the infinite dialogue is opened in the direction of the truth that we are.

(Gadamer 1990: 157)

Speaking, then, as was noted earlier in this chapter regarding Agamben’s identification of the fracture between ‘voice’ and ‘language’, is itself a performance of a kind of self-revealing becoming. Its self-revealing is a kind of packaging, or, in Kantorian terms, an *emballage*, a wrapping that reveals by its very act of veiling. As Gadamer observes, stammering is already a speaking, but as ‘the obstruction of a desire to speak’ it paradoxically embodies the potentiality of the ‘infinite realm of possible expression’.

Kantor, invariably, found himself forced to operate between two worlds (and particularly when accepting this official international prize): on the one hand, he was forced to operate in the world of culture and society, with the commodification and the underlying ontology that enables it, and on the other, he inhabited the world by the terms of what he understood as the ‘true artist’, someone who accepted the mystery of reality beneath the labels and categories maintained by society, and attempted to find ways to engage with it. In a statement from 1977\(^\text{70}\) on ‘The Situation of the Artist’, Kantor wrote:

> The artist has to pay for this strange privilege of operating ‘beyond’ life. The condition of the artist is like that of someone, who,

\(^\text{70}\) This text, ‘Sytuacja artysty’ was published in Kantor 1984: 7, in which it is dated 1977.
striving toward some particularly significant goal,
suddenly senses that the act of pressing onward
is the essence of his quest and the point of his existence.
And—looking for a way out, or just an easy way through realizes
that around him more and more doors are shutting,
that he must shut many of them himself,
try another way,
press on,
in the full and terrifying knowledge that everything is Void,
that the real nature of his task
is to close doors, thereby
shutting off
shutting out everything
that ceaselessly tries to furnish the Void with a content,
that passes under the name of Reality,
 arrogating to itself the only valid universality
and all legitimacy pertaining thereto ...
And only when the holocaust happens,
When our vaunted ‘reality’ dissolves,
amid disgrace and denunciation, clutching at words
to describe itself: ‘it all turned out to be a fabrication’,
amid the babble of mutual contradictions and alternative strategies—
the ‘condition of the artist’ draws close to the moment
of self-revelation. But it is already too late.
And, in any case, nobody has been listening.

(Kantor 1990: 140–141)

Kantor recognises that, in the ‘world’s terms’, he inhabits a ‘foreign land’ and, in so far as he is contaminated by it, he is a stranger to the underlying reality with which he is trying to commune. Nevertheless, in his desire to speak, ‘even if perhaps a stammering speaking’ as Gadamer puts it, he opens up the ‘infinite realms of possible expression’, an expression that opens up with those who wish to learn the same language the ‘infinite dialogue in the direction of the truth that we are’. This truth is the strangely positive truth of being, In Heidegger’s phrase, the ‘placeholder of nothing’, perhaps best expressed in the nothingness of the ‘…’ with which Kantor closes his ‘Little Manifesto’.

But surely this ‘nothing’, the ellipsis or ‘…’, is open to the charge of ‘emperor’s new clothes’ so beloved of some contemporary commentators. As a phrase this term is frequently deployed by the media as a clichéd pejorative
metaphor in the face of modern art seen as pretentious and hollow. In reality the phrase is also often applied to any art that seems bemusing and difficult to understand, because it challenges normative ideas of what 'art' should be (see Robbins 2004: 672, note 3). However, is this the provocation that Kantor is intending? Does he have a satirical intent? After all, both Kantor’s manifesto and Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ feature a ‘little child’.71 However, the forgetful schoolboy that Kantor becomes in his ‘Little Manifesto’ does not seem to have the same triumphant, whistle-blowing tenor that is the common interpretation of Andersen’s tale. Upon analysis this is instead what appears to be underlying Żurowski’s critique of Kantor discussed at the end of the previous chapter. In this critique Żurowski labelled Kantor a charlatan and buffoon, characterising his manifestos as ‘highly suspect wrapping’ or, in other words, a sham. What this chapter has shown are the existential preoccupations Kantor was working through in his art and writing. The ‘little boy dressed up in a black suit and pretending before his friends’ (Żurowski 1985: 368) evokes perhaps an interpretation other than that of the ‘little boy’ or ‘little child’ in Andersen’s tale. However, Anderson’s tale, as opened up in essays by first Jacques Derrida and later by Hollis Robbins (in each case their respective essays are an ‘interpretation of interpretation’) is every bit as ‘tricky’ as the patron of interpretation, Hermes, mentioned at the start of this chapter. In chapter three, I developed a particular view of human being, through a critique of representation, as a being that is extended through time, dwelling in the ‘allotted share’ of its ēthos. In the next chapter (chapter five) I will relate this idea of human being to notions of abjectness and negativity derived from further readings of Heidegger, Foucault and Agamben and locate these in Kantor’s work. Before I do so, however, I want to turn briefly now to relate the sense of interpretation developed so far to the questions concerning

71 In her essay Hollis Robbins references the translation of Andersen’s tale available from Project Gutenberg on the internet, giving the reason that this particular translation ‘is the most literal available’ (Robbins 2004: 641 fn. 1). This Project Gutenberg translation describes the ‘voice of innocence’ as ‘a little child’; the line, which occurs towards the very end of the tale (third paragraph from last) reads: “But the Emperor has nothing at all on!” said a little child’ (Andersen 1999). Despite this, Robbins, throughout her essay, refers almost entirely to this ‘little child’ as a ‘little boy’.

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‘truth’ and ‘appearance’ discussed in chapter three and reflect further on the way in which the interpretative field itself can also be seen to be extended. The conventional and reductive idea of two-way communication between ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’, that interpreters such as Żurowski seem to operate on, can instead be seen as an integral performative part of the ἔθος of human being itself.

The misleading ‘little child’
Derrida’s short critique of Andersen’s tale occurs near the beginning of his essay ‘The Purveyor of Truth’, whose main theme is a lengthy critique of Jacques Lacan’s reading of Edgar Allen Poe’s story ‘The Purloined Letter’. In this preliminary short discussion, he deconstructs Sigmund Freud’s reading of Andersen’s tale as a veiled expression of the unconscious fear of public nudity:

Freud’s text is staged when he explains to us that the text, e.g. that of the fairy tale, is an Einkleidung ['disguise'] of the nakedness of the dream of nakedness. What Freud states about secondary revision (Freud’s explaining text) is already staged and represented in advance in the text explained (Andersen’s fairy tale). This text, too, described the scene of analysis, the position of the analyst, the forms of his language, the metaphorico-conceptual structures of what he seeks and what he finds. The locus of one text is in the other.

(Derrida 1975: 37–38)
For Derrida, Andersen’s tale pre-empts and already performs Freud’s analysis of it in his Interpretation of Dreams and as such it contains the seeds of its own reading. As Robbins observes, ‘Andersen’s tale is also a critique of criticism, Derrida’s criticism suggests. As tale, teller, interpreter, and critical case study all in one, it knows what it is about in offering such a transparent fantasy’ (Robbins 2004: 659). Critical theorists such as Derrida and Robbins are also, like Schulz and Kantor, and Andersen’s tale, Hermes-like messengers.

Robbins, keen to take seriously Derrida’s point about the tale’s auto-interpretative nature, proposes a hermeneutic strategy that subverts the popular interpretation that the tale seems itself to favour: the seductive power of the romantic idiom of the innocent child speaking truth to power. She proposes:
that ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ offers several other critical positions besides that of the courageous romantic child. These positions are figured in the story by five very familiar ‘characters’: the Emperor, the ‘rogue weavers,’ the ministers, the canopy, and the public. Each of these positions offers us critical verbs: to rule, to weave, to minister, to parade, and to applaud. In the critique that follows I will present and parade ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ by weaving the threads of the tale’s often ignored characters and words, and in doing so address and applaud its sociopolitical-literary-critical complexities.

(Robbins 2004: 661)

In Robbins’ subsequent reading Andersen’s tale is seen to establish a charged zone of interpretative possibilities suspended between the ‘characters’ that precede the ‘little child’ together with the text that mediates them. Robbins considers the tale from seven perspectives in all: the Emperor, the weavers, the ministers, the canopy, the public, the little child and finally the text itself. In doing so she performs something like the reading that Heidegger performs on Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, which was discussed in the preceding chapter.

Understood in a conventionally representational manner Andersen’s tale seems, as Marshal McLuhan describes it ‘simply a perfect illustration of how perceptive but antisocial individuals—children, poets, artists, sleuths—can see what is really going on more clearly than “well-adjusted” individuals’ (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 88–89). In Derrida’s reading, the tale, echoing Heideggerian concerns (as well as the Kantorian strategy of emballage, of concealing to reveal), becomes a somewhat more convoluted tale of veiling and unveiling:

in the form of an invisible nakedness and an invisible garment, a fabric visible to some and invisible to others, a nakedness at once unapparent and exhibited. The same fabric conceals and shows the Stoff [matter] of the dream, i.e., also the truth of that which is present with no veil. If we take into account the more than metaphorical equation of veil, text, and fabric, Andersen’s text has the text as its theme. More precisely, the determination of the text as a veil within the space of truth, the reduction of the text to a movement of aletheia [sic].

(Derrida 1975: 37)
But, for Robbins, the tale, although containing these various readings becomes a shimmering zone of multiple shifting potential readings. Viewed from the perspective of each of the tales ‘characters’, the tale is simultaneously concerned with: the Emperor’s dilemma of how to perform his power; the weavers’ creativity in their successful ‘weaving’ of a web of deceit; the ministers’ concerns with managing the diplomacy of their office; the canopy’s performance of its function in signifying ‘that the Emperor is the emperor, whatever he happens to be wearing’ (Robbins 2004: 666); the public’s sense of participation in the performance of power in their initial ‘blind-seeing’ acquiescence in ‘seeing’ the Emperor’s invisible clothes; and the little child’s apparent puncturing of all this chain of enchantments begun by the weavers.

For Robbins, the text betrays itself in the seductive force with which it apparently resolves the tale around the pointing finger of the child, for in reality:

- The child’s words are disruptive—not for having levelled the difference between ruler and ruled, but for endangering the formal process by which it is accomplished without being openly acknowledged. While the public outside the text applauds the boy’s act of disenchantment, the community inside is fractured and diminished.

  (Robbins 2004: 668)

From this particular perspective the child emerges as ‘scandalously reactionary’ (Ibid.: 668), one who creates problems for the social fabric of the town rather than resolving or liberating anything.

When I first began thinking about this tale some years ago it was because of the regularity with which commentators would respond to the coverage of the annual Turner Prize by evoking the title of Andersen’s tale. This seemed to be a view shared particularly by large numbers of first-year undergraduate students, who would react negatively to the slightest avant-garde gesture in performances they were shown or taken to. At the time it seemed to me that the obvious assumption being made was that the bemused and uncomprehending public—together with the commentators themselves—were fulfilling the function of the little child whilst the artists were cast in the role of the scheming, roguish,
deceiving and villainous weavers. Then it had seemed enough for me to simply reverse this. I argued in lectures (mischievously delighting in provoking my audience) that the deceivers were the public and the commentators who both had a vested interest in maintaining the hegemony of the visible, of normativity, of the status quo. It was surely the artist who was in the role of the innocent little child in revealing the nakedness of the ‘real’, a sense of the ‘thing in itself’.

However, what is often overlooked is that Andersen’s tale does not end quite with the child’s pointing finger. Indeed, as Robbins points out citing from Elias Bredsdorff’s biography of Andersen, the original version of the tale had no child; the Emperor’s invisible new clothes were a success, he continues on his procession and ‘the whole town talked about his wonderful new clothes’ (Bredsdorff 1975: 312, cited by Robbins in 2004: 668). Even with the addition of the child, the Emperor, though vexed, ‘thought the procession must go on now! And the lords of the bedchamber took greater pains than ever, to appear holding up a train, although, in reality, there was no train to hold’ (Andersen 1999). As Robbins observes ‘If the function of art is to make the invisible visible, both the weavers and the chamberlains prove themselves aesthetically (as well as ethically) proficient in their specific references to what the cloth actually looks like’ (Ibid.: 674, fn. 17). What the little child innocently, or perhaps ignorantly points to—the Emperor’s nudity—is something that could be interpreted in a number of ways: that power is something invisible yet real; that the Emperor is, as signified by the canopy above him, still the emperor naked or not; that the power structure is a function of consensus, another real-but-invisible commodity. Viewed in this way, my revision was too simplistic, especially compared to the tale’s own performance of itself, which points towards the romantic resolution identified in the pointing finger of the little child, a gesture that veils the shimmering complexity and latent potentiality of its concealed, interpretative field.

**Conclusion: ‘maturing into childhood’**

In the last chapter I argued that a particular idea of representation, arising out of a post-Platonic metaphysical tradition, engenders a paradoxically non-narrative
idea of human being as an essential unitary substance moving through linear time. Using ideas from Heidegger and Agamben, I have problematised this particular notion of a unitary essence-as-substance by arguing that another way of conceiving human being is as a fluctuating temporal field extended through time: that human being is an extended process, an ongoing performative referencing backwards and forwards that constructs the individual’s space of being or ēthos. In this chapter I have problematised ideas of understanding and interpretation in such a way that the traditional notion of artist and spectator have become blurred. What I want to suggest is that the plane of interpretation is also collapsed into the nature of human being, and intersects with it in such a way that it, also, becomes part of its very construction. The ēthos—the dwelling-space or room—of human being is constructed by the passage backwards and forwards not just through time, by way of memory and expectation, but also Hermes-like, by multiple acts of interpretation: interpretation of oneself, self-reflexively in the sense of one’s creation of oneself, as well as interpretation of others and the shared environment of being, which Heidegger calls ‘the clearing’. So, there is the performative structural relationship between past and future, and performative hermeneutic relationship between the known and the unknown. In the range of possible interpretations of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ offered by the readings of the tale by Derrida and Robbins, Żurowski seems to stand out more clearly in the role of the ‘little boy’ in the sense of an interpreter who is ‘scandalously reactionary’ as outlined above. For who is Andersen’s little boy in the tale other than an infantile deus ex machina, a ‘Johnny-come-lately’, nothing more than a narrative device with which to ‘neatly’ close the tale. According to Robbins (citing from Bredsdorff’s biography 1975: 313), shortly before publication Andersen had second thoughts about his original childless conclusion and substituted the final three paragraphs that everyone now knows, apparently because he wanted to give it a more satirical appearance.

This ‘little child’, whose apparently innocently pointing finger is the locus for the popular ‘finger-pointing’ interpretation of the tale, is a red herring. Just as much of a red herring in aesthetic terms as the idea of ‘disinterest’ is in the
creation and spectatorship of art. The finger-pointing little boy is nothing more than another symptom of the fracture between artist and spectator as identified by Agamben. If this is the case, who is the little boy that Kantor regresses to shortly before his disappearance into the ‘…’ of the closing ellipsis of his Little Manifesto’? For he is not Andersen’s little boy. The answer lies with two of Kantor’s artistic precursor-siblings Gombrowicz and Schulz, both of whom utilise tropes of a return to childhood. However, it is Schulz, particularly, who holds the key to Kantor’s staged regression in the Sukiennice Hall on April 8, 1978. In a letter of March 4, 1936, replying to his friend Andrzej Pleśniewicz, a prominent Catholic intellectual, Schulz wrote:

> What you say about our artificially prolonged childhood—our immaturity—takes me a little aback. After all, the kind of art I care about is precisely a regression, childhood revisited. If it were possible to reverse development, to attain the state of childhood again, to have its abundance and limitlessness once more, that ‘age of genius,’ those ‘messianic times’ promised and sworn to us by all mythologies, would come to pass. My ideal goal is to ‘mature’ into childhood. That would be genuine maturity for you.

(Schulz 1988a: 126)

There is a different intimation here of the potential relevance of the small child. What is foregrounded here is not the child per se, but rather a particular idea of ‘regression’, of ‘childhood revisited’. What is at stake is a certain freedom of temporal mobility that would enable the ‘abundance and limitlessness’ of childhood to be smuggled back into the present as a messianic act. This is nothing to do with the simplistic finger pointing of the child at the end of Andersen’s tale. It does, however, relate to a sense of the weaving, or construction of human being out of time. To return to Kantor’s ‘Little Manifesto’, it is now possible to read it as a performative sculpture in which Kantor weaves himself into a distinctive artistic form. In his regression to childhood from the defiant stance at the beginning of the manifesto, from his having something to say, to the state of forgetfulness at its close, he enacts a move from the status of award-winning artist to something more abject. But, paradoxically, that very state of humiliation in the return to the immaturity of childhood, and of the
absence of memory, is a return to potentiality. The apparently humiliating regression, when seen as a fragment of a larger movement, process or cycle, becomes a potentially positive beginning rather than a humiliating end. In the same way that ‘poor objects’, as will be seen in the next chapter, became a form of resistance against the threat of annihilation during the occupation, a regression to childhood and the potentiality of the informe of immaturity becomes, for Kantor, a form of resistance, even though futile, against the encroachment of the final annihilation of death. It is as if by embracing the nothing of forgetfulness as a conscious, intentional gesture, Kantor is able to suggest the continuation and potential of the performance of ‘even the thing I am …’. In the next chapter I will explore in more detail the negative ontology that underlies Kantor’s poetics of being.
CHAPTER 5. THE BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT. KANTOR’S ANATOMY
LESSON: ‘REALITY OF THE LOWEST RANK’ AND THE BIOPOLITICS OF BARE LIFE

Introduction
Artists often use oblique strategies to explore the nature of human being and Tadeusz Kantor was no exception. As with other artists for whom the Second World War was a formative experience, Kantor’s particular aesthetic strategies are evidently profoundly influenced by his wartime experience. However, for Kantor this did not happen as a simple linear narrative in his artistic development. Until the 1970s, his experience can be understood to have been continually refracted through his engagement with a succession of international contemporary art practices. Each of Kantor’s encounters with a foreign art movement—Constructivism and abstraction, Surrealism, informal, ‘zero’, emballage, happening—was transformed in his hands through its intersection with his underlying concerns. As such, separate and, on the surface, seemingly disparate movements acquire a certain homogeneity as they are each détourned by Kantor in his struggles to articulate a poetics of being. As a consequence of his personal operation on them, these individual avant-garde artistic strategies are each turned into vehicles for each other. In this way, and certainly when viewed retrospectively, all of Kantor’s work can be seen to be expressive of certain tendencies from Constructivism, Dadaism, Surrealism, informal; it is all, in a sense, ‘impossible’, all ‘packaged’ and all concerned with the immediacy and aleatoricism of the happening.

With The Dead Class, Kantor began to leave such explicit engagement with and personalisation of existing art forms behind. Nevertheless, his ability to consistently bend existing artistic practice to his own purpose is an intrinsic part of the process that led to his later work. The continuous element underlying this process is Kantor’s concern with the paradoxical nature of human being, what Agamben (following Hegel) would later characterise as ‘this negative
being’—‘the thing existing which is not when it is, and is when it is not: a half-glimpsed becoming’ (Agamben 2007d: 107). Death is the negative side of this ‘half-glimpsed becoming’, the ‘thing that I am’. This ‘negative being’ is the ‘placeholder’, the ‘lieutenant of the nothing’. Death, whether witnessed in the form of someone casually shot in the street, or, as the realisation of one’s own impending mortality, problematises life by casting its shadow in such a way that the all-too-temporary, provisional nature of the ‘tenant-in-lieu’ is thrown into stark relief. Arguably it is Kantor’s experience with death in occupied Kraków that informed his work until The Dead Class. However, as he was preparing The Dead Class he was approaching his sixtieth year and had started to see friends and colleagues from his youth pass away. Consequently, in the early 1970s, Kantor experienced a re-acquaintance with death in a different sense to that of the violent slaughter of the occupation, and the inevitable encroachment of his own end started to inform his thinking. There is consequently a direct link between the witnessing of death during the period of 1939-1945 and—through the reminder of the natural deaths of his friends and acquaintances and the approach of his own sixtieth year in the early 1970s—the beginning of Kantor’s ‘witnessing of his own death’, something that, as I shall explore in chapter seven, featured increasingly in his work following The Dead Class. In this chapter I want to explore in more detail the metaphysical underpinnings of the paradoxical ‘negative being’ of human being. Firstly, I will examine Kantor’s engagement with art informel and argue that his interest with this form may derive from an underlying sense of informe peculiar to Polish Modernism embodied in the work of Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz. I will then discuss this in relation to Kantor’s détournement of the happening form, which he staged for the first time in Nuremberg in 1968: Lekcja anatomii wedle Rembrandta (An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt). In doing so I will show how Kantor’s reflection on aspects of his wartime work surfaces in the late 1960s in a way that prefigures certain key concerns that emerge more explicitly in The Dead Class and his subsequent work. This early, key experience in

72 This happening was realised several times as stated in the notes to the passage translated in Appendix 1.20.
occupied Kraków will be shown to relate to Kantor’s reading of the work of the
Jewish graphic artist and short-story writer Schulz, whose own aesthetic
strategies of inverting dominant ontological hierarchies can be seen to inform
Kantor’s own artistic practice. Implicit in this strategy is again a critique of a
representational ontology that prioritises a substantialist concept of being over
the more dynamic and mutable concepts of becoming and seeming; a reading
of reality that Schulz championed. In his performative staging of Rembrandt’s
painting, Kantor can be seen to challenge conventional ontological hierarchies
in a way that both echoes Schulz’s metaphysics and prefigures a sense of the
immanence of life as elaborated in the work of Gilles Deleuze.

**Informe and Informel**

Kantor’s ‘happenings’ emerged for him in the second half of the 1960s as a
natural development of his previous concerns with *informel*, ‘zero’, and
packaging or *emballage*. To understand the specific nature of negativity in
Kantor’s work, and before exploring the underlying metaphysics of negative
ontology in more detail it is worth first untangling the various strands present in
the particular art movements that he engaged with. I particularly wish to single
out the ideas that, for Kantor, cohere around his engagement with the idea of
*informel*, the postwar European movement in painting that flourished during the
1940s and 1950s, exemplified in the Parisian scene by painters such as Jean
Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Georges Mathieu, Hans Hartung and Wols. Arguably,
Kantor’s particular interpretation of *informel* continues to underly the work he
subsequently labelled as ‘zero’, ‘*emballage*’ and ‘happening’, and indeed, his
‘theatre of death’, although it was not necessarily the ideas of the historical
genre that Kantor was articulating.

Superficially, because Kantor publicly engaged in the second half of the
1950s with *art informel*, it can seem as if he was just importing ‘the latest fad’
into Poland following his second trip to Paris in 1955. However, it is possible to
argue that this is not the case, that although, on the surface Kantor found the
aesthetic of *informel* conducive to the problems of figurative painting and
geometrical abstraction, he can also be seen, at a deeper level, to be
continuing his development of a poetics of being that he had begun with the aesthetic of ‘poor realism’ developed for his underground production of The Return of Odysseus in 1944 (and which will be explored in more detail in chapter six). For one thing, as Suchan notes in his discussion of Kantor’s informel in relation to the lost film Attention—Painting! (which was discussed in chapter three) Kantor’s conception of his informel work was not identical with that of the American Abstract Expressionists, or the various approaches of the Western European painters working in this genre. As commentators such as William Rubin (1979) have noted, Abstract Expressionism and Pollock’s approach in particular, is understood as having arisen out of the concerns of Surrealism regarding automatism as a technique for liberating unconscious creativity. Kantor, despite his exposure to Surrealism during his first trip to Paris in 1947, was not following this particular route. Regarding the difference between what he calls the informe of Pollock and Kantor, Suchan notes that:

while the interpreters of Pollock’s painting saw chance as a way of liberating the subconscious—the true ‘self’—from the tyranny of culture, Kantor sees it as a way of liberating matter from the control of the artist. He thus confirms once again that, for him, informel is not exclusively (though it is to some extent) a means of self-expression, nor the painting—solely a recording of inner experience. That the relation between the artist and the painterly matter is of more complicated nature.

(Suchan 2005: 58)

Indeed, Suchan goes so far as to suggest that Kantor may have simply misunderstood informel, conflating two of its strands together:

At the time when he first met with it—during his visit to Paris in 1955—gesture painting was gradually giving way to matter painting. It is highly probable that the fact that Kantor simultaneously absorbed the two concepts—one of which attached greater importance to artistic expression, while the other tried to represent reality without cultural mediations—‘blurred’ his own formula of informel. Its subsequent hybridisation was doubtless a result of consecutive ‘modifications,’ made under the influence of ideas that at a given moment absorbed the artist’s attention—‘finding’ the object, ‘zeroing’ the artist’s creative
functions, recognising the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ as the only area of artistic exploration, and so on. (Ibid.: 62)

Whatever the truth of this, what is clear is that Kantor was using what he understood of informel to pursue his own artistic goals. In doing so he created what Suchan characterises as the ‘conglomerate of artefacts and ideas that we know today as Kantor’s informel’ (Ibid.). However, this ‘conglomeration’, however accidentally formed, indicates Kantor’s deeper concerns. These concerns, as identified by Suchan, are more important and interesting than the details of any origins in the circumstances of 1950s Paris. What determines, for Suchan, the ‘heretical nature’ of Kantor’s informel is rather ‘the blurring of the line separating the artist from the material’ and that it is this that can be seen to unify his aesthetic strategy beyond the ostensible genre of informel:

While the material changes: from dyes and canvas, through ready-made objects, ‘poor’ objects and situations, to ‘memory clichés, archetypal images, and individual memories, what remains unchanged is the complicated relation bonding the artist and the matter of his art into a single fluid system.

(Suchan Ibid.)

For Suchan ‘the artist balances on the border between the subject and the object of artistic activity’ (Ibid.).

As I shall discuss later in this chapter, the borderline between subject and object is something that acquires a complex significance in Kantor’s work. His proximity to the Jewish ghetto in Podgórze in Kraków during the occupation placed Kantor next to a physical border between life and death as marked by the barbed wire fence separating the free side of the street from the ghetto enclosure. However, this boundary was more than just physical; it also manifested itself as a form of liminality within Kantor’s own identity. Because of his Semitic features and the fact that his living situation necessitated his travel to and from an area adjacent to the ghetto, Kantor was frequently stopped and checked as a potential Jewish escapee. It will be remembered that Kantor, though not officially Jewish himself probably had some Jewish ancestry on his
father’s side, and during his childhood had coexisted happily with the prewar Jewish population of Wielopole. The fact of living in such close proximity to the dwindling, doomed Jewish population of Kraków and being mistaken for a Jew himself, placed Kantor in a peculiarly liminal situation of his own.

As I will show later in this chapter, the relationship of Jews to Poles according to the Nazi law governing occupation was logically that of a subset within a subset, in which a particular section of Polish society had been marked as ‘other’ on the basis of its race, transformed into a negative and then erased, thereby leaving an empty set—a void—in the heart of the Polish population. If the situation of the martyred Polish nation, as read through the filter of its Romanticism, can be seen as symbolic of humanity, its Jewish community is frequently seen as its hidden, guilty secret. To be a Polish Jew was, in a sense to be in a situation of provincialism and victimhood, more so than a Pole. Hyde cites Renato Palazzi, who, in his speech at the 1989 Paris conference at the Centre Georges Pompidou dedicated to Kantor’s work, spoke of what he called ‘le moi Hebraïque’:

> It is the Hebraic ‘I’ dissolved in the Holocaust and the Diaspora, it is the Polish ‘I’ stifled in its own national identity and condemned in turn to another, more modern diaspora where to be a Jew or a Pole is not an ethnic allegiance but the symbol of a universal condition.

(Palazzi cited in: Hyde 1991: 20)

Kantor had been reading Schulz’s writings since before the war and, as I will argue later in this chapter, was influenced by the sense of ‘degraded reality’ in the Jewish author’s work. However, in Schulz’s fictions, this Hebraic identity is never actively voiced. Schulz was not a practising Jew. He did not attend the Synagogue or speak Hebrew. So, for example, the school that his Old Age Pensioner in the eponymous story from *The Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* seeks re-admittance to is, in Schulz’s original text, just a school (i.e. a Polish Catholic school). The Headmaster in the story asks the Pensioner: ‘Do you remember for instance, how much is five times seven?’ (Schulz 1988b:

73 Renato Palazzi was a collector of Kantor’s art and supporter of his work.
In The Dead Class, which, in 1975 partially draws on this particular story for its situation, the teacher tellingly asks not a simple, neutral arithmetical question, but rather a question concerning the Old Testament: ‘What do we know about King Solomon?’ (Kantor n.d. The Dead Class: 18). In his discussion of The Dead Class in his article ‘Sztuka po końcu sztuka’ (Art after the end of art, 1981), the Jewish critic Artur Sandauer saw that Kantor had given this Hebraic ‘I’ a voice by making the ‘dead classroom’—a memory of a provincial Galician Polish-Catholic classroom—momentarily transform into a cheder or Jewish schoolroom, and the teacher into a melamed or Rabbinical schoolmaster. In this way, Sandauer argued, Kantor had voiced the tacit Jewishness present in Schulz’s fictions, and in Poland’s heart. The Jewish presence that surfaces in Kantor’s work, particularly in the ‘theatre of death’ cycle, is one of its most powerful aspects, one that refers to both the time of the occupation and of Kantor’s childhood. These two periods, when placed side-by-side show the positive and negative sides of the Jewish presence at the heart of Poland, which Kantor repeatedly stated was so important alongside that of the Christian Church.

As noted in chapter one the experience of death, in the form of both indiscriminate killing and the very precise discrimination of genocide, left many artists, and Kantor in particular, with a strong aversion to the utopianism of pure abstraction on the one hand, and any use of the human figure in art on the other. As Kantor commented in an interview with Porębski:

this human form became compromised, we could no longer have its form based on a humanistic idea of the ancient beauty of the human figure. This beauty remained absolutely erased, and I also did not respond well to deformation, say, the deformation of Picasso. I could not reconcile myself to this.

(Kantor in Porębski 1997: 124; my translation)

74 In Polish: ‘Czy pan jeszcze pamięta na przykład, ile jest pięć razy siedem?’ (Schulz 1989: 319).

75 In Polish: ‘Co wiemy o Królu Salomonie?’ (Kantor 2004: 54).
The problem of how to engage artistically with reality ‘after Auschwitz’ (to quote Theodor Adorno’s phrase from the 1950s (Adorno 2003: 435)) remained with Kantor’s generation after the war and its presence can be detected in his attitude to art during his 1947 stay in Paris:

The image of the human being, which up till then was regarded as the only truth-telling representation, disappears.

Instead, there gradually emerge biological forms of a lower kind, almost animals, with few remaining traces of their past ‘humanity’ or, perhaps, a few traces foreshadowing their humanity.

Let there begin a new cycle of creation.

(Kantor in: Kobialka 1993: 19)

The paintings that Kantor made in response to this were those of his ‘metamorphoses’ and ‘metaphorical’ periods. However there is a sense of wanting to come to terms with, to transform a perception of formlessness. If, under the occupation, human life, that of Poles and Jews, had been deformed by the Nazis into ‘biological forms of a lower kind’ a potential form of resistance to this was to détourned eformity into a positive form of evolution: a metamorphosis, a ‘new cycle of creation’.

In chapter two I noted that the three key figures of the inter-war avant-garde, Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz, each individually exhibited an independent sense of what Georges Bataille writing in Paris in the 1920s had identified as informe or ‘formless’. Published in December 1929 as a short entry in the Surrealist art magazine Documents (№7) as part of his mischievous ‘critical dictionary’, Bataille’s ‘article’ reads:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the
other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.

(Bataille 1985: 31)

Bataille’s editorial project for this incomplete enterprise is now understood to entail an intentional destabilisation of concepts and ideas. As such, this initially apparently insignificant and inconsequential article has acquired a significance beyond its diminutive size. In its opposition to the tyranny of form, and with its provocative and subversive presentation of formless as an amorphous and un-categorisable category, the article can be seen to be using a negative as a positive. The message of the article is that the world, as understood by science and the academy, is nothing but a formlessness forced into a ‘mathematical frock coat’. As such the article suggests that the world, in its essential formlessness inherently, undercuts the pomposity of academe through its manifestation as the kind of lowliness found on the sole of a shoe: a squashed earthworm or spittle.

Coming after Witkacy’s plays and novels of the early 1920s but before Schulz’s two short-story collections and Gombrowicz’s novel Ferdydurke of the mid-1930s Bataille’s article can be seen as roughly contemporary with the Polish inter-war avant-garde. However, this potential parallel has tended to be ignored. In succumbing to an equation between Bataille’s informe and the later informel of the forties and fifties it is easy to overlook the fact that in having the influence of Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz, Kantor was already imbued with a specifically Polish sense of informe before he ever became aware of the art informel painters in Paris. In the work of these three figures, formlessness acquires a playful and subversive power to challenge and liberate conventional thoughts and values and Witkacy’s sense of the essential formlessness of reality predates Bataille’s article by a number of years. As Gerould writes in his introduction to his translation of Witkacy’s 1921 play The Water Hen (A Spherical Tragedy in Three Acts), reality for Witkacy consists of ‘New groupings, hybrid graftings, preposterous fusions—the play’s motion is generated by the odd malleability and mutability of matter’ (Gerould in Witkiewicz 1989: 35).
Witkacy’s is a vitalist world in which ‘People are like insects and Infinity surrounds them and summons them in a mysterious voice’ (Witkiewicz 1989: 49) and ‘The world is a desert without meaning’ (Ibid.: 50). This conception of matter in Witkacy—the combination of questionable forms-of-life within a desert of inanimate matter—seems very close to Bataille’s idea of Informe. Gombrowicz and Schulz too, each in their own way, share this predilection for the prioritisation of lowliness and immaturity, a sense in which reality seethes and writhes beneath humanity’s perception of it, and arrives, with some sort of cruel sense of humour, at surprisingly inappropriate ways of subverting the human sense of superiority.76

The problem with placing Kantor’s informel paintings so securely within the framework of the Parisian style detracts from the sense of his continuity with the interwar avant-garde concerns of Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz. Together these figures can be seen as a source of a specifically, and particularly Polish brand of informe, one that arose out of the nationalistic concerns of Polish Romanticism as it processed the aftermath of partition and the challenges of independence. Paradoxically, the tenor of existential absurdity represented by the work of these three figures became equally applicable to the realities of Nazi occupation and later those of the Soviet bloc. Failure to recognise the importance of this ‘Polish informe’ for Kantor’s understanding of his own practice of informel, risks that practice being seen as entirely continuous with that of art informel, and thereby understood within narrow art-historical terms. As a related example, some critics have equated Bataille’s term with that of the ‘informal’ of art informel and, in doing so, unhelpfully serve to conflate these terms in a way that allows them to lose their interesting specificity and reduces their subversive force. The painting, variously categorised as ‘matter’ or ‘gesture’ painting arose in Paris as a response to various currents in the Parisian art scene: ranging from a sense of rebellion amongst younger artists to the shadow cast by the ‘School of Paris’, to a general feeling that the experience of war and occupation demanded, as a response, a complete break

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76 The ending of Gombrowicz’s last novel Cosmos (Gombrowicz 2005) provides perhaps the supreme example of this.
with aesthetic tradition. In consequence the resulting experimentation with a 
non-geometrical form of abstraction is indicative that a certain sense of ‘anti-
form’ or ‘formlessness’ was seen as a potential aesthetic strategy for dealing 
with the perceived problems of geometrical utopianism on the one hand, and 
straightforward figurative painting on the other. Utopianism seemed a bankrupt 
gesture in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and for many artists, the 
recent experience of death in one form or another rendered the very act of 
depicting bodies at all in figurative painting inherently distasteful. Edouard 
Jaguer, in his 1946 article ‘Les Chemins de l’abstraction’ (The Paths of 
Abstraction), referring to the kind of contemporary geometric abstraction typified 
by Piet Mondrian, commented: ‘Confronted with these cheerful or austere 
mosaics, we stay indifferent (apart from the pleasure to the eye). In no way do 
these decorative elements relate to our apocalyptic age. We cannot recognize 
ourselves in them’ (cited in Guilbaut 1990: 49). Echoing this sentiment Bataille 
wrote in 1947 in his review in *Critique* of Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question 
juive* (published in English as *Anti-Semite and Jew*):

> Like you and me, those responsible for Auschwitz had 
> nostrils, a mouth, a voice, human reason, they could unite, 
> to have children: like the Pyramids or the Acropolis, 
> Auschwitz is the product, is the sign of the human. The 
> image of humanity is inseparable, henceforth, from the 
> gas chamber ...
>
> (Bataille 1947: 471; my translation)

However, such a simple equation of *informel* with Bataille’s *informe* merely on 
the basis that painters favoured an informal and improvisatory approach over 
geometrical abstraction or figuration as a more appropriate response to the 
aftermath of war misses out on the subversive import of Bataille’s ‘definition’.

As a term specifically for painting *informel* was coined by Michel Tapié in 
his book *Un art autre* (Art of Another Kind) published in 1952. As Yve-Alain Bois, 
writing in his essay ‘No to … the *Informel*’ notes: ‘The word *informel* is self-
evidently badly chosen, and its greatest wrong is to look so much like the word 
*informe*, even though the latter’s field of reference is diametrically opposed to 
the former’s’ (Bois 1997a: 140). It does seem that the term *informel* has come to
encompass what Bois calls ‘the huge gang of painters who followed in [the] wake [of Fautrier, Dubuffet, Wols, etc.] and who were often characterized as “tachistes” or “abstraits lyriques”’ (Ibid.; emphasis in original). Writing in his essay ‘Postwar Painting Games: the Rough and the Slick’ in Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal, 1945–1964 (1990), Serge Guilbaut nevertheless confidently asserts an assumed thematic relationship between the two terms: ‘Important here, besides the recurrent themes of Surrealism, was the concept of the “incoherent,” the “inchoate,” which became for Tapié the symbol of the new art and which derived from what Georges Bataille had named the “formless” in the 1920s. (Informe in French) (Guilbaut 1990: 50).

While Critics like Bois and Sarah Wilson argue that informel is distinct from Bataille’s informe, Bataille’s conceptualisation of informe does provide informel with an important subversive and metaphysical tenor without which it would merely function as a descriptive term in opposition to geometric abstraction: ‘informal’ and improvisatory as opposed to ‘formal’ and meticulously planned. Bataille’s text, in its original context in Documents 7, followed two entries on ‘spittle’, one of which characterised spittle as the epitome of the informe. Bataille’s article has thus two obvious intentions, deriving from the formlessness of spittle, but also the base, lowly nature of such a bodily secretion. This idea of informe might appear applicable to Kantor’s informel paintings, as well as those of some of the Parisen painters, such as Mathieu, looking as they do as if something has been squashed onto the canvas (as indeed Kantor’s umbrellas often were). However, as Suchan has argued, Kantor’s informel paintings come from a set of concerns that are more complex than this, concerns that are to do with the liberation of the artistic creation, as well as to its relationship with the artist: the ‘balancing on the border of the subject and object of artistic creativity’ (Suchan 2005: 62). As noted Kantor already had access to a Polish sense of informe with which he was already familiar before the war, and this was further influenced by the informe of the reality of occupation that placed him in a personal liminality between Jew and non-Jew.
During his first visit to Paris in 1947—the period of the first phase of the art that Tapié was to label *informel* in 1952—Kantor appears not to have encountered the painting of Fautrier, Dubuffet, Mathieu, Wols et al. directly. The painters he met with then were figures such as the Social Realist painter André Fougeron, whom he interviewed, and the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta. Alongside the collections in the Louvre, he saw paintings by Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró. He also encountered Picasso’s postwar paintings of bestially deformed human figures, which, together with the example of Matta seemed to have influenced his subsequent ‘metamorphoses’ and ‘metaphorical’ paintings (see Pleśniarowicz 2004: 53). Instead of the ‘gesture’ and ‘matter’ painting then being developed, Kantor seems to have obtained a sense of something approaching Bataille’s concerns in his ‘critical dictionary’ article via the unlikely source of his visit to the exhibits of the *Musée de l’Homme* at the *Palais de la Découverte* (Palace of Discovery) which presented images of the world seen under the microscope—images of the microscopic structure of matter as revealed by the techniques of science as opposed to those of art. Interviewed by Borowski years later Kantor confided that: ‘For the first time I encountered the image-world as the product of [scientific] knowledge. I was fascinated, but overwhelmed by the awareness that access to this world [via science] alone provides the supreme and the most precise knowledge’ (Kantor in Borowski 1982: 32; my translation).

In her book of reminiscences, *Szkice z pamięci: zapiski, wspomnienia, listy* (Sketches from Memory: Notes, Memoires, Letters), Kantor’s first wife, Ewa Krakowska recollects her and Kantor’s visits to the *Palais de la Découverte*. The book presents reproductions of sketches made there by Kantor and the photographs he took of their visit to the museum. The Kantors’ visit to Paris coincided with the museum’s International Science Exhibition organized by UNESCO from 1946 to 1947 (Krakowska 2009: 115). The exhibition featured

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77 Kantor married his first wife, Ewa Jurkiewicz, just before the end of the war on March 24, 1945. They had met in the Young Artists’ Group and she had been involved in his Independent Theatre. She accompanied Kantor on his first trip to Paris. They were later divorced and Ewa subsequently married Wojciech Krakowski and retained his name (see Pleśniarowicz 2004: 49).
presentations on organic chemistry, showing equipment used in stereochemistry with display cases of molecular models. Other halls presented material on endocrinology, formal genetics and cytogenetics and of the microscopic details of plant biology. As evidenced in the reproductions in Krakowska’s book, Kantor made sketches of the stoma of mustard plants, of the latticework-like structure of the molecular models, and many other curious shapes and forms (mostly unidentified in the sketches) that he found in the museum’s galleries. He took photographs of images such as the x-ray of a human head, showing the skull beneath the skin, and of a large wire model showing the latticework-like three-dimensional internal structure of solids (unidentified in the photograph). This model seems to directly prefigure Kantor’s drawings and paintings of the period following his visit to Paris when he was preoccupied with the depiction of ‘Umbrelloid Space’. Also featured in the museum’s hall of medicine then, according to Krakowska, was Honoré Fragonard’s 1766-1771 sculpture, *Rider*, on loan from *l’École nationale vétérinaire de Maisons-Alfort*. Kantor had pasted a reproduction of this sculpture in his sketchbook. The sculpture consisted of full-sized fake skeletons and internal organs of a horse and its rider (Ibid.: 124–125) and is a possible model for the figure of General Piłsudski on his skeletal horse created years later in Kantor’s 1985 production *Let the Artists Die*. Krakowska recalls the effect of the exhibition on first arriving:

> After familiarising ourselves with the area around our apartment, we decided to visit several exhibitions near the Champs Élysées. Included in our inventory was the Palais de la découverte. Unfortunately, we reached it after closing time. Disappointed by the closed doors, we decided that tomorrow I will go alone to see if it is worth seeing.

> On the second day, after entering the first room, I saw a meter-high magnifying glass, and behind the lens moved monstrous-size human figures. Shocked, your view quickly ran around the rest of the room with mathematical graphs, models of chemical compounds, models of atoms, the magnified cross sections of rocks and I immediately went back to our hotel to tell Tadeusz. The very next day we both went there and when I saw through the lens
Tadeusz’s great head, again it made an electrifying impression on me. Many times we went there. Tadeusz made sketches and researched the scientific discoveries that were presented there in different ways.

(Krakowska 2009: 113; my translation)

The exhibition was a revelation to Kantor and appears to have influenced him as much if not more than the Surrealist paintings of Picasso and Roberto Matta that he had seen in Paris. ‘… stop going to museums and galleries …’ he proclaimed:

I have discovered a new museum. The *Palais de la Découverte*. I reached it one day and entered—as if it were just a museum of curiosities.

But later going there between 11.00am and 3.00pm became a duty almost.

… The unusual accumulation of all that the EYE—the human organ extolled since the times of the Impressionists that has usurped exclusive rights to the area of painting and the knowledge of the world—could not see.

… Sections of metals, cells, genes, molecules, structures ...

… A completely different morphology. The concept of NATURE that embraces the infinite and the unimaginable. A real ANT-HILL!

Of: DUMPING-GROUND!

A concentration of nature imagined in a nightmare. Madness…. the hectic mobility of life. And its CRUELTY! ....

All anthropomorphic norms have been brought to ruin.

(Kantor (n.d.) ‘Notebook ’47, or Inferno’: 1; Polish text in: Kantor 2005: 103 and similar in interview in Borowski 1982: 31; ellipses in original)

The *Palais de la Découverte* exhibition seems to have allowed Kantor to make a connection with the idea of a troublesome, immature, trashy, seething sense of reality that was circulating between Witkacy, Gombrowicz and Schulz. This would later, and for a limited time, find direct expression in Kantor’s work in his
Informel period, but as a description of matter from his ‘Night Notebooks’ makes clear, the idea of informe or formlessness—akin to Bataille’s notion, but taken rather from the leading figures of the interwar Polish avant-garde—was already established, this time described in terms of space:

Space is not a passive receptacle in which objects and forms are posited....
SPACE itself is an OBJECT (of creation).
And the main one!
SPACE is charged with ENERGY.
Space shrinks and expands.
And these motions mould forms and objects.
It is space which GIVES BIRTH to forms!

[...]
A figure of a human being is formed at the threshold between a living, suffering organism and a mechanism, which functions automatically and absurdly.
It is governed by the laws of METAMORPHOSIS.
A figure of a human being is subject to transformations, expansions, transplants, and interbreeding.


This is the sense of the seething, writhing informe that underlies Kantor’s postwar painting and, I would argue is what underlies what Suchan sees as the originality in the ‘conglomerate of artefacts and ideas that we know today as Kantor’s informel’ (Suchan 2005: 62).

Kantor was so disconcerted by the ability of scientific perception to see further and more clearly than artistic perception that he wondered if there was

78 ‘1948... 1949... 1950... Notatnik Nocny, Czyli Metamorfozy’ (1948... 1949... 1950... Night Notebooks, or Metamorphoses) in Kantor 2005: 108–112, translated in Kobialka 2009: 106–109 as ‘After the War: A Night Notebook or Metamorphoses (1947–1948). As with much of Kantor’s writings, it is not clear when these pieces were written. According to Pleśniarowicz most of these writings ‘were written or edited only in the 70s and 80s’ and are understood as reflections and recollections of the years indicated (in Kantor 2005: 5: ‘W większości były pisane lub redagowane dopiero w latach 70. i 80.’; my translation).

79 See Appendix 1.17 for an earlier, unpublished, anonymous translation in the Cricoteka archives that follows the format given in the Polish publication of Kantor’s collected writings.
any way forward for art. In his conversation with Borowski years later, following a discussion about his first encounter with *art informel* in 1955, Kantor is asked if he no longer believed in painting. In response to Borowski’s question Kantor, making a direct link with his *informel* period, replied:

I believed, but it was not an absolute faith. Always, as in *informel* painting, I wanted something more than some form of autonomy or the methods in the art. I want to apply this method to the whole of reality. The case interested me more as a phenomenon of reality than as a stand-alone value of the painting.

(Kantor interviewed in Borowski 1982: 42; my translation.)

Clearly, in the particular character that he found in the ‘formlessness’ of *informel*, Kantor saw an insight into the flux of reality akin to the insight he had received in his time spent in the galleries of the *Palais de la Découverte*, the ‘concentration of nature imagined in a nightmare. Madness…. the hectic mobility of life’. For Kantor, commenting later in the discussion when asked what the ‘new’ *informel* tendency meant for him, replied:

The [new] painting, which was just arriving, manifested an end to all calculation and intellectual constraints and as a result, it was also the end of current experience. It took on the forces of darkness and disaster revealing their nature and mechanism. Painting was situated beyond all form and aesthetics. It became for me a manifestation of life: *not a continuation of art, but of life.*

(Ibid.; emphasis in original)

In one sense then, *art informel*, for Kantor, was yet another strategy for responding to the aftermath of the war. However, it was a strategy that was enlisted as an articulation of the underlying sense of the ‘Polish *informe*’, especially in the sense of ‘degraded reality’ that he had acquired from Schulz’s writings.

Ostensibly it is Witkacy that is associated with Kantor due to the six plays by that author that he chose to associate his productions with for the twenty-year period between 1955 and 1975. However, underneath the overt preoccupation with Witkacy, ran the constancy of certain aesthetic concerns derived from Schulz. In his discussion ‘From Informel to emballage’, one of the
essays accompanying his interviews with Kantor, Borowski makes a further link between what I am terming the ‘Polish informe’ in Kantor’s work and that of Schulz, observing that: ‘Genuine, proper interest in the reality of the artist saw in Kantor, as in Schulz, degraded reality’ (Borowski 1982: 123; my translation). Indeed the affinity between Kantor and Schulz is, in places, striking. In Kantor’s recollections of his time in Paris in 1947, where he articulates this crisis of form, his phrasing bears distinct echoes from Schulz’s prose. Kantor remembered his dismay at the realisation that the structure of reality, as he had seen it revealed in the *Palais de la Découverte* exhibitions, could only be accessed through scientific methods and that his artistic training disqualified him from acquiring such knowledge himself:

But I could not accept this. Then, after some time I made a ‘discovery’, which personally for me is of fundamental importance. I came to realise, however, that there exists another entrance. That it will be a rather poor side-door, unrepresentative, maybe even ridiculous, through which art might enter.

I realized that I had to remain a layman, in order to maintain the conditions necessary for the imagination!

(Ibid.: 32; my translation)

In his discussion of matter and creation in Schulz’s ‘Manekiny’ (Tailors’ Dummies), the fourth story from *The Cinnamon Shops*, the narrator’s father argues that: ‘even if the classical methods of creation should prove inaccessible for evermore, there still remain some illegal methods, an infinity of heretical and criminal methods’ (Schulz 1988b: 40). In another example of Schulzian echoes in one of the notes in his ‘Notebook ’47 or Inferno’ Kantor reflects that:

It may well also be that my progress is not going to end at this ‘stop’ …

Maybe there will be ‘sidetracks’ off the Main Track of my life and work that I will have to follow to get back to the Main Track …

(Kantor (n.d.) ‘Notebook ’47, or Inferno’: 6; Polish text in: Kantor 2005: 106; ellipses in original)

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80 There is almost identical text in Kantor’s ‘Notebook ’47 or Inferno’; unpublished anonymous translation Kantor n.d.: 2, Polish text in Kantor 2005: 104.
This seems to directly echo the language used by Schulz at the beginning of ‘Genialna epoka’ (The Age of Genius), the second story from The Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass, in which the narrator asks: ‘Have you ever heard of parallel streams of time within a two-track time? Yes, there are such branch lines of time, somewhat illegal and suspect […]’ (Schulz 1988b: 140).

Kantor’s account of matter itself, towards the end of his informel period in 1961 seems redolent with the sense of Schulzian informe:

[The Informel Theatre] is a discovery of an unknown aspect of REALITY or of its elementary state: MATTER that is freed from abiding by the laws of construction, always changing and fluid; that escapes the bondage of rational definitions; that makes all attempts to compress it into a solid form ridiculous, helpless and vain; that is perennially destructive to all forms and is nothing more than a manifestation; that is accessible only by the forces of destruction, by whim and risk of a COINCIDENCE, by fast and violent action.

(Kantor in: Kobialka 1993: 51)

Schulz’s account of matter, again voiced by the narrator’s father in the story ‘Tailors’ Dummies’, although more celebratory and positive is couched in a similarly vitalist rhetoric:

Matter has been given fertility, inexhaustible vitality, and, at the same time, a seductive power of temptation which invites us to create as well. In the depth of matter, indistinct smiles are shaped, tensions build up, attempts at form appear. The whole of matter pulsates with infinite possibilities that send dull shivers through it. Waiting for the life-giving breath of the spirit, it is endlessly in motion.

(Schulz 1988b: 39)

81 It is not only matter in Schulz that is animate and mutable, but space and time that are also liable to surprise with unexpected changes. In the story ‘Cinnamon Shops’ streets and rooms change their shape and relation as the narrator runs on an evening errand. In ‘The Age of Genius’, as already noted, there are ‘parallel streams of time’ with ‘branch lines […] somewhat illegal and suspect’ (Schulz 1988b: 140).
Although at first glance Kantor’s account of matter seems more pessimistic than that of Schulz, perhaps owing to its refraction through his experience of the occupation, there is nevertheless a strong sense of Schulz’s vitalism in its description as ‘always changing and fluid’ and of its ‘fast and violent action’. Also, as noted in chapters two and four, there is the sense of both artists occupying a Hermes-like position of liminality on the borderline between their own creativity and that of the material itself.

This conception of the subversive, vital nature of matter can be seen earlier in Kantor in the aesthetic of ‘poor realism’ developed for his wartime production of *The Return of Odysseus* in 1944 (to be considered in chapter six), before his adoption of the term *Informel* in the late 1950s. Years later in an interview with Barbara Sawa in 1988 Kantor gave a rare public acknowledgement of his debt to Schulz, claiming that:

‘poverty’ is for me a truly human condition, and also a condition in which art can exist.

This is why I created for myself this idea of poor reality—reality of the lowest rank. It is not only my invention, though, because there is something very Polish about it. In the inter-war period, Bruno Schulz built a world of degraded reality in his novels [sic]. I conceived a notion of reality which is poor, indistinct and helpless when confronted with all the supreme world powers.

(Kantor interviewed in 1988, in Sawa 1990: 65)

The term ‘degraded reality’ was coined by the influential Polish-Jewish critic Artur Sandauer, who wrote the introduction ‘Rzeczywistość Zdegradowana (Rzecz o Brunonie Schulzu)’ (Degraded Reality—A Study of Bruno Schulz) to the first post-war edition of Schulz’s fictions, originally published in 1964. It is tempting to think that Kantor’s articulation of his central aesthetic derives from Sandauer’s idea of ‘degraded reality’ in Schulz’s fictions. The circumstantial evidence is on the surface compelling because Kantor seems not to use the term until the 1970s when he started to reflect in writing on his work since 1938. It seems entirely characteristic of Kantor to claim that the idea was original to him by retrospectively predating it to the time of the occupation. It is, however, undoubtably Sandauer who identifies this quality in Schulz’s fictions, and his
1964 essay and the republication of Schulz’s work were tremendously influential in the Polish culture of the time.

The 1964 republication of Schulz’s stories led to a resurgence of interest in his work, which in turn led to the making of Wojciech Jerzy Has’s film of *Sanitorium pod kledysdrą*, released in 1973\(^82\) at the time when Kantor was beginning to work on *The Dead Class*. As Michael Brooke remarks in his 2008 review of Has’s film: ‘Most unsettling of all is the recreation of pre-Holocaust Jewish Poland, whose total destruction Schulz didn’t live to witness’ (Brookes 2008: n.p.). Has’s reworking of themes from Schulz’s writings carried a certain awareness of the Holocaust that could not have been directly present in Schulz’s texts. In consequence the film has a sense of reflecting on Schulz’s life from the perspective of his demise at the hands of the Gestapo officer who shot him. Also, coming only a few years after the Polish authority’s notorious anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, this sense of a lost, ghostly Jewish presence within Poland was enough to cause censorship problems so that the film had to be smuggled out of Poland to appear in the 1973 Cannes Film Festival where it won the Jury Prize.\(^83\)

It is hard not to see in Has’s film elements that prefigure motifs used by Kantor in his ‘theatre of death’. The wan-faced train conductor who reappears as a Charon-like figure throughout the film seems to prefigure the Charwoman of *The Dead Class*, the Photographer’s Widow in *Wielopole, Wielopole*, and the Innkeeper in *I Shall Never Return*. Scenes and locations metamorphose fluidly in a manner that is true to Schulz’s elastic sense of time and place, but also points towards Kantor’s ability to morph his theatrical spaces from Christian classroom to Jewish synagogue, and from family-room to battlefield. Moreover, in Has’s film, soldiers frequently march with bayonetted rifles in a manner that both recalls some of Schulz’s drawings for his second volume of stories (see

\(^{82}\) Released in North America as *The Sandglass* and in the UK as *The Hour-Glass Sanitorium*.

Schulz 1988b: 199, 201 and 259) but also seems to prefigure the many manifestations of marching soldiers in Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’.

The metamorphic quality in Has’s film of Schulz’s story exemplifies a certain informe of the Polish kind that Kantor derives from Schulz and the other two figures of the Polish interwar avant-garde. However, what makes the influence of informe in its Schulzian form so poignant for Kantor, as I noted at the end of chapter two, is its celebration of provincialism and Jewishness. Although Kantor and his generation devoured Schulz before the occupation, the idea of ‘degraded reality’, of a vitalist materialism and its creative mutability arising out of ‘low’ or ‘degraded’ peripheral, provincial reality, for Kantor at least, acquired a particular resonance during the experience of occupation and its aftermath. In a section that seems to prefigure Alain Resnais’s 1955 film documentary about Auschwitz, Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog), with its documentation of the commodification of human being into soap, lampshades and stuffing for sofas, Schulz’s work acquires a certain prescience. In his ‘Conclusion’ to the ‘Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies’ (a section of the story ‘Manekiny’), the narrator’s Father comments that:

Ancient, mythical tribes used to embalm their dead. The walls of their houses were filled with bodies and heads immured in them. A father would stand in a corner of the living room—stuffed, the tanned skin of a deceased wife would serve as a mat under the table. I knew a certain sea captain who had in his cabin a lamp, made by Malayan embalmers from the body of his murdered mistress.

[…] my own brother, as a result of a long and incurable illness, has been gradually transformed into a bundle of rubber tubing. […] Can there be anything sadder than a human being changed into the rubber tube of an enema? What disappointment for his parents, what confusion for their feelings, what frustration of the hopes centred around the promising youth!

(Schulz 1988b: 47)

Despite the note of ironic humour that is present, these transformations of human being into inanimate commodities seem more casually devastating than, say, the transformations in Franz Kafka’s stories, which at least still involve a
change into other living forms. In Schulz the transformation is of a more humiliating order. It is, however, precisely Schulz’s Jewishness that makes his version of informe so profound in its influence on Kantor. In the space of one decade following the publication of his first collection of stories in 1934, Schulz’s informe had acquired a macabre double perspective.

As already mentioned, a consistent foundation of Kantor’s aesthetic was a twofold preoccupation with what he referred to as realności najniższej rangi (the reality of the lowest rank) and przedmiot biedny (the poor object). Both of these aspects of his aesthetic can be seen to articulate a specifically Polish sense of informe, and in its Schulzian form, a specifically poignant Polish-Jewish tenor. Kantor’s aesthetic prioritised a poor, lowly, and degraded reality at the margins of existence: a form of being that dwells in the liminal zero-zone between existence and nonexistence. This aesthetic preoccupation, as I will argue in the following discussion, can be seen to relate to aspects of the negative ontology.

**Negative ontology: Something for nothing—nothing as something?**
The concept of ‘negative ontology’ has a paradoxical and problematic connotation: surely ‘nothing can come of nothing? In the published version of his 1935 lecture course *Introduction to Metaphysics* (2000) Heidegger sees this paradox as exemplified in the ancient debate between Parmenides and Heraclitus who introduced to Western metaphysics the apparently opposing conceptions of reality as either being or becoming:

This division and opposition [Being\(^{84}\) and becoming] stands at the inception of the question of Being. Even today, it is still the most familiar restriction of Being through an Other; for it is immediately obvious, due to a representation of Being that has hardened into the self-evident. What becomes, is not yet. What is, no longer needs to become. That which ‘is’ has left all becoming behind it, if indeed it ever became or could become. What ‘is’ in the authentic sense also stands up against every onslaught from becoming.

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\(^{84}\) Following Heidegger who tends to make a distinction between Sein, ‘Being’, and seiende, ‘beings’. I use ‘Being’ to refer to the totality of existence, the fact that things are at all, and ‘being’ or ‘beings’ to refer to individual entities within that totality.
Out of these Pre-Socratic ideas, first Plato and then Aristotle developed the dichotomy of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ into the concepts of ‘substance’ and ‘appearance’. *Ousia* (substance) is understood as the essential, substantive basis of being, one with a problematic relationship to its appearance: the substance can only be known and experienced because of its representation. The idea of Nihilism is in a sense a direct challenge to this representational idea of reality because it itself appears to challenge the idea of a substantial basis for reality: that there is anything behind the appearance. Nietzsche’s plan for his proposed final book *The Will to Power*, opens with a section entitled ‘European Nihilism’, which reads: ‘Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?’ (Nietzsche 1968: 7). According to Nietzsche the idea of nihilism—the place of ‘the nothing’—is an uncanny presence in the world, lurking not only within the essence of human being but in the essence of the creative activity of the artist as well as the aesthetic activity of spectatorship. The implication is that this negativity, as a lurking presence, is indeed something that is paradoxically present—a *no*-thing that *is*. Heidegger comments on this apparent paradox in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

*together with the path of Being, the path of Nothing must expressly be considered, that it is consequently a misunderstanding of the question about Being if one turns one’s back on Nothing with the assurance that Nothing obviously is not. (That Nothing is not a being, however, by no means prevents it from belonging to Being in its own manner).*

(Heidegger 2000: 117; emphasis in original)

If, as Heidegger and certain philosophers working in his tradition such as Agamben would have it, this negativity is a positive force, then it is necessary to develop an understanding of the artist, the work, and the spectator that can adequately situate them each in the context of this paradox.

In 1929, ten years before Kantor was to complete his studies at the Kraków Academy of Fine Art, Martin Heidegger delivered his inaugural lecture, as Husserl’s successor as professor of philosophy, at the University of Freiburg.
Entitled ‘What is Metaphysics?’, the lecture was a convoluted disquisition on the place of nothingness as the ground of Being—of existence as such. For Heidegger, the place of human being, or dasein (literally ‘being-the-there’) in his terminology, was predicated on ‘the Nothing’ such that human being was itself ‘the lieutenant’ or ‘placeholder [platzhalter] for the Nothing’ (1968: 374, 1998a: 93 and see also Safranski 1998: 182–183). As he went on to argue in his 1949 ‘Postscript’ to the lecture, Heidegger feared that his foregrounding of the paradoxical presence of ‘the Nothing’ (paradoxical because, according to conventional logic, ‘nothing’ cannot have a presence by definition) would be interpreted in an unremittingly negative manner. Indeed, this has generally been the tenor of the ‘place’ of nothingness in twentieth-century discourse. However, in the spring of 1929, Heidegger attempted to defend his positive understanding of ‘the Nothing’ in his famous public debate with Ernst Cassirer, whose The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (published in three volumes in the 1920s) marked him out as the philosopher of culture and proponent of its positive values. In the debate, Cassirer championed human culture as ‘transcendence turned into form’, a dwelling erected by human being for human being as a protection against barbarism and animality. This building of an ‘ideal world’ was a protection that was hard won but all too fragile and easily destroyed. Heidegger, whilst agreeing that culture was a home for human being, argued that it was a home that could become stale and cluttered, a home in need of renewal or repair—that culture could become rigid and stultifying. In this way, he maintained, human being ‘freezes into’ the culture it has created and loses its freedom. In contrast to Cassirer, Heidegger advocated the necessity for human being to confront itself with its original nakedness and ‘thrownness’. For him it was necessary for human being to be thrown ‘back, so to speak, into the hardness of his fate’ (Heidegger 1990: 204), ‘to surrender man […] to anxiety’ (ibid.: 200). As Rüdiger Safranski characterises it in his 1998 biography of Heidegger, human being should be given a fright that will force it back into that homelessness from which the flight into culture can begin anew (Safranski 1998: 187). In the autumn of 1939, ten years after this debate between Cassirer and Heidegger, and shortly before Kantor completed his formal studies as an
artist that December, the Germans invaded Poland and set about providing the
evironment that would practically engage him in the environment of occupied
Kraków in Heidegger’s project of ‘surrendering man to anxiety’.

**Occupied Kraków: The reality of biopower**

Following the Nazi invasion of 1939, Kantor, along with the other occupants of
Kraków, was indeed ‘thrown back into the hardness of his fate’. From the
beginning, the Nazi plan for the Polish people was a severe example of the
exercise of what has come to be known—following Michel Foucault’s
characterisation—as biopower: where a power ‘has taken control of both the
body and life […] that has […] taken control of life in general—with the body as
one pole and the population as the other’ (Foucault 2004: 253). As Foucault
argued in his 1976 lecture course at the Collège de France, biopower consists
in the state’s control over human being, not as a set of individuals valued in
their own right, but as a part of a collective *species*. In this way an individual’s
*essence*, or essential characteristics, are decided for them by the state. In
return for its allegiance the state then cares for its subject species. If the state
does not wish to care for all the people under its dominion then it is but a simple
logical step to introduce caesuras into the species-population by re-categorising
(or re-presenting) it as a mosaic of sub-species, or *races*, which can then be
coded in favourable or unfavourable ways. By this simple logical and legalised
manoeuvre, the state can declare war ‘internally’ on its own people by
formalising and institutionalising racism. Foucault charts the sinister
manipulation of human being within the play of power exercised by states as
follows:

The appearance within the biological continuum of the
human race of races, the distinction among races, the
hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are
described as good and that others, in contrast, are
described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the
field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of
separating out the groups that exist within a population. It
is in short, a way of establishing a biological-type caesura
within a population that appears to be a biological domain.
This will allow power to treat the population as a mixture of
races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower.

(Foucault 2004: 254–255)

The very genetic material from which the individual human being is generated is therefore itself encoded with a specific destiny by the state. The most obvious example of the exercise of biopower was, of course, the German Final Solution for the ‘Jewish Problem’.

The ‘logic’ of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws formalised the ‘scientific’ racism that singled the Jews out for particularly special treatment as a race characterised as inferior—untermensch, or ‘sub-human’—by the Nazi racial purity policies. As I will discuss later in more detail, Kantor’s living situation in Kraków during the Second World War placed him for a time directly adjacent to the Jewish ghetto. Although there was a possible Jewish background on his father’s side, according to the official Nuremberg regulations Kantor was not Jewish. Nevertheless, merely not being classed as Jewish was by itself no guarantee of immunity from savage treatment in the occupied territories. There is some debate whether such populations as the Poles were formally categorised as untermensch or not. What seems clear, however, from German discourse at the time, is that unless deemed of ‘Germanizable’ stock, Poles were to be cultivated as a barely educated race of slave-material. Whilst the Jewish people were to be exterminated ‘as lice’ (see Agamben 1998: 114), the Polish people were to be narrowly constrained within an inferior form-of-life as slaves. In 1939, Dr. Hans Frank, the Governor-General of German-occupied Poland made the following pronouncement:

85 Jewishness is determined by the maternal line and this was scrupulously respected by the German legal apparatus following the 1935 Nuremberg Laws. One of the reasons that Kantor was able to survive the occupation was that his family history had been Catholic for two generations and he therefore, despite his Semitic features, was not classified as ‘Jüdische’.

86 For example, see the Wikipedia entry for Untermensch which seems to have sparked off a heated exchange on this topic.
From now on the political role of the Polish nation is ended. It is our aim that the very concept Polack be erased for centuries to come. Neither the Republic nor any other form of Polish state will ever be reborn. Poland will be treated as a colony and Poles will become slaves of the German empire.

(Dziewanowski 1977: 114)

On 15 March 1940 The Reichsfuehrer-SS Heinrich Himmler echoed this sentiment when he closed a speech to concentration camp commandants with the statement: ‘Then all the Poles will vanish from the face of the earth’ (Quoted in Hillel and Henry 1976: 143). Later that year on 15 August, Himmler issued a short memorandum to the Führer. Entitled ‘Some Thoughts on the Treatment of Foreign Populations in the East’, the secret document elaborated on the place of the Polish people within the overall German racial plan:

I hope to see the very idea of ‘Jew’ completely wiped out by the possibility of a great emigration of all Jews to Africa or some colony elsewhere. It must also be possible in a somewhat longer period of time to make the ethnic notion of Ukrainian, Gorale and Lemken disappear from our territory. Everything we have said about these splinter races applies on an even larger scale to the Poles.

(Himmler cited in Hillel and Henry 1976: 144)

Kantor would have been officially categorised as Nichtdeutsch (non-German): a citizen of Poland of non-German descent who could prove themselves free of all Jewish connections (Davies 1981: 445). However, as a Slav, Kantor would have to survive for almost six years in a reality in which his existence as a human being was tested and questioned. As Norman Davies has observed, all ‘the occupied territories were designated lawless Arbeitbereich (Work Areas) where martial law was in force and where “death” or “concentration camp” were the only two forms of stipulated punishment for any type of offence’ (Ibid.: 441), and that to ‘all intents and purposes, Poland had become “Gestapoland”’ (Ibid.: 443). Himmler stated:

The removal of foreign races from the incorporated eastern territories is one of the most essential goals to be accomplished in the German East … In dealing with members of some Slave nationality, we must not endow these people with decent German thoughts and logical
conclusions of which they are not capable, but we must take them as they really are... I think it is our duty to take their children with us... We either win over the good blood we can use for ourselves... or else we destroy that blood. For us, the end of this war will mean an open road to the East... it means that we shall push the borders of our German race 500 kilometres to the east.

(Himmler cited in Davies 1981: 445; ellipses in Davies)

In the words of Governor-General Hans Frank: ‘Once we have won the war, all the Poles, Ukrainians and anything else that may still be running around here can be turned into mincemeat as far as I am concerned, unless anyone has any other ideas for them’ (Quoted in Hillel and Henry 1976: 149). With the German occupation of Poland, these racial policies could therefore apply to Kantor.

Effectively untermensch (in all but name) and slave-material, Kantor was assigned to work as a scenery-painter in the properties workshop for the former Juliusz Słowacki theatre, which was relocated during the occupation to the building of the Synagog Izaaka (Isaac Synagogue) in the original Jewish district of Kazimierz (Chrobak, Stangret and Święt 2000: 28; Pleśniarowicz 1997: 42 and 2004: 35).

The reality of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’
The reality of occupied Kraków was one in which the daily walk or tram ride to work carried the risk of witnessing or falling victim to random murder. The threat of this transformation of human being from the status of living to nonliving would have been a constant presence. Kantor’s somewhat Semitic features,

87 This description ‘[...] as they really are’ has obvious sinister connotations which was explored in more detail in chapter three in the critique of the ontology of representation in relation to the concept of untermensch or ‘sub-human’. Although there is some controversy about whether Polish people were categorised as untermensch, the point I wish to make is that they were officially targeted within the German system of biopower which sought to advance the Germanic race at the expense of other races defined or re-presented as inferior.

88 The official German policy was to ‘Germanise’ any children of their subjugated ‘slave-races’ who appeared Aryan, i.e. blond-haired and blue-eyed. Polish children so identified were taken from their families and placed with German families, either in Poland or in Germany itself. See Hillel and Henry 1976, chapter 13, ‘Fountains of Death’, which deals with this aspect of German policy in detail with relation to Poland.

89 See Appendix 1.18 for a brief account of Roman Polanski’s film The Pianist (2002), which illustrates this reality.
together with the fact that, with his family, he had been relocated to an
apartment directly adjacent to the Jewish ghetto, would obviously not help his
situation in that reality. This setting of particular classes of life—Jewish and
Polish—at or near to zero created a pressure of reality that oriented life to its
barest essentials. The constant presence of the threat of nonexistence,
associated with an enhanced perception of the proximity of human being to
poor, inanimate matter, led to what can be seen as a ‘reverse’, or ‘inverted’
ontology, one in which the poor, lowly and inanimate is prioritised, by those so
categorised, over the higher ranking forms of life occupying the seats of power.
However, two types of negative connotations can arise from this orientation
towards zero. On the one hand, the threat is that the individual driven to this
state will become nihilistic in the commonly understood sense—an
understanding that human life is meaningless, pointless and might just as well
be rendered into inanimate matter. On the other hand, such a state of despair is
not the only response to proximity to the zero zone. A more positive perspective
is one that recognises that existence as opposed to nonexistence—the very
being of human being—is illuminated more vividly by the proximity to its
negation. Viewed in this way the dwelling of humanity near the limits of its
fragility reveals its value more vividly. This ‘reverse’ or ‘inverted’ ontology,
according to Leonide Ouspensky in his book Theology of the Icon (1978), is
familiar from the interpretation of the Gospels, where ‘‘The first shall be last,”
the meek and not the violent shall inherit the earth, and the supreme humiliation
of the cross is truly the supreme victory’ (Ouspensky 1978: 225). As
Ouspensky and others have argued, this inversion constitutes a new
perspective that is realised in the aesthetics of the Byzantine icon:

90 Kantor’s living situation in Kraków at this time will be dealt with in greater detail later in this
chapter.

91 For example, see Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians (II Corinthians 12: 9–11).
the Seventh Ecumenical Council emphasized the perfect correspondence between the icon and the Holy Scripture and that the icon calls us to the life [i.e. of humiliation] which the Gospel reveals. But in the Gospel everything is, so to speak, in inverse perspective [...] Thus the life of the Christian is placed in this same perspective: the death of the martyr is his victory, his coronation, and the privations of the ascetic struggle are transformed into an incomparable joy.

(Ibid.)

In his 1987 address at the Cricoteka Kantor likened the members of his family inhabiting the poor room in Wielopole, Wielopole to figures from the Gospels:

through the greatest humiliation, through approaching the bottom, I want to obtain the greatest height. Indeed, [...] in ‘Wielopole’, [...] in this small room, the greatness of the room is raised via [association with] the Gospel. This means that all types are contained within my family, [...] in my evaluation, a rather abject category is suddenly raised, because they begin to enter the space of the Gospel. Through humiliation.

(Kantor 1987: 10; my translation)

The idea of ‘reverse’ or ‘inverse’ perspective is an important one for understanding other aspects of Kantor’s aesthetic in terms of a particular ‘Eastern’ heritage that can be traced by way of Russian Constructivism and its avant-garde precursors. This sense of the imbuing of the lowly ordinary family, dead and adrift in the mists of memory with a sense of the eternal through association to the Gospel, and the particular perspective that this brings is something that will be explored in more detail in relation to Kantor’s aesthetic of the ‘poor object’ in chapter six. In the remainder of this chapter I want to attend more specifically to the logic of the negativity of the abject that can be seen to arise in occupied Kraków and the topography of Kantor’s situation there.

92 The official home of Kantor’s archive at ulica Kanonicza 5, and his headquarters from 1980 until his death.

93 See Appendix 1.19a for a transcription of this passage from this event.
Negativity and humiliation: the inverted ontology of ‘the thing I am’

In essence, the ‘humiliation’ that Ouspensky and Kantor respectively refer to centres around the extinction of human life. But how is it that the humiliation of the expendability of human life is equated with ‘supreme victory’? In the Gospels this victory is achieved through recourse to the economy of the supernatural afforded by Christ’s resurrection as the Son of God. Although Kantor in the passage just cited alludes directly to the Gospels, they are treated as yet another found object. Although Kantor was Catholic and was buried with full ceremony, his art is not directly religious in that sense. What Kantor is instead accessing is a more fundamental metaphysics of humiliation. For there to be an idea of humiliation there has to be a prior idea of a ‘something’ that can be humiliated, some status or state that is valued, otherwise dignity is unthreatened and the act of ‘being made humble’ carries no force. The idea of ‘life’ as being something valuable or sacred is itself bound up with a particular and tacit privileging of the form-of-life particular to human being: the idea that life is sacred, but human life is especially sacred. Fundamentally what is at issue is not only existence itself, threatened with its negation by death (which is one form of humiliation), but also the status of the idea of human life as something higher than other forms of existence that is threatened with a reduction (a second form of humiliation). This entwining of the concepts of existence and status means that both ‘life’, and especially its manifestation as human being, has somehow acquired a superior status that can become threatened.

Shakespeare’s character Parolles in All’s Well That Ends Well states that it is: ‘simply the thing I am / Shall make me live’ (IV.iii: 314–315). This ‘thing I am’—mere existence, ‘life’—is the product, in Shakespeare’s play, of humiliation—a ‘thing’ rendered ‘thingly’ through exposure to the process of humiliation. As might be expected from his preoccupation with an aesthetic of poor reality, the idea of humiliation as a positive force was central to Kantor’s work as he stated in the 1987 address given in the Cricoteka cited above:

one of the leading values, is that we achieve greatness—through humiliation […] through the greatest humiliation,
through approaching the bottom, I want to obtain the greatest height. [...] I am concerned that the idea of greatness [...] cannot be expressed by form. And Casimir the Great—the most powerful Polish figure—was presented by Wyspiański [in his design for a stained glass window] as—a skeleton, a skeleton with the remnants of glory—a crown, a sceptre, an orb. This is a wonderful idea, a brilliant idea. [...] When I started to make ‘The Dead Class’, [...] this stained glass window project was for me a confirmation, that greatness is achieved through complete humiliation.

(Kantor 1987: 10–11; my translation)

For Kantor then, Wyspiański’s image of the skeletal fourteenth-century Polish King encapsulated the fundamental paradox of human being: that the life lived in the ‘now’ by any one individual is implicated in a greater whole, one that contains both the past and the future enveloping the transient present, the former stemming from the nothingness before birth, and the latter indicating the annihilation awaiting as death. However, such an ontologico-temporal context can also be related to a socio-historical context. In Foucault’s characterisation the human being in modernity is ‘an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question’ (Foucault 1981: 143). As such, biopower brings to bear the threat of humiliation on its human subjects, and wields a fundamentally sinister and negative connotation: that of frail, abject human being at the mercy of power, whether it be the power of the state directly or the power of state-sanctioned global capitalism. What is at stake therefore is this human life—‘simply the thing I am’. It is necessary to consider a little more closely the manner in which the concepts of ‘life’ (mere existence) and ‘human being’ (living existence as status) have become tacitly entwined to illuminate how the inverted or negative ontology implied by the foregrounding of the idea of humiliation can form a positive strategy of resistance.

**Zoë, bios and ‘bare life’**

A central preoccupation that emerged in Agamben’s writing was a development of Hannah Arendt’s discussion in her 1958 book *The Human Condition* (1998: 180).

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94 See Appendix 1.19b for the original Polish text.

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, bios as distinguished from mere zōe, that Aristotle said that it ‘somehow is a kind of praxis’ [Politics 1254a7].

(1998: 97)

Instead of one word that becomes easily sacralised in its identification with human being, the Greeks employed two words. The word ζωή (zōē) denoted ‘life as such’: mere natural, nutritive, reproductive and perishable life. As Aristotle observed at the beginning of the second book of De anima: ‘Now of natural bodies some have life and some do not, life being what we call self-nourishment, growth and decay’ (Aristotle 1986: 156). As such, zōē referred to life in the sense of general being or existence: ‘the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)’ (Agamben 1998: 1). For the ancient Greeks, and with respect to the life of human being, zōē referred principally to the domestic environment, the business of daily living, of sustenance and reproduction common to the family home or οἶκος (oikos). For what could be done with, or made of, the simple fact of living (natural life or zōē) by particular
creatures or groups of creatures, the Greeks had another word: βίος (bios), denoting form-of-life, ‘the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group’ (Ibid.: 1). The bios, or form-of-life specific to human being was that of the city or polis, the political and cultural life of human being in community.

For Agamben, the victim of biopower was rendered neither zoē, natural life, nor bios, cultural and political life, but a liminal zone of life ‘in between’ for which he employed the term la nuda vita, literally ‘naked life’. This liminal zone can be seen as the site in which life-as-mere-existence and life-as-status overlap and cohere: the zone of humiliation. For Agamben, la nuda vita was a development of Walter Benjamin’s use of the term das bloße Leben in his essays ‘Fate and Character’ (1919) and ‘Critique of Violence’ (1921), where the term, variously translated as ‘mere life’, ‘bare life’ and ‘natural life’, denotes a substrate of human being in which notions of fate and guilt can inhere.95 Agamben makes it clear in his discussion of Benjamin’s 1921 essay at the end of the first part of Homo Sacer that das bloße Leben equates to his own concept of la nuda vita:

This is why it is not by chance that Benjamin, with a seemingly abrupt development, concentrates on the bearer of the link between violence and law, which he calls ‘bare life’ (bloßes Leben), instead of defining divine violence. The analysis of this figure—whose decisive function in the economy of the essay has until now remained unthought—establishes an essential link between bare life and juridical violence. Not only does the rule of law over the living exist and cease to exist alongside bare life, but even the dissolution of juridical violence, which is in a certain sense the object of the essay [‘Critique of Violence’], ‘stems … from the guilt of bare natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to the punishment that “expiates” the guilt of bare life—and doubtless also purifies [entsühnt] the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law’ [Benjamin 1977: 200].

95 As de la Durantaye points out, Agamben does not make it clear in his published work that la nuda vita was conceived by him as a translation of Benjamin’s das bloße Leben and that it is, in effect, ‘a translation without quotation marks’ (de la Durantaye 2009: 203). This term also occurs in ‘Fate and Character’ (Benjamin 2004d: 204) and ‘Critique of Violence’ (Benjamin 2004b: 250).
The apparent slippage in the meaning of the term ‘bare life’ is unhelpfully confusing in this passage, perhaps owing to the translation. However, in the very next sentence of the essay Agamben is quoting from, Benjamin states that ‘with mere life, the rule of the law over the living ceases’ (Benjamin 2004b: 250). What this means for Agamben is that once certain categories of human being—groupings based on differences of ethnicity, politics, sexuality or medical status—are reclassified as different from the population that is under the protection of the law, they fall towards the category of zoë through the stripping away of their bios. Although, as can be seen from the passage above, it is easy to equate Agamben’s reading of Benjamin’s ‘bare life’ with zoë itself, (and sometimes Agamben does use the term in this sense), more specifically, he uses the term to denote the abjectness of human being stripped of its bios as human being. In this sense ‘bare life’ is human being in a state of abandonment, legally enclosed—in what might be termed a ‘legal bubble’—in such a way that it can be treated as if it was ‘mere’ biological life. It is this ‘living, innocent and unhappy’ figure of bare life consigned to the humiliating meat-grinder of biopower that is, for Agamben, a specific performative relationship between the exercise of state force (gewalt or violence) and its formal conceptualisation enshrined in law. In her discussion of Agamben’s use of the term, Eva Plonowska Ziarek has observed that:

Stripped of political significance and exposed to murderous violence bare life is both the counterpart to and the target of sovereign violence. To avoid misunderstanding, I would like to stress the point that is made sometimes only implicitly in Agamben’s work and not always sufficiently stressed by his commentators: namely, the fact that bare life—wounded, expendable, and endangered—is not the same as biological zoë, but rather it is the remainder of the destroyed political bios.

(Ziarek, E. P. 2007: 90)

Human being rendered as the remnants of its bios therefore brings it into the vicinity of animality, a perceived lower status of being from which it is normally
keen to distinguish itself. As Agamben observes, this places human being in a liminal zone:

this life is not simply natural reproductive life, the zoē of the Greeks, nor bios, a qualified form of life. It is, rather, the bare life of homo sacer [...] a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture.

(Agamben 1998: 109)

For Agamben, the key exemplar of this ‘zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast’ was exactly the Nazi treatment of certain categories of human being as developed and executed during the Second World War.

Paradoxically human life is something that can be variously protected, sacrificed or counted as worthless. It is the last part of this spectrum that is seen as crucial by Agamben and is enshrined in the obscure figure from Roman law called the homo sacer, or ‘sacred man’. The homo sacer refers to a figure who, in being banished from the law, finds itself in the position of being unworthy of sacrifice but also of exposure to the jeopardy of being murdered with impunity. This unfortunate person is in the situation of being legally ‘outside’ or ‘without’ the law by being proscribed by it. The situation of the homo sacer is therefore paradoxically wholly determined by the law’s exclusion of it: homo sacer is without (i.e. outside) the law, not within it. In this way the figure of the homo sacer perfectly exemplifies Agamben’s idea of human being rendered as ‘bare life’. However, Agamben also takes this figure to explain far more than an ancient Roman legal entity, or the condition of the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps. For Agamben, the recognition of the being of human being as inhering in the being of bare life—that is in the ‘zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast’—is the paradigm of the paradoxical nature of human being itself. The zone of bare life is one in which human being is both recognised and recognises itself as at its lower limit, a limit from which the perspective of the paradoxical circumscription of greatness opens up. This was exemplified for Kantor by Wyspiański’s skeletal image of
Casimir the Great, an image of a sovereign in whom the very recognition of greatness is characterised by the humiliation of its loss. The power of the image of the king-as-skeleton derives from the condensing of an implied narrative of universal loss into a single image: the work of time renders even the great and mighty to nothingness. In the stained-glass design (now realised in a new pavilion in the centre of Kraków) Wyspiański’s skeleton-king appears to float as if adrift in eternity, his empty eye sockets perpetually filled with the recognition of the loss of the power once held. In its self-reflexivity the image contains all the King’s life viewed from the perspective of its negation. If the idea of ‘bareness’ can be seen to share something of this condensed image of the situation of human being, then for Agamben it can be seen to resonate with the same tenor that the idea of the humiliation of the human being as a ‘poor object’ of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ did for Kantor. For both, the apparently negative ontology of human being as a ‘nothing-that-is-yet-something’ was a way of making sense of a humanity that finds itself approaching the limits of crisis of the zero zone, of finding greatness in the humiliation of ‘bare life’.

The representation of human being

The perception of negativity as a threat to being can be understood, as Foucault has observed, as a consequence of the fragmentation of the biological continuum by the insertion of caesuras which create separate categories of being. This biopolitical creation of fragmentation and difference is usually mediated by representation. The construction of caesuras between ‘the subspecies known, precisely, as races’ (Foucault 2004: 255) in the hegemonic conception of ‘the human’, is achieved through the use of alternative representations that can stand in opposition to the official representation of the human. For Himmler it was the blond-haired, blue-eyed upright figure of the Aryan ideal. In opposition to this ideal other races and classes of people were represented as a series of underclasses ranging from the not-quite-human—often characterised as uneducated, dirty and misshapen, those who could be utilised as slave-labour—to the non-human and therefore categorised as ‘animal’ and who could be utilised and processed in a different way. In this
process of categorisation, the undesirable groups were likened to specific animals and the particular types invoked were often ones with negative connotations such as cattle, swine or vermin. This recategorisation from human to animal being was particularly vivid in the case of Nazi treatment of the Jews in the 1930s, where, in being categorised as vermin by the Nazi state, they could be legally exterminated as such, as Agamben has observed:

The truth—which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils—is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, ‘as lice,’ which is to say, as bare life. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics.

(Agamben 1998: 114)

Such an appalling strategy would not be conceivable without the apparently innocent ancient distinction between human and animal being.

The famous formulation of Aristotle’s distinction between animals and humans arises in his attempts to determine a specific nature for human being above that of the animal (a supra-animal nature conceived of as the highest ‘good’ achievable for human being) in *The Politics*, *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Anima*. In delineating his tripartite structure of living things—the vegetable, animal and intellectual souls—Aristotle implied an ascending ladder of being from the nutritive (basic life), the sensitive (animal) to the rational and intellectual (human) via the faculties of nutrition, sensation and thought. As Agamben has observed, such an attempt to define human being is itself inherently grounded in the negative, for the human animal is always only defined in terms of something else—as a ‘rational animal’, the ‘political animal’ or the ‘animal that has language’—never as something in its own right. In his 2002 book *The Open: Man and Animal* (published in English in 2004a), Agamben highlights this paradox with reference to Carl Linnaeus’s rationalisation of Aristotle’s categories and the particular difficulty he had with categorising human being within his new system:
In truth, Linnaeus’s genius consists not so much in the resoluteness with which he places man among the primates as in the irony with which he does not record—as he does with the other species—any specific identifying characteristics next to the generic name *Homo*, only the old philosophical adage: *nosce te ipsum* (know yourself).

(Agamben 2004a: 25)

The point here, as Agamben goes on to note, is that ‘man has no specific identity other than the ability to recognize himself’ (ibid.: 26; emphasis in original):

Yet to define the human not through any *nota characteristica*, but rather through his self-knowledge, means that man is the being which recognizes itself as such, that man is the animal that must recognize itself as a human to be human.

(Ibid.: 26; emphasis in original)

However, this use of representation, to generate *difference* through the formation of categories and the articulation of rifts has been the basis of Western ontology since Plato, one side-effect of which has been to conceive of ‘art’ as degraded, as ‘second-rate’ and the concept of ‘truth’ conceived of as a matter of agreement between ‘original’ and ‘copy’. Within this resulting labyrinth of representation, the ontological field becomes refracted into competing kinds of being, amongst which the very idea of ‘human being’ is cast adrift.

What would a poetics of such being look like? Following his experimentations with decor of *art informel* in the late fifties and early sixties, which can be seen as an attempt to liberate the underlying *informe* of reality, Kantor began experimenting with the idea of revealing this ‘truth’ in a different way: by covering it up and packaging it. Under the term *emballage*, described by Pleśniarowicz as ‘*collage* in depth’ (2004: 91), he began playing with the paradox of revealing by concealing. The covering becoming a metaphor for the skin of appearance but in its messenger-like quality as also *envoi* of the truth from the object beneath. Kantor’s happenings, a form he began experimenting

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96 This notion of self-reflexivity also relates to the discussion in chapter three concerning the temporal dimension of human being.
with from 1965 (following his visit to New York in that year), can be seen as a development of this *emballage* or ‘playing with wrapping’. Rather than simply following the games with chance practiced by the happening artists in Fluxus, Kantor’s happenings can instead be seen as an *emballage* of the reality of action through the framing of them with found objects, environments and events. Between 1965 and 1971 Kantor arranged happenings based on situations and subjects suggested by famous paintings (by Rembrandt, Dürer, Géricault), that involved low-rank objects (such as a letter, newspapers, a typewriter), and quotidian environments (such as a cafe, a casino, a laundry, the sea). In his *An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* (1968) Kantor both packaged Rembrandt’s famous painting in the guise of a happening, but also, in a sense, performed his own ‘anatomy’ on the clothing-skin of the appearance of human being itself. (In an interview with Borowski, Kantor called it ‘an example of de-*emballage*’ (in Borowski 1982: 86; my translation).) This chapter closes with a discussion of the poetics of being articulated in this work in the light of the discussion of negative ontology of human being and the biopolitics of bare life elucidated so far.

‘Letting Tattered Clothing Sing’: Tadeusz Kantor’s Anatomy Lesson and the ‘reality of the lowest rank’

In 1968 Kantor staged for the first time his *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* in Nuremberg; Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn produced his painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, in 1632, at a time when the culture of attending the public dissection of corpses in anatomy theatres had become a mark of civic respectability. Kantor had lived through the Second World War in the Polish city of Kraków and his *Anatomy Lesson* was performed when so-called *realny socjalizm* (real socialism) came into widespread use in the 1970s. The term designated the predominantly bureaucratic (rather than idealistic) forms of socialism practiced in Poland and other Soviet satellite states in particular.

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97 For further details and the Polish text of Kantor’s *partytura* for this happening together with my parallel translation, see Appendix 1.20.


99 *Realny socjalizm* (literally ‘real socialism’) came into widespread use in the 1970s. The term designated the predominantly bureaucratic (rather than idealistic) forms of socialism practiced in Poland and other Soviet satellite states in particular.
and political institutions during an epoch that Theodor Adorno had recently
defined as marked by the question of how to live ‘after Auschwitz’ (Adorno
2003: 435).\textsuperscript{100} The corpse that is the subject of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp’s
dissection in Rembrandt’s painting was a thief from Leiden (ironically
Amsterdam’s rival in the staging of civic anatomies) named Adriaen
Adriaenszoon, who had been executed on 31 January 1632 for stealing a
clothing;\textsuperscript{101} in Kantor’s \textit{Anatomy} it is the clothing that is dissected rather than the
human being.

In his 1926 poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ W. B. Yeats, railing against the
approach of old age, wrote that ‘An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered
coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing, / For
every tatter in its mortal dress’ (Yeats 1967: 217). This notion of the soul
animating the tatters of mortal clothing invokes the spectre of Plato’s
formulation of the soul’s separate identity from, and superiority to, the body.\textsuperscript{102}
However, as Heidegger argued in his 1940 essay ‘The Age of the World
Picture’: ‘It is in the metaphysics of Descartes that, for the first time, the being is
defined as the objectness of representation, and truth as the certainty of
representation’ (Heidegger 2002: 66). Although Descartes’ famous conceptions
of subjectivity were not available until his publications of 1637 and 1641, the
philosopher was living in Holland and studying anatomy whilst formulating his
philosophical position and was in Amsterdam at the time when Rembrandt was
working on his painting (see, for example, Cottingham 1986: 11, Gaukroger
Descartes was working on texts that included his \textit{Treatise on Man}, a vision of
mechanical beings ‘composed as we are, of a soul and a body’, which he
planned to describe separately. Unfortunately his plan to include a description of

\textsuperscript{100} See, for example, Adorno’s ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’ (1959), ‘Education
After Auschwitz’ (1967), and ‘Lecture Fourteen, “The Liquidation of the Self”’ (1965), in Adorno
2003: 3–18, 19–33, and 427–36, respectively.

\textsuperscript{101} See Sawday 1995: 150.

\textsuperscript{102} See, for example, \textit{Phaedo}, 82d-83b, translated by G. M. A. Grube, in \textit{Plato: Complete
pp. 49–100 (72–73).
the soul and ‘finally […] show you how these two natures would have to be joined and united to constitute men and resemble us’ (Descartes in: Hall 1972: 1 and Cottingham et al. 1985: 99), was abandoned at this time. This vision of the world and the figures described in it was nothing less than a recasting of the idea of nature as a mechanistic and rationally knowable system. It was a world in which the subject as rational, knowing, soul was absent, and implied the separation of mind from body that would inform his position in the Discourse on Method (1637) and the Meditations on First Philosophy (1641). As Jonathan Sawday has observed, the spirit of ‘Cartesian man’ was abroad before Descartes explicitly formulated it, exemplified in certain ‘metaphysical’ poetry, such as John Donne’s ‘The Ecstasy’, composed before 1614, which was in wide circulation before its publication in 1633 (see Sawday 1995: 296 ff. 18, and Redpath 1956: 3): ‘It was in the anatomy theatres of Leiden and Amsterdam that Cartesian man was born, in the person of a grotesquely twitching criminal corpse, at the behest of the medical and juridical authorities of the city’ (Sawday 1995: 158). Following William Schupbach’s influential reading, which sees ‘the duality of man’s metaphysical status […] given visible form in the composition of Rembrandt’s painting’ (Schupbach 1982: 44), Sawday argues for the ‘Cartesian nature of Rembrandt’s image’ as a ‘portrayal of the domination of intellect over the aberrant will of the executed felon’, a product of the problem of the relationship between the will and the intellect that Descartes had been working on in his Rules for the Direction of the Mind written shortly before his move to Holland in 1628 or earlier (Sawday 1995: 153). Rembrandt’s Anatomy may therefore be seen as contemporaneous with the intellectual milieu that gave birth to the Cartesian subject, a conception that installed the recipient of this ‘certainty of representation’—an incorporeal, sovereign, rational self—within the mechanical anatomy of the body: in it but not of it. By re-staging Rembrandt’s painting, The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp, in 1968 and in Nuremberg, the site where the world learned the full extent of the irrational certainty of the ‘rationality’ of Auschwitz, Kantor appears to be articulating a very different and more subversive idea of life from the one represented by the sense of subjectivity implicit in the original painting. In doing so there appears to be a
tacit critique of the idea of Enlightenment rational progress that resonates with Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002). Kantor’s *Anatomy* seems to celebrate life not as the disembodied and sovereign subject of the Cartesian *cogito*—itself an echo of the Platonic dualism of body and soul—not as an object of representation, but as life that seems to be distributed and immanent within the poor matter of its clothing and possessions.

Instead of a reverential homage to Rembrandt’s solemn anatomy, Kantor’s intention might at first appear satirical. The original painting has been interpreted as a celebration of the triumph of Dr. Tulp’s rational intellect over the dead thief’s mechanical corpse. Kantor, however, in his work seems to be celebrating the everyday contents of the pockets of the clothing that wraps the living body lying on his dissecting table. Rembrandt’s painting would seem to have a high purpose, while Kantor’s happening would appear to revel in the low and the trivial. As noted in chapter two, such indirection was one of several strategies of evasion used by Polish artists during the censorship of the socialist period. As I will show, however, this ‘low’ quality can be seen to be part of Kantor’s artistic purpose, and arose from his idea of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’, or ‘poor reality’.

Kantor’s happening was performed on four occasions between 1968 and 1971. Each time he made use of found participants with whom he composed his tableau according to the formal scheme of Rembrandt’s painting. He snipped with scissors at his model’s clothing, opening up the lining and paying particular attention to the contents of the ‘wrinkled and crushed / p o c k e t s’, ‘these intimate hiding places’, these ‘ridiculous organs of / human instincts / […] for preservation and memory’. Thus anatomised, the torn clothing and the ‘forgotten leftovers’ and ‘shameful litter’ liberated from the pockets were glued and stapled to canvas to create something relating to an *emballage*: an artwork-

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assemblage or many-layered collage of tattered clothing and personal belongings that was in effect a ‘still life’ or *nature morte*.¹⁰⁴

In staging his happening *according* to Rembrandt, Kantor appears to set the consequences of the Enlightenment project of positive rational progress through scientific enquiry in stark juxtaposition to one of the iconic images of the origins of its dream. The corpse in Rembrandt’s painting becomes, in Kantor’s performance, an anonymous body whose clothing and belongings are coolly and methodically removed and processed, becoming in the end a ‘painting’ themselves.¹⁰⁵ Kantor’s written *partytura* or ‘score’ for the happening clearly suggests that the seemingly trivial objects harvested from the model’s pockets are ‘the genuine, / authentic side of / individuality’. In Kantor’s anatomy the objects, in becoming a still life, are seemingly more valued than the forgotten model. However, greater value is assigned to these objects precisely because of their reference to ‘authentic individuality’, whereas in Rembrandt’s painting the bodily parts dissected—the flexor muscles of the forearm—are valued because of the general points they can make about the intricacy of anatomical

¹⁰⁴ *Emballage* or ‘wrapping’ (from the French *emballer* ‘to wrap’) was an element of Kantor’s artistic practice which involved the wrapping of people and everyday objects. As well as apparently protecting its contents, the wrapping served to both conceal and at the same time reveal their presence. In so doing the *emballage* also drew attention to itself as a representative of poor marginal reality, occupying a liminal place between its contents and the observer. In essence, Kantor’s *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* is an anatomy of clothing foregrounded as an *emballage* of the human being; the resulting exhibition of the clothing glued to the canvas is, in effect, an exhibition of this dissected ‘wrapping’ or *emballage*. See Kantor’s ‘Manifest Ambalaży’ in Kantor 2005: 300–04, and ‘The Emballage Manifesto’ in Kobialka, 2009: 154-58. See also Michal Kobialka’s discussion of the specificity of this idea in Kantor’s work in *Further on Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor’s Theater*, 2009: 70-74.

¹⁰⁵ In this transformation of orientation from the horizontal to the vertical, Kantor’s work in this happening recalls that of Fautrier on his 1928–9 painting *L’homme ouverte* (The Open Man) or *L’autopsie* (The Autopsy), described by Sarah Wilson in her essay ‘Fêting the Wound: Georges Bataille and Jean Fautrier in the 1940s’:

> For *L’homme ouvert*, like a real anatomist himself, Fautrier worked on the flat—as though above a veritable corpse, physically engaging, as it were, with the entrails of his life-size victim. He then, literally, raised the body, as though from the dead to an erect position—to hang it on the wall, assuming the power of the life-giving Creator.
> (Wilson 1995: 177)

Having left *informel* painting behind as an explicit genre in the early sixties, the resulting ‘painting’ of Kantor’s happening can be seen as a bricolage version of Fautrier’s painterly ‘anatomy’.
mechanisms: the corpse’s individuality is not of interest. It is the demonstration of the power of rational knowledge that is of importance.

The subject-object dualism in Rembrandt’s painting intersects with, and supports other dualisms, for, the painting has also been viewed as a dramatisation of the historical moment of separation of the human soul from its bodily machine, and a celebration of the triumph of the rational intellect over the substance of nature. This victory, which heralded the coming of Enlightenment science, was to liberate Western Philosophy from the post-Aristotelian confusions of Scholastic thought. As Sawday has argued, this Cartesian rationalisation was of a new, thinking subject, freed of its entanglement with troublesome matter, a new ‘us’ able to gaze ‘clearly and distinctly’, to use Descartes’ words from his Meditations, on the material of God’s creation, understand its workings and in so doing put it to rational use.\textsuperscript{106} However, the new Cartesian system in a sense merely internalised an ancient schism between Being as ousia (substance), and the concepts of becoming and appearance. In Heidegger’s account in his 1935 lecture course Introduction to Metaphysics, for the ancient Greeks the apparent opposition between Parmenides’ conception of Being as changelessness and Heraclitus’ conception of Being as becoming was understood in a unitary way (2000: 103): just as appearance was understood to share in the essence of Being, to be an aspect of it (‘appearing belongs to Being […] Being has its essence together with appearing’ (Ibid.: 108; emphasis in original)). In contrast to this unity the gaze of the new Cartesian rational subject itself tacitly embodies the schism by conceiving of the world as one in which the subject can only know the objective world through potentially unreliable sensory representations. In this system, however, the subject that succeeds in installing itself as sovereign wields the power to establish what Michel Foucault has characterised (as noted earlier) a ‘biological-type caesura within a population’ that allows the population to be represented ‘as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, […] to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely as races’ (2004: 254).

\textsuperscript{106} See Sawday 1995: 151.
Paradoxically the fragmentation of the world understood in terms of representational ontology renders potentially vulnerable all those subject to what Foucault has termed ‘biopower’.

As Adorno and Horkheimer argued influentially in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), one of the possible destinations of the hyper-rationalised use of science is Auschwitz. There, the sovereign rational intellect turned human beings into parts of a machine in which they themselves were anatomised and rendered into their inanimate components: skin, hair, and gold teeth, to be processed alongside the variety of their personal belongings by the *Sonderkommando*, special groups who sorted through the mounds of bodies and clothing outside the gas chambers in order to harvest ‘useful’ commodities prior to the bodies’ incineration in the crematoria. It is not only those bodies that are decomposed in that image of commodification, but also the ‘humanity’ of every survivor and the various category of ‘worker’ in the factory of the camps. The Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi has written about the testimony of Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian physician ‘one of the very few survivors of the last Special Squad’[^1] in Auschwitz’ (Levi 1989: 37).[^2] One episode that Nyiszli recounted Levi found particularly significant:

So, Nyiszli tells how during a ‘work’ pause he attended a soccer game between the SS and the SK (*Sonderkommandos*), that is to say, between a group representing the SS on guard at the crematorium and a group representing the Special Squad. Other men of the SS and the rest of the squad are present at the game; they take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green.

(Ibid.: 38)

[^1]: For Levi’s account of these ‘Special Squads’ see Appendix 1.21.

[^2]: According to Levi, Nyiszli, a renowned pathologist ‘whose services Mengele […] had secured’ was ‘supposed to devote himself in particular to the study of twins […] Alongside this particular task of his, to which, it should be said in passing, it does not appear he strenuously objected, Nyiszli was also the attending physician of the squad, with which he lived in close contact’ (Levi 1989: 37). Nyiszli’s reminiscences were published in New York in 1960 as *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account*. The soccer match episode occurs in chapter IX (Nyiszli 1993: 68).

This match might strike someone as a brief pause of humanity in the middle of an infinite horror. I, like the witnesses, instead view this match, this moment of normalcy, as the true horror of the camp. [...] That match is never over.

(Agamben 2002: 26)

The implication is that it is the very unseen negativity at the heart of this simulacrum of normalcy that constitutes the hidden idea of humanity: a fragile thing of which the failure to acknowledge the awful, bare emptiness of its negation is itself a sort of crime. I shall later locate this idea in Kantor’s happening.

Kantor received the news in April 1942 that his estranged father, Marian Kantor, had been shot in one of the quarries in Auschwitz. Although Kantor was never there, he was nonetheless a witness to part of the machine of extermination. In November of that year Kantor, along with his Mother and his sister’s family, was resettled to an apartment building on Węgierska Street in the Podgórze district of Kraków (see Pleśnianowicz 2004: 35 and Chrobak et al. 2004: 38–39). The building stood within the original boundaries of Kraków’s Jewish ghetto, which had been established in 1941 by the Germans when they evicted the Jews from Kazimierz, the ‘Galician Jerusalem’: the historical centre of economic and intellectual life for Polish Jews since the fourteenth century (Jodłowiec-Dziedzic 2004: 3). The Galician suburb of Podgórze, situated just across the River Vistula from Kazimierz, was a rundown former merchants’ residential area. The ghetto was intended to be an incubator of contagious diseases, such as Typhoid which the Germans hoped would accomplish the extermination of the population of Kraków’s Jews (Ibid.: 8). It was enclosed within three-metre high walls, which parodied Jewish tombstones (Ibid.: 8). Following reductions in the ghetto’s size, Kantor and his family came to be

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109 Various dates have been reported for this event; however, Krzysztof Pleśnianowicz gives the date as 4 April 1942, according to Marian Kantor’s nephew, Józef Zdzisław Kantor. See Pleśnianowicz’s two books (1997: 12 and 2004: 14). See also Zdzisław Kantor 2004: 26.
resettled next to the ghetto boundary in March 1942 (Chrobak et al. ibid. and 2000: 27; Pleśniarowicz 1997: 41 and 2004: 35). That June, the SS assumed authority over the ghetto and in the first few days massacred approximately 600 Jews in Plac Zgody, the main square, and in the surrounding streets; 7000 more were sent to the gas chambers in Auschwitz (Jodłowiec-Dziedzic 2004: 11). Further large-scale massacres and deportations to the death camps occurred in October of that year. The ghetto was finally ‘liquidated’ in March 1943 and its entire Jewish population was either killed there or transported to the death camps (Ibid.: 11).

As already briefly noted in chapter one and earlier in this chapter, Kantor’s living situation then brought him into close proximity with the doomed Jewish population of the ghetto. His officially registered work during 1942–43 was in the stage workshops for the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre, which, following the removal of Jews to Podgórze, had been relocated to the Isaac Synagogue, in the heart of Kazimierz (Chrobak, Stangret and Świca 2000: 28; Pleśniarowicz 1997: 42 and 2004: 35). To get to and from his place of work, Kantor would have had to pass over the only open bridge between Podgórze and Kazimierz, the Piłsudskiego bridge. This necessitated his passing along Limanowskiego Street, where the reduction of the ghetto had divided that street along its length with a barbed wire fence, which formed the new ghetto boundary.\textsuperscript{110} Anyone walking or travelling by tram along this street must have been profoundly aware of the figures on the other side of that fence, already marked by degradation and death. As Kantor articulated it in his twelfth Milano Lesson: ‘World War II. / Genocide, / Concentration Camps, / Crematories, / Human Beasts, / Death, / Tortures, / Human kind turned into mud, soap and ashes, / Debasement, / The time of contempt...’ (Kantor 2005b: 88 translated in Kobialka 1993: 259).\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110} I am grateful to Pani Anna Pióro, the curator of the Apteka pod Orląm museum, for her help in understanding the changing topographical reality of the Podgórze ghetto and for granting me access to historical maps and photographs of the ghetto. I am also grateful to the late Mike Staner, a survivor of the Podgórze ghetto who lived at 12, Węgierska Street whilst it was still within the ghetto, and who described to me at length the situation of the reality then.

\textsuperscript{111} See also the first Milano Lesson Kantor 2005b: 46, translated in Kobialka 1993: 211.
Kantor’s daily confrontation with an erased or virtually erased humanity became a source for his artistic theory and practice at this time. It was probably during this period, when Kantor was working on what was to be the final underground production for his Clandestine Independent Theatre (The Return of Odysseus by Wyspiański, 1944) that he first formulated his idea of ‘poor reality’ or ‘reality of the lowest rank’. Denied their own cultural practice by the occupying forces, many young Polish intellectuals turned to the work of the inter-war avant-garde discussed earlier, including that of the Jewish writer and graphic artist, Schulz. Kantor was reading Schulz’s fictions avidly at this time (see Kantor’s comments in Miklaszewski 2002: 32–33 and 37; Pleśniarowicz 2004: 27). The connections with what the critic Artur Sandauer was to later term the ‘degraded reality’ in Schulz’s fictions (Sandauer 1985: 5–33), and the reality both of his own existence as a Pole under German occupation and as a witness to the condition of the Jewish population in the ghetto are stark. After the war Schulz’s work remained unavailable in Poland until 1964, when Polish cultural identity remained suppressed, though this time as a result of the various manifestations of ‘real socialism’.

As Czesław Prokopczyk has noted, the notion of ‘degraded’, ‘bankrupt’ or ‘marginal’ reality in Schulz centres on the Polish word tandeta. The meaning of this word, he observes:

may be understood, to put it simply and visually, as the lowest layer, or the lowest, though for some intriguing reasons favourite, subspecies of the ordinary in the world of Schulz’s fiction. It is the layer of shoddy and cheap products, of trumpery and lack of taste, of ‘depraved’ human characters, or possibly even of crippled and deformed beings.

(Prokopczyk 1999: 206)

In Schulz’s fictional universe this degraded reality takes many forms, but it seems to derive from the deeply felt paucity of provincial life, the sense that what passed for reality in the town of Drohobycz was somehow a second-rate imitation of the reality of a Kraków or a Warsaw. Reality in Schulz’s fiction is said to be ‘as thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its imitative
character’ (Schulz 1988b: 73). It ‘exists in a state of constant fermentation, germination, hidden life’ (Ficowski 1988: 113) and ‘takes on certain shapes merely for the sake of appearance, as a joke or form of play’ (Ibid.). It is as if, because provincial reality has no substance, it occupies itself with ‘the assuming and consuming of numberless masks. This migration of forms is the essence of life’ (Ibid.).

It is not hard to see how this presentation of reality might have spoken to Kantor in his situation at this time. The German occupation made explicit and all-too-concrete a ranking of humanity that had existed in a less structured way before the war. However, under occupation Germans assumed the highest rank, Poles became their inferiors, whilst Jews occupied the lowest rank of all: according to Hitler and the SS they were beneath even the lowest rank of humanity (Davies 1981: 445–446). From this simple tripartite hierarchy developed a complex web of resistance, of corruption and collaboration, of heroism and cowardice (Davies 1981: 446). Some Jews worked for the Gestapo to police Jews under the auspices of the Judenrat (‘Jewish council’). Some Poles collaborated to police each other and any Jews attempting to evade confinement in the ghetto, or any Poles who helped to hide them. As noted earlier, Kantor’s somewhat Semitic features, together with his living next to the Jewish ghetto would obviously not have helped his situation in that reality. According to the Nuremberg regulations Kantor was officially classed as Nichtdeutsch or non-German (therefore not Juden or Jew and not required to wear the yellow star). Nevertheless he was frequently stopped and ‘checked’ on the way to and from his home next to the Podgörze ghetto: that is, stopped by Germans patrols or their Polish collaborators and forced to drop his trousers to prove he was not circumcised.\(^{112}\) As already noted, according to Agamben ‘the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, ‘as lice’, which is to say, as bare life’ (Agamben 1998: 114). Such a pressure of reality clearly produces ‘degradation’ at many levels.

\(^{112}\) I am grateful to the late Mike Staner for describing to me the environment of ‘checking’ around this time, both by Germans and by gangs of certain categories of collaborators. I am also grateful to Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz who told me that Kantor had made it clear on several occasions both publicly and privately that he had been a victim of such checking.
However, it was not merely as a description of the ‘bankruptcy of reality’, of ‘that city of cheap human material’ (Schulz 1988b: 76) that Schulz’s metaphysical prose would have been attractive to Kantor. More than merely black humour, ‘degraded reality’ somehow offers a certain hope in Schulz’s depictions in that it takes on a celebratory quality and assumes a playful self-sufficiency. Thus, as noted earlier, in his ‘Treatise on Tailor’s Dummies, or The Second Book of Genesis’, Jakob, the narrator’s father, in the passage cited earlier celebrates the ‘infinite fertility’ and ‘inexhaustible vitality,’ of matter, a living fecundity that: ‘entices us with a thousand sweet, soft, round shapes which it blindly dreams up within itself. […] We are simply entranced and enchanted by the cheapness, shabbiness and inferiority of material’ (Schulz 1988b: 39 and 41). In his 1968 commentary on the contents of his model’s pockets, Kantor expressed this Schulzian sense of enchantment.

The reality of occupied Kraków was one where the metamorphosis of animate to inanimate body was a casual fact of daily life, where mounds of clothing or belongings indicated the recently departed presence of a human life just as much as its corpse (Davies 1981: 455). In such a ‘degraded reality’—where the already lowered quality of life could be reduced further still to dead matter—it is not surprising that Kantor would be drawn to Schulz’s brand of quasi-panpsychism, to this exotic version of the Aristotelian conception of hylomorphism: of form and matter (a conception that perhaps also anticipates later ideas such as Gilles Deleuze’s vitalist concept of immanence).113 The cheapness of life somehow heightens the awareness of the bare emptiness of its potential negation but it also, paradoxically, becomes a cause of celebration and a form of resistance against the forces of degradation and negation.

In his essay ‘Cinnamon Shops by Schulz: The Apology of Tandeta’, Andreas Schönle argues that it is ‘the privileged position of tandeta that […] it mediates between form and matter’ (Schönle 1991: 131). In its imitation of form, tandeta ‘fakes a definite appearance, without, however, merging completely with it’ (Ibid.). The faking ‘a definite appearance’ would appear to be a deliberate

113 See Deleuze 2001 and Agamben ‘Absolute Immanence’ in Agamben 1999g.
paradox designed to call into question the conventional ranking of ‘appearance’ as ontologically inferior to ‘authentic’, ‘substantial’ being. Agamben’s use of the obscure figure Homo Sacer to articulate a similar paradox of negativity at the heart of human being seems to echo the celebration of tandeta. The figure of homo sacer (sacred man) is one who through being banished from the law occupies a liminal state of being, of ‘bare life’, that is, the life of one ‘who may by killed and yet not sacrificed’ (Agamben 1998: 8; emphasis in original).

Drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt in Political Theology (2005) and his discussion of the ‘state of exception’, Agamben develops this idea, as noted earlier, to cite the bare life of homo sacer as emblematic of the condition of human being as a being existing essentially in a liminal zone between biological existence and political life: between nature and culture. This is a Heideggerian concept of human being as a continually becoming-appearance, of an existential performance as opposed to an essentialist substance. As discussed earlier, Agamben’s concept of bare life also resonates with Walter Benjamin’s concept of der bloße Leben (‘mere life’) in the discussion of sovereignty in his 1921 essay ‘Critique of Violence’: ‘Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it’ (Benjamin 2004b: 250). Kantor’s work too invokes an idea of bare life but in a sense of a subversive celebration of the immanent, virtual and liminal, rather than merely as an object of abjection. If bare life is part of this existentialist ‘essence’ of human being then it is in the self-recognition of it as such—the human-as-abject-being—that affords recognition of the ‘genuine, / authentic side of / individuality’. What is discarded or forgotten is therefore salvaged and redeemed in a way that also echoes Walter Benjamin’s conception of messianic time in his 1940 essay ‘On the Concept of History’ (Benjamin 2006b) as well as in Convolute N of The Arcades Project (Benjamin 2002 462–463).

The celebration of tandeta in Schulz’s fictions can therefore be seen as a re-appropriation of degradation (or in Kantor’s terms ‘reality of the lowest rank’)
for creative purposes. This is shown in Kantor’s happening, as the separation of layer from layer of clothing leads to the abrupt discovery of ‘new interior worlds’, which open up to reveal the almost non-Euclidean space of the ‘antipodes of clothing’: ‘pockets! / lots of pockets!’ As Kantor delves into this interior world of his model’s clothing, the cotton padding spills out of the lining. Unravelling and proliferating seemingly out of proportion to the confined space of its origins this padding seems to echo the ‘fluffiness and porosity’ of matter celebrated by the father in his ‘Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies’ (Schulz 1988b: 41). Similarly, the objects that Kantor harvests from this model’s pockets, whilst initially innocuous, seem gradually to change and proliferate in the partytura as the catalogue of items progresses. From the innocent and trivial ‘gnawed pencils’ and ‘toothbrushes’ the list proceeds to more personal objects in the form of photographs. However, these consist not only of the normal and expected pictures of ‘family’ and ‘children’ but progress to the more illicit pictures of ‘lover’ and pornography. As Kantor continues to unpack the pockets he discovers ‘condoms’, ‘stolen teaspoons’, and finally the increasingly violent ‘penknives’, ‘knives’, and ‘guns’. There is therefore a sense, as with Schulzian matter, that the inanimate objects associated with the anonymous and forgotten model have a subversive life and humanity of their own: that, as the father in Schulz’s ‘Treatise’ expounds, ‘There is no dead matter […] lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life’ (Schulz 1988b: 40). There is also a sense, noted earlier, in which the objects come to refer to the subject of human individuality, not of the anonymous model alone but paradoxically, of the individuality of everyone. Kantor’s harvesting of objects may recall the harvesting of useful commodities by the Sonderkommandos from the dead victims of the gas chambers. However, through his performative manipulation of the clothing and objects associated with his model, Kantor can be understood to be accessing Schulz’s subversive conception of form and matter so that these items take on, as it were, a life of their own. In this dance of becoming and seeming, rather than obediently remaining in their category of ‘conventional / or insignificant outward appearance’, these items are liberated from the state of utter abjection that would otherwise seem to be the fate of Adriaen
Adriaenszoon, the subject of Tulp’s anatomy, or the dead victims of Podgórze or Auschwitz. Moreover, Kantor staged his performative revision of one of the iconic products of scientific rationalism at a time when the domination of ‘real socialism’ was in some ways resembling Nazi occupation.

In his ‘Night Notebooks’ Kantor wrote that: ‘The human form is shaped on the border area of a live, suffering organism and / a mechanism / functioning automatically and absurdly’ (Kantor 2005: 111–112; my translation).\textsuperscript{115} In this conception, Kantor encapsulates the paradoxical fragility of the bare life of human being suspended between the mechanism of Cartesian matter and the pre-Cartesian animating principle of Aristotelian form, between \textit{zoê} and \textit{bios}, between nature and culture, between the apparent oppositions of Being and becoming—Being and seeming. In doing so, both here and implicitly in what might now be seen as his revision of Rembrandt’s \textit{Anatomy}, Kantor has reconfigured the separate, fragmented and incorporeal nature of Cartesian \textit{res cogitans} in a manner that has allowed a sense of human soul to return via the illegal, poor side door of \textit{tandeta}, in a way that prefigures a Deleuzian conception of immanence. Where Rembrandt’s Dr Tulp found soulless, mechanical material in Adriaenszoon’s dissected forearm and hand, Kantor found humanity and soul in the contents of his model’s pockets. In response to the unseen negativity at the heart of the football match that Agamben maintains is never over, and to the potential threat of the bare emptiness of the negation of human life, Kantor’s \textit{Anatomy Lesson} was a public celebration of humanity and soul within the ‘reality of the lowest rank’.

Acknowledging the dangers implicit in the Cartesian \textit{cogito} this gesture by Kantor invokes a more vitalist sense of life, one that is virtual and distributed within matter itself: a sense of life that speaks and sings through the clothing and possessions that remain after the human body has been discarded. This Deleuzian sense of immanence hovers on the borderline between being and not-being, suggesting a sense of the self of bare human life being ‘held out into

\textsuperscript{115} ‘Postać ludzka kształtuje się na pograniczu / żywego, cierpiącego organizmu i / mechanizmu i funkcjonującego automaticznie i absurdalnie’ (Kantor 2005: 111–112).
the nothing’, as the Heideggerian conception characterises it (Heidegger 1998e: 93). Echoing Heidegger’s ‘nothing of being’, Deleuze suggested in the last text published before his death that ‘the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life’;\(^{116}\) the ‘life of the individual fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other’ (Deleuze 2001: 28 and 29). In his version of Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson*, Tadeusz Kantor, rather than celebrating the rational, sovereign, disembodied subject of the Cartesian *cogito* celebrates the liminal, immanent, bare life of *tandeta*. Where, in Rembrandt’s painting, the coat stolen by his subject is forgotten, Kantor’s response is to let the tattered clothing sing for itself.

Although considered a minor piece, Kantor’s *Anatomy Lesson* encapsulates key aspects of his aesthetic: a sense of vertiginous temporality through reference to the past (the linking of the 1968 of the happening with the 1632 of Rembrandt’s painting); the prioritisation of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ and ‘poor objects’; the breaking down of the barriers between spectator and performer; the inclusion of himself within the artwork; the *détournement* of existing artworks and situations. Tacitly underlying these aesthetic preoccupations was Kantor’s experience of the occupation and, within that, even if at this stage only by implication, the fate of Polish Jewry.\(^{117}\) In his two larger scale theatrical works that utilised the ‘open’, spectator-inclusive form of the happening, *The Water Hen* (1967) and *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (1973), Kantor included Jewish figures explicitly. However, his articulation of a lost Jewish presence at the heart of Poland, achieves its apotheosis in the almost miraculous transformation of the Polish classroom into the Jewish

\(^{116}\) See Agamben ‘Absolute Immanence’ in Agamben 1999g: 220.

\(^{117}\) 1968 was the year in Poland of the infamous state-sponsored ‘anti-Zionist’ campaign, which became a thinly disguised full-scale anti-Semitic purge that used the Arab-Israeli six-day war of the previous year as a pretext to arouse fears of a ‘fifth column’ of Israeli sympathisers within the Polish establishment (see Davies 1981: 588–589). As a result of this campaign almost 20,000 Jews left Poland leaving the country a virtually Jewish-free nation (Kersten and Szapiro 1993: 464–465). Coincidentally, Kantor, who had been appointed a second time as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1967 was also dismissed during the following year in 1969 (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 102 and 105).
chered in *The Dead Class*. This repeated transformation, which sees the bickering, face-pulling, and playground-rhyme-reciting ‘children’ gradually assume a wailing chanting with ‘hands upraised, rocking rhythmically in the ecstasy of Jewish prayer’ (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 203) marks, amongst other transformations in his aesthetic, a new turn. This rhythmic wail-like chant, which punctuates *The Dead Class* as if the voice of bare life itself were calling from ‘the other side’, signals a distinct change to the use of front-orientated, rhythmic, repetitive motifs that face directly onto the spectator. The openness, the immersion of the audience into the action of the performance that the happening form had afforded was exchanged for what Kantor called ‘the closed work’. However, this closure afforded a different kind of immersion, a form of direct communion with the spectator in ways that hark back to an older source of inspiration from the time of the first avant-garde. The exploration of this phenomenon is the topic of the next chapter.

The ‘reality of the lowest rank’, according to Kantor’s paradoxical valorisation of humiliation, inverts the normal perspective of truth-value, as noted by Ouspensky in relation to the Gospels. The surface of representation, the poor *envoi* of the true original, in its low-ranking poor humiliation—in the *nothingness* of its performative representation—*becomes* the truth. This inversion can be seen in Kantor’s *Anatomy Lesson* in which the authenticity of true individuality is found not in the depths ‘in the heart’ but on the surface, not even in the skin, but in the skin’s skin, the clothing and trivial objects of possession. This reversal was articulated with even more power in Kantor’s seminal work *The Dead Class*. If the hollow heart of Poland is occupied by the absence of Jewish presence, then this comes to the surface in those moments of *The Dead Class* where the Polish classroom turns into a Jewish *cheder* (classroom) and the chanting of school lessons metamorphoses into the ecstatic keening of Jewish prayer: ‘Aj na nyna / aj na nyna’ (Kantor 2004: 61). This reversal of the movement of truth value, from a configuration in which the spectator is drawn into the depths of a work towards an illusory truth in its ‘heart of hearts’, to one in which the truth advances towards the real world of the spectator from out of the depths, is one that can be seen to have its origins in
certain aspects of the first-wave avant-garde. However, such a reversal is also linked to an older tradition concerned with problems with the articulation of the truth, as I will discuss in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 6. THE AESTHETIC CONTEXT: THE ‘POOR OBJECT’ AS ICON

Introduction: Intimations of eternity
This chapter relates aspects of Kantor’s early and late career to the key turning point in the early 1970s leading to the apparent change in aesthetic presented by *The Dead Class* in 1975. Although Kantor professed such a ‘turn’, he did so by appealing to what he described as his discovery of the ‘poor object’ and ‘poor reality’ some thirty years earlier in his 1944 Underground production of Wyspiański’s *The Return of Odysseus*. However, whilst Kantor, as I have shown in the previous chapter, can be seen to draw on the metaphysics of Schulz’s ‘degraded reality’, his apparently peculiar marriage of symbolism and abstraction indicates a previously unexplored proximity, by way of the Russian avant-garde, with the metaphysical legacy of the aesthetic logic of icons. In categorically locating his ‘poor object’ ‘at the threshold between GARBAGE and ETERNITY’ (Kantor 2009c: 346), Kantor’s aesthetic can be seen to bear an unlikely affinity with the ‘hammered gold and gold enamelling’—“the artifice of eternity”\(^{118}\) of Orthodox icons. In exploring the ideas underlying Kantor’s early influences, this chapter makes links between Pavel Florensky’s work on space and representation, in particular his 1919 essay ‘Reverse Perspective’, and Heidegger’s and Jacques Derrida’s critiques of representation, drawing on recent research to further illuminate Kantor’s aesthetic of the ‘real’.

If the middle of Kantor’s career was dominated by the idea of *informe* and *informel*, the beginning could be said to have been more influenced by ideas from the first-wave avant-garde, particularly in his tendency towards abstraction, enshrined in the ideas from Suprematism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus. However, in terms of the underlying concerns that Kantor was engaged with, the apparently contradictory tendencies of Constructivism and *informel* nevertheless share an interest in attempts to engage with reality in non-representational terms. In addition, the notion of *informe* arising from the Polish interwar avant-garde, distinctive in its valorisation of humiliation, is reminiscent

\(^{118}\) As the poet W. B. Yeats characterised Byzantine art in his 1926 poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ (Yeats 1967: 218).
of the use of poor materials used in Synthetic Cubism and in certain aspects of the Russian avant-garde, where artists like Liubov Popova and Vladimir Tatlin utilised lowly materials such as sawdust and discarded wood and metal in their work as a means of prioritising reality over illusion.

In Chapter three, I sketched out a conception of human being that I suggested would have close parallels with Kantor’s work. It will be recalled that in Heidegger’s reading of the Heraclitean fragment ēthos anthropōi daimōn: ‘the human being dwells […] in the nearness of god’, the concept of ēthos is interpreted as a ‘dwelling place’ spanning a temporal whole. In this conception time can be understood to loop back on itself in a way that envelops the individual human experience and makes a dwelling for it—a ‘present’ that, itself, consists of a bundle of present awarenesses of the past together with present expectations of potential futures. This conception is opposed to the view of human being as a singular substance occupying a point in time separate from its past and future. This notion of human being has implications not just for individuals, but also for their cultural products as manifested in groups and movements. It is worth here reiterating the beginning of the passage cited in chapter three from Kantor’s Theatrical Place, from the section entitled ‘The So-Called Development in Art and Chronology’. In it Kantor writes:

In art, the logic of a phenomenon’s successful development does not often coincide with a linear chronology.

Often, I have the impression, which fascinates me, that TIME in art, in its course of events, encroaches upon the notion of eternity.

As if past and future did not exist in it.

As if the phenomenon of succession or progression did not exist in it.

(Kantor 2009c: 360)

This passage has implications not only for how Kantor’s own chronology is read but also for how Kantor may himself have read the wider artistic movements from which he derived his influence. Its implication is that ‘time in art’ functions
as if, or almost as if, it were eternity—timelessness—itself.\textsuperscript{119} In this way developmental elements can come to be viewed as if suspended and freely floating in a timelessness no longer constrained by a fixed sequential relationship of cause and effect. However, insofar as there is a tendency to revert to the idea of a ‘linear chronology’ in the historical development in the arts there is a corresponding tendency to see certain artistic movements as separate and even antagonistic in a way that disguises underlying issues that may be more sympathetic. The problem applies equally to attempts to make sense of individual artists’ chronologies and certainly to attempts to interpret the facts of Kantor’s development, and especially to his interpretation of his own chronology. This chapter will consider aspects of Kantor’s account of his own artistic development from 1938 to 1975 where he makes repeated references to what he refers to as his key influences: ‘abstractionism’, ‘Constructivism’ and the Bauhaus. In response to these early key influences, Kantor set up an apparent dichotomy between these apparently abstract tendencies and what he refers to as the tendencies of ‘Symbolism’, ‘Dada’, ‘Surrealism’ and, as I have already discussed in chapter five, \textit{informel}. Although tendencies such as abstraction and Symbolism, or Constructivism and Surrealism initially may appear mutually exclusive and even antagonistic, this is not necessarily the case. In the following discussion, I wish to draw out the logic of Kantor’s insistence on the ‘notion of eternity’ in relation to art by suggesting hidden commonalities uniting apparently antagonistic tendencies. These tendencies coalesce around Kantor’s aesthetic of ‘Poor Reality’ and the ‘Poor Object’, which, according to his own narrative, marked a break with the tendencies of abstraction and Constructivism in his work. A consideration of what happened to the influence of Constructivism in Kantor’s work following this turn will facilitate a reading of his own chronology in a way that resonates with his own ideas of time and memory.

\textsuperscript{119} As Antonova discusses in Chapter 4 of \textit{Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God} (2010) ‘eternity’ can refer to a sense of infinite or unending time, or, to timelessness. Kantor seems to use the term in the latter sense. This is the mainstream Christian sense based on Augustine and encapsulated by Boethius in his definition in \textit{Consolations of Philosophy} 5.6 (Boethius 1999: 132–133).
The temporal paradox of Kantor’s artistic development

When Kantor began his career as an artist he was as engaged with the idea of theatre as he was with that of painting. His engagement in theatre was in the spirit of ‘total art’ in the avant-garde terms of the Futurists and the Constructivists: he was interested in directing every element of the theatrical event, determining the scenography and costume design as well as the conception and direction of the actors’ performance (Kantor in Halczak 1989: 68). In this Kantor was following (as were his immediate predecessors, the first interwar Cricot group) a general trend from the first-wave European avant-garde in which groups of artists of the Futurist, Expressionist, Cubo-Futurist and later Constructivist and Dadaist tendencies experimented with theatrical performance as a form of ‘art theatre’ in opposition to the dominant realistic and naturalistic traditions (see Schmalenbach 1970: 188).

Kantor claimed that, by 1938, near the end of his formal education as an artist, he was a committed abstractionist, a self-confessed follower of the Constructivists and the Bauhaus. He frequently referred to himself at this time as being ‘under the influence of abstract art: the whole group of Russian Constructivists like Malevich, Popova, Tatlin. I didn’t know what to do with these contradictions. Symbolism was dated by the 1930s. You had to be abstract, Constructivist’ (Kantor in: Hertz 1985–1986: 14). As noted in chapter one, Kantor’s turn away from the mainstream teaching of Post-Impressionist painting in the Academy of Fine Arts led him to study stage design under Frycz and this would have brought him into more direct contact with the tradition of the first-wave avant-garde and its developments in Russia and Germany. According to Pleśniarowicz (2004: 26), it was Frycz who lent Kantor his copy of the 1928 volume by René Füllop-Miller and Josef Gregor, *The Russian theatre: its character and history with especial reference to the revolutionary period* (Füllop-Miller and Gregor 1930), which contained illustrations of Russian Constructivist stage design and discussed the influence of Russian icons on the avant-garde movement (see Gregor in Ibid.: 91–93 and 129). However, this avowedly self-conscious dedication to Constructivism and the Bauhaus appears to have ceased after only two productions in this style: a puppet production of Maurice
Maeterlinck’s *The Death of Tintagiles* in 1938, and a heavily stylised version of Słowacki’s *Balladyna* in the Independent Clandestine Theatre production of 1943. Both of these productions were heavily influenced by the abstract aesthetics of Constructivism and the Bauhaus; the human figure was reduced to the abstract form of lines, triangles, circles and squares. For example, in the production of *Balladyna*, Kantor recalled that he used geometrical shapes, the circle, the arch, the right angle and materials such as tin, black roofing paper and wollen cloth. The nymph Goplana, the untouchable sex symbol of the new romantic literature, nearly a prototype femme-fatale, whose part was usually played by extremely alluring actresses, became an abstract mechanism-structure in our staging.

(Kantor in Pleśniarowicz 1994b: 51)

In this way Goplana was presented as an abstract metal shape on a plinth, with a notch cut in one edge of the metal for a mouth and a single circle cut for an eye. However, following this production, and under the continued pressure of the reality of occupied Kraków (explored in chapter five), Kantor appeared to radically change his aesthetic strategy, apparently (according to his own later narrative written in the early 1970s) abandoning this aesthetics of abstraction for an aesthetics of what he called ‘Poor Realism’ or ‘Poor Reality’.

As noted in chapter five, following the Second World War, Kantor engaged, in his own idiosyncratic manner, with the mainstream of European avant-garde artistic strategies: Surrealism, *informel*, *emballage*, assemblages, happenings, environmental and conceptual works; the influence of Constructivism and the Bauhaus were apparently forgotten. He increasingly pursued the prevailing idea of the ‘open’ artwork. In his happenings, such as the *Sea Happening* at Osieki on the Baltic coast in 1967, and in theatre spectacles such as *The Water Hen* (1967), and *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (1973), based on dramas by Witkacy, he employed an ‘open’ configuration, installing the happening or dramatic action in seaside, ‘café’ and ‘cloakroom’ environments respectively, settings which actively included the audience within the fabric of the performance and, in the case of *The Water Hen*, and Dainty
Shapes and Hairy Apes, incorporated concepts from his Happenings into the fabric of the theatrical production. However, in 1975, with the premiere of The Dead Class, Kantor apparently broke with this aesthetic of the ‘open artwork’ and inaugurated a new period of the ‘closed work’. In this production the spectators were clearly separated from the actors and from the performance space by a rope barrier. They were therefore not included or ‘involved’ in the performance action in the way that they had been previously.

In a text from 1982 ‘Klasa Szkolna’ (The Classroom), Kantor explained:

my idea of the CLOSED WORK [...] was defined in THE DEAD CLASS when I was fed up with the ubiquitously overused conceptions of ‘the open work,’ open forms, the open theatre, and so on. To that extent the production of The Dead Class was a closed work in the mental and metaphysical sense.

(Kantor 1995b: n.p.)

This new strategy of apparent separation of performance work from spectators lasted in various forms up to his death in 1990 and included his most famous major theatrical spectacles following The Dead Class: Wielopole, Wielopole (1980), Let the Artists Die (1985), I Shall Never Return (1988) and Today is My Birthday (1991), smaller scale performance works (known as cricotages), as well as installations and the return to figuration in his late painting. From 1975 until his death Kantor’s work therefore returned, in one sense, to a more prearranged creation that confronted and engaged with the audience, rather than a more apparently open arrangement derived from the idea of the happening which was, at least theoretically, open to the action of chance and the active participation of the spectator.

The advent of the new aesthetic associated with The Dead Class (1975) could, on the one hand, be seen as a symptom of his nature as a consummate showman who aggressively occupied the centre stage of avant-garde art in Poland. In this view the avant-garde was an ‘arms race’ in which Kantor would experiment in what (for Poland) was a new artistic arena, only to then find other

120 See Appendix 1.22 on the problem of dating this text.
artists imitating and debasing the currency of that particular strategy, when he would move on to something newer. However, there are other possible reasons for the radical change in aesthetic strategy that presaged *The Dead Class*. One was, perhaps, Kantor’s age and the intimation of mortality: he was 60 in 1975. But perhaps an even more important reason for his aesthetic turn was a ‘rediscovery’ of an earlier idea.

In the early 1970s Kantor was taking stock of his artistic ideas and began a project of preparing typescripts of all his notes and manifestos dating from the beginning of his artistic career before the Second World War. During this period of reflection he claimed a ‘rediscovery’ of an artistic idea that he insisted he had discovered first in the Clandestine Underground Theatre that he ran during the Nazi occupation of Kraków: this idea is the ‘Reality of the Lowest Rank’, discussed in chapter five. This was an aesthetic based on the idea of the ‘poor object’. To distance himself from Marcel Duchamp’s discovery of *l’objet prêt*, Kantor was keen to claim that this idea was completely original because, he said, he had discovered it during the occupation when Poland was cut off from the world. He consistently claimed that, at that time, he was unaware of Duchamp’s work in this field, stating that he did not see French art until after the war (Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 208):

> When I began *The Return of Odysseus* I knew nothing about dada [sic], about Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Schwitters, or those artists who began to use the ready-made object. So the notion of the ‘ready-made’ or ‘found’ object is my personal invention because, truly, I didn’t know—you have to believe me.

(Kantor interviewed in the film *The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor*, Bablet 1991)

Kantor’s ‘Poor Object’ differed from Duchamp’s more cynical readymades (‘that other object’ (Kantor 1993: 211)) in that he was more personally involved with them. For Kantor, space was charged with the force of memory, and matter, following Schulz, was more animate than dead. His ‘revision’ of Duchamp’s concept was combined with something like the Surrealist notion of *objet trouvé* (found object or situation). For Kantor it is the object that ‘finds’ the artist and
not the other way round. The term *Objets trouvé* is literally ‘lost property’, and as such has the connotation of sadness, melancholy and dejection and provides a further clue to Kantor’s personal vision of this concept. For Kantor the object is poor because it comes from the lower ranks of reality and, as such, is abject, lost, useless, ignored and forgotten. Thus situated, the object is freed of its habitual use value in normal terms and consequently free to ‘find’ the artist anew. One has only to recall the way that Kantor, in the work from *The Dead Class* on, fusses over his stage properties or corrects the hair on his mannequins as if they were his own children to sense his special relationship with poor objects. It is both an emotional and a metaphysical connection.

In a sense, Kantor’s claims concerning the priority of his ideas do not matter—he was a showman who needed to defend his artistic marque from his rivals to protect what he saw as his originality. What is important is the question of the relationship between the ‘poor’ aesthetic of 1944 and the Constructivist influence that preceded it, and the relationship of this to the later aesthetic turn that led to *The Dead Class* in 1975 and the subsequent work of the ‘theatre of death’ which flowed from that. In ‘The Classroom’ text Kantor states that *The Dead Class*, as a ‘closed work’, proclaimed ‘the era of my own avant-garde. / An avant-garde / of reminiscence, / memory, / the invisible, / the abyss and death’ (Ibid. n.p.). In his self-mythologisation of his career, Kantor saw himself as turning away from the ‘clean’ abstraction of Constructivism and the Bauhaus in 1944 with *The Return of Odysseus* to an aesthetics of ‘poor’ distressed objects and reality. However, I wish to argue in this chapter that on another level, Kantor can also be seen to be returning to ideas that can be connected to Constructivism and indeed seen to derive from it, not as a purely visual aesthetic, but rather in the sense of the underpinning philosophical and metaphysical ideas that I will discuss later.

Kantor refers to his original debt to Constructivism throughout his career. He described the inaugural 1956 production of Cricot 2, Witkacy’s *The
Cuttelfish,121 as ‘commedia dell’arte in abstracto’ (Kantor interviewed in the film The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor 1991), thereby linking it to Oskar Schlemmer’s performances in the Bauhaus. Moreover, he explicitly returned to more overt discussions of this tendency towards the end of his life. In June 1986 Kantor was invited by Renato Palazzi, a favoured critic of his work and then the Chancellor of the Civica Scuola d’Arte Drammatica in Milan, to run a series of workshops and lectures culminating in a diploma performance for that year’s graduating students. Kantor taught a group of eleven students and, out of necessity, decided to ‘shake up’ their training by giving them a brief ‘Elementary Theatre School’ in which he laid out what he felt to be the most important lessons of the twentieth century avant-gardes (see Renato Palazzi in Kantor 1991b: 5–10; Kobialka 1993: 207; Pleśniarowicz 2004: 133–134). He singled out as most important the trends of abstraction, Constructivism and Surrealism, and supervised the students in the creation of two short pieces entitled Ślub w manierze konstruktywistycznej i surrealistycznej (A Wedding in the constructivist and surrealist manner). This teaching was documented as Lekcje mediolańskie (The Milano Lessons) and subsequently published in Italian (1988), Polish (1991b) and English (1993). In 1987 Kantor staged a short piece, as part of Dokumenta 8 in Kassel, called Maszyna miłości i śmierci (The Machine of Love and Death). In what must have been for Kantor, a conscious recapitulation of the Constructivist-Surrealist pairing in the Milano Lesson pieces, the first half of this 1987 performance was ostensibly a reconstruction of his 1938 production of Maeterlinck’s The Death of Tintagiles, featuring Kantor’s Constructivist/Bauhaus-inspired mannequins,122 whilst the second half was a symbolic moving tableau employing a Symbolist/Surrealist aesthetic in which a combination of live human figures, a skeleton and a more realistic mannequin orbit the central iron doors in contrary motion, either walking or carried on a revolving stage.

121 The choice by Kantor and Jarema to make Witkacy’s play The Cuttlefish the first production of Cricot 2 would seem to be a conscious echo of the first Cricot group’s opening production of the same work in 1933. Jarema, who was some seven years older than Kantor, had been a member of the first Cricot group.

122 See Appendix 1.23 regarding the similarity of these mannequins to figures in Bauhaus, Futurist and Constructivist art.
The Machine of Love and Death, as its title evokes, was intended by Kantor to state what he saw as one of the central paradoxes of his art: the tension between the Constructivist aesthetic of the *machine* and the symbolism associated with the existential emotional landscape of human existence, which had preoccupied the Symbolists and Surrealists. Kantor expressed this apparent contradiction in the title in a short essay commenting on his 1938 production of *The Death of Tintagiles*, written or edited between the 70s and 80s,123 ‘Between Holy Abstraction and Excommunicated Symbolism’. This text was republished as part of the programme notes for *The Machine of Love and Death*. In it the ‘Director of the EPHEMERAL (AND MECHANICAL) PUPPET THEATRE’, as Kantor styled himself, describes how he ‘bought a little yellow book’, probably one of the Bauhaus publications,124 and set about translating the ‘strange captivating texts’ of ‘Walter Gropius, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee…’ (Kantor in Halczak 1989: 67). Kantor celebrates their aesthetic of:

the metaphysical abstractum, the mechanical eccentricity, the triadic ballet, man and the machine, the circus, Triangles, CIRCLES, CYLINDERS, CUBES, sounds, COLOURS, FORMS SIMULTANEOUS, SYNOPTICAL, SYNACOUSTIC, in an ecstasy of joy, CONSTRUCTION, a pure OBJECTLESS LIBERATED world, ABSTRACTION...

(Ibid.; ellipsis in original)

In the next paragraph Kantor goes on to articulate what, for him, is the incompatibility of the abstract Constructivist tendencies with the Symbolist/ Surrealist tendencies of the other artists and writers to which he was also drawn:

The Director of the EPHEMERAL (AND MECHANICAL) Puppet Theatre apparently attached too much importance to all this [i.e. the ‘metaphysical abstractum’]. But what can one do with the GREAT MYSTERY of Maeterlinck’s little plays, [from] which one has never parted? What can one

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123 This essay was probably revised for the occasion of the 1987 performances *The Machine of Love and Death*, although, as Pleśniarowicz (2005a: 575) notes, Kantor may have been revising notes made at or nearer the time of the earlier 1938 production.

124 See Appendix 1.24 for a brief account of the Bauhaus ‘little yellow books’.
do with the CHARMS cast by Mr. Wyspiański, with the Wawel Castle, the HUT in Bronowice, with the growing OBSESSION of Kafka’s attics, or finally with Bruno Schulz’s RUBBISH HEAP overgrown with burdocks and nettles…

(Ibid.; ellipsis in original)

As Kantor was later to note in the 1970s in *Theatrical Place*:

I was particularly sensitive to the problem of fate and death. These were the traces left by the symbolist tradition of Maeterlinck and Wyspiański. This was why, despite the fact that I admired it greatly, the cold scaffolds of pure constructivism were alien to me. MOD was more important—my own, inner, dramatic, tragic mood with all of its formalistic consequences, which were not always in agreement with the radicalism of an abstract construction—an abstract construction which was at that time the only one that could express that truth I was after. But this was not abstraction in its pure sense.

(Kantor 2009c: 330)

As I will argue, Kantor’s distinction between an ‘older’ Symbolism and a fashionably ‘new’ abstraction is perhaps something of a smokescreen, and that ideas underlying the abstraction of Suprematism and Constructivism also underly Kantor’s aesthetic of the ‘poor object’. In any case, Kantor’s ‘abstraction’, and his development of it, were not, as he argues, ‘abstraction in its pure sense’—it was not abstraction and fragmentation for its own sake. His aesthetic does not look like that of Cubism, Suprematism or Constructivism because it has another motive.

On the surface it seems strange that Kantor should, in effect, imply a denial of any continuous presence or influence of the abstraction of Constructivism and the Bauhaus in his work; that it should instead appear to effectively ‘bookmark’ his career by resurfacing towards its end in this way. It is strange because there are other indications that Constructivism haunted Kantor’s mature work in his last three major spectacles. In *Let the Artists Die* (1985) the actors are fastened into wooden mechanical contraptions that force them into tortured versions of the poses of the medieval Nuremberg artist Stoss’s figures at the base of his triptych of the Assumption of the Virgin in St.
Mary’s Basilica in Kraków. These ‘torture machines’ are reminiscent of some of the *merz* sculptures of Kurt Schwitters, an artist who came to practice on the threshold between Dada and Constructivism in the 1920s. Also in the 1985 production, the ‘barricade’ assembled at that spectacle’s finale can be seen as a ‘poor’ version of typical Soviet Constructivist stage design. In *I Shall Never Return* (1988), the setting is an inn—‘a kind of a b s t r a c t i o n of a dive’ (Kantor in Kraszewski 1995: 302 and Kantor 2005b: 111)—presided over by a ‘Constructivist-innkeeper’ who sets the square tin-topped tables and stools in strict lines and measures them obsessively with a folding ruler (an obsessive action that had already appeared in *Where are the Snows of Yesteryear* (1979) and *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980)). In *Today is My Birthday* (1991) the Constructivist theatre director Meyerhold is invoked as witness to artistic martyrdom, alongside Kantor’s late Polish colleagues in the Kraków avant-garde, the abstractionists Jarema and Stern.125

These, apparently fragmentary, scattered references to Constructivism suggest one of two possibilities concerning what happened to the influence of this tendency in Kantor’s notionally ‘Constructivist-free’ work in the years from 1944 to 1986. On the one hand the Constructive references and elements discernible in Kantor’s early (pre-1944) and later (post-1985) work and discourse could be understood as merely superficial features of his work, the youthfully exuberant responses to early influences in the earlier period or something ‘tacked on’ to his aesthetic in his later work. On the other hand they could indicate a deeper vein of continuous influence underlying his work stemming from a particular understanding of ‘Constructivism’ and associated tendencies. One reading of Kantor’s narrative of his career as a linear

125 Stern is, strictly speaking, not a ‘pure’ abstractionist. His paintings featured real materials that had an autobiographical and metaphysical resonance, such as earth and ground-up human bone, which reflected his experience of surviving a mass exterminations following deportation from the Lwów ghetto in 1943 (Di Mambro 1991: 19 and 21, and Kantor 2005b: 301–303). However, this could be said to point up a certain non-illusionary aspect of much ‘abstraction’ from the first avant-garde. The Cubists and Futurists frequently made use of real materials in the painted surfaces, as did Constructivists such as Tatlin, Rodchenko and Popova. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the same can be said of icon painters and of Malevich’s *Black Square*, which was after all, a real black square. The distinction between Jarema and Stern is one between a particular personal articulation of this latter practice and a more ‘pure’, ‘cool’, geometrical abstraction that later came to characterise the ‘International’ style.
progression favours the former analysis. However, Kantor constructed and reconstructed his own revisionist self-narratives at different stages in his career. This self-reflexive tendency, by which Kantor ‘recognises himself’ in different ways, suggests instead a non-linear way of understanding his artistic development.

The Suprematist zero—looking to the future or to the past? Suprematism Constructivism, and the critique of Euclidean space

Jorge Luis Borges, in his 1942 essay ‘The Analytical Language of John Wilkins’, makes the observation that: ‘there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and speculative’ (Borges 2001: 231). In the now oft-cited passage concerning ‘a certain Chinese encyclopaedia called the Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge’, a bizarre and seemingly arbitrary division of the animal kingdom is alphabetically catalogued, ending with the category ‘n’: ‘those that at a distance resemble flies’ (Ibid.).

In her book Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West (2000), Susan Buck-Morss notes that: ‘It was only in the 1960s that Western art historians constructed retroactively an international narrative of the artistic “avant-garde,” in which the Russian modernists figured as a critically important moment’ (Buck-Morss 2000: 60). As a consequence ‘The term “Russian avant-garde” was applied systematically only after the fact […] codified by Camilla Gray in her pioneering account, published in 1962, The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922’ (Buck-Morss 2000: 303, note 78).

Viewed ‘at a distance’ from the present, ‘Constructivism’ as a category has tended to be seen as a tendency in opposition to Suprematism. Indeed, Russian Constructivism can seem more distant from Suprematism when seen through the veil of ‘International Constructivism’—a tendency that evolved in the

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126 See Agamben’s discussion of Linnaeus’s classification of human being cited in chapter five.

127 This passage was introduced into recent theoretical discourse in Foucault 2002: xvi–xvii.

128 Gray’s book was republished in 1986 with the title The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863–1922 (Gray 1986). According to Buck-Morss, Gray’s book ‘set the logic of the discourse, connecting Russian artistic modernism to developments in Western Europe. In the 1960s, Soviet artists rediscovered the avant-garde of the twenties, often through Western publications’ (Buck-Morss 2000: 303, note 78).
wake of the diaspora of original Russian, German and Eastern European artists who were fleeing Nazi and Stalinist repression. ‘International Constructivism’ is indeed an aesthetic of hard and clean geometric patterns (for example, see the account of ‘Constructivism’ in Rickey 1995). However, the Constructivism of the Russian and early Soviet avant-garde, until the early 1920s, was a much more confused and fuzzy entity during its period of evolution, only later spawning a tendency with a specific, separate and more utilitarian identity. The tendency in twentieth-century art history to distinguish between Malevich’s Suprematism, and the Constructivism of figures like Tatlin, Popova and Rodchenko, is a distinction (in any case one largely based on the personal animosity between Malevich and Tatlin) that Kantor seems not to recognise. In this, at least in terms of the metaphysics of abstraction that concerned him—an ‘impure abstraction’ that could deal with his ‘own, inner, dramatic, tragic mood with all of its formalistic consequences’—Kantor can be seen to be entirely justified.

In chapter three I discussed the philosophical context of the problem of representation in the context of Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. I argued, in employing a more performative notion of human being and reality, that the ontology implied by Kantor’s work escaped conventional notions of the artwork as representation-as-copy that had been the basis of Plato’s criticism of art. One interpretation of Heidegger’s narrative temporalisation of the Cave is that the enlightened prisoner, returning to the cave after being educated in the ‘Good’ of ‘Truth’ in the sunlit world of the eidē or forms outside, is, logically, a messenger from eternity. If the truth of the forms is atemporal then the educated ex-prisoner is truly an emissary from that eternal realm: one who has crossed the threshold between time and timelessness. In an address to the Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française given in 1980, Jacques Derrida characterised the problematic of representation in just this way, as a ‘sending’ or ‘dispatch’—as envoi of truth (Derrida 2007). For Derrida the appearance of the envoi is not separate from that which it represents. Such a revision of the relationship between truth and representation derives from Heidegger’s deconstruction of Plato’s Allegory into a narrative economy. The ‘image’ of truth enshrined in Plato’s cave is seen in terms of a necessarily
structured process of disclosure or *alētheia*. The point of invoking Heidegger’s radicalisation of Plato’s model is to suggest a different way of understanding representation, one that rescues artworks from the Platonic stigmatisation of being ‘mere’ copies. For Heidegger, the point of Plato’s allegory was that, although the situation of the prisoners in the cave was the reality of human being, it was only one part of its potential scope. The transformation of the one prisoner into the messenger or *envoi*, returning from beyond as the representative of truth and eternity, reveals the underlying true nature of the cave-prison. It allows the ‘imperfect’, ‘copy’ of reality—the restricted situation of the prisoners and the partial nature of their phenomenal world, their world of appearances—to be understood as an integrated part of one *economy*. In the same way that early Christians understood God’s Creation as a divine ‘economy’,¹²⁹ and his plan for its redemption in terms of the Holy Trinity as a *Trinitarian Oikonomia* or ‘economy of the Trinity’, so Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s Cave allows reality and human being to be seen as an economic ordering. Such an ‘economy of truth’ is also an inherent part of the Orthodox icon’s uncanny power to act as the *envoi* of truth from ‘the other world’ and recent research¹³⁰ has identified a strong relationship between the metaphysics of icons and the early twentieth-century avant-gardes in contemporaneous Russian writing.

In his manifesto ‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism’, written for “0,10” (Zero-Ten). The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting’ in 1915, Kazimir Malevich stated that ‘A painted surface is a real, living form’ (Malevich 2011: 118), and that the figure in his most (in)famous painting *Black Square* (1915)¹³¹ was: ‘The face of the new art […] the living, regal

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¹²⁹ In the sense of ‘household management’ from the ancient Greek *oikonomia* from *oikos* ‘house’ and *nemein* ‘manage’. The theological sense is in the form of a conceit of God managing the household of Being or Creation (see Mondzain 2005, Buck-Morss 2007 and Agamben 2011c).

¹³⁰ For example see Florensky 2002a, Spira 2008 and Antonova 2010.

¹³¹ According to Drutt 2003, Malevich painted three more versions of his *Black Square* after the 1915 exhibition, dated 1923, 1929 and a fourth version thought to have been painted in the 1930s (see Drutt 2003: 26 and 31, note 33).
The sense of vitality that the Parisian *informel* artists of the 1940s and 1950s were trying to give to their ‘formless’ abstractions was, in Malevich’s characterisation, already present in the painted geometrical forms on his canvases in that 1915 exhibition. In the work that he exhibited there, Malevich declared: ‘I have transformed myself in the zero of form and through zero have reached creation, that is, Suprematism, the new painterly realism—non-objective creation’ (Ibid.). In a 1916 letter to Alexander Benois, Malevich further described his *Black Square* as the ‘single bare and frameless icon of our time’ (Malevich, cited in Douglas 1980: 59). As Christine Lodder notes, the placement of Malevich’s *Black Square* diagonally across the corner of the room ‘recalled the position of the icon in the Russian Orthodox home, possessing metaphysical connotations’ (Lodder 2008: 193).

As Norbert Linton notes in his book *Tatlin’s Tower* (2009), the ‘Zero-Ten’ exhibition ‘contained two major works presented as icons’ (Linton 2009: 50); these works were Malevich’s *Black Square* and Tatlin’s *Corner Counter Relief* (1915). Although Malevich and Tatlin quarrelled during this exhibition (see Linton 2009: 51), the genesis of a mutual antipathy that was never resolved, both artists seemed to share a preoccupation with icons. Tatlin had trained as an icon painter in 1902 (Lodder 1983: 8) and he was acquainted with the influential artist Natalia Goncharova, who maintained a keen interest in icons. There had also been an exhibition of icons two years earlier in Moscow in 1913 (Lodder 1983: 11–12, and 269 note 29) that may have maintained a high level of interest in this artform amongst this circle of artists. Andrew Spira has noted in detail in his book *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (2008) how the interest in icons was shared, for various reasons, across the range of artistic trends in the Russian and early Soviet avant-gardes.

The connection between Suprematism and Constructivism through their shared interest in icons has tended to be overlooked in post-1960s mainstream art-historical narratives of that period. Instead, a narrative of the various practices of the first avant-garde has come to dominate. This is one that sees
the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde as part of a decisive break with a more conventional idea of realism. This was a break that began with Post-Impressionism, where the illusory painterly space ‘behind’ the picture surface began to advance towards, and dissolve into, the texture and geometry of the painted surface of the picture plane itself, as seen, for example, in the works of Cézanne, Gauguin and Seurat. With the move from Analytical to Synthetic Cubism in the work of Braque and Picasso, the reality of the painted surface becomes the subject itself as ‘real’ objects such as wallpaper, newspaper or rope were incorporated into the ‘picture’, alluding to the object concerned. Alongside this move towards abstraction the ensuing experiments of Russian Cubo-Futurism continued the exploration of ways of representing the three-dimensionality of reality in painting, as well as its temporal dimension in the form of attempts to represent movement. The key moment in this narrative is reached with Malevich’s development of his ideas in his Suprematism, and its (literally) iconic apotheosis in the Black Square. In this work the ‘zero’ of representation, as Malevich argues, is reached: the painted black square no longer represents its subject; it is a painted black square.

In this erasure of representation, the depth of the pictorial space vanishes, advancing from the depths of the fictional world of the painting towards the reality of the two-dimensional picture surface itself. And, in doing so, the fictional pictorial space approaches the three-dimensional reality of the spectator. Following the example of some Futurist works, Russian Constructivism, the movement commonly seen as following Suprematism and as existing in opposition to it, went even further in this regard and, in the form of works such as Vladimir Tatlin’s Corner or Counter Relief (1915, also shown in the ‘Zero-Ten’ exhibition), abandoned the picture frame altogether, advancing beyond it to invade the actual space of the spectator.

This tendency in early Modernist paintings of a movement through the picture plane towards the spectator can be seen as a movement in precisely the opposite direction to that implied by the illusory depth of the picture space established in Renaissance linear and optical perspective. In his 1927 essay
Perspective as Symbolic Form (1991), Erwin Panofsky notes the Renaissance German artist Albrecht Dürer’s (1471–1528) characterisation of this system of perspective in which he defines the Latin word *perspectiva* as ‘seeing through’. According to Panofsky this engenders a concept of perspective as one in which the picture is:

transformed into a ‘window’ [and] we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into a space. The material surface upon which the individual figures or objects are drawn or painted or carved is thus negated, and instead reinterpreted as a mere ‘picture plane.’ Upon this picture plane is projected the spatial continuum which is seen through it and which is understood to contain all the various individual objects.

(Panofsky 1991: 27)

Through this ‘window’ the mind of the spectator is drawn into the illusion of depth amongst the objects represented in the ‘space’ of this rendered world. In this system, the surface of visually perceived reality forms the supposed ‘base’ of a ‘visual pyramid’, the vertex of which sits on the perceptive surface inside one of the eyes of the observer. Lines of sight are characterised as ‘visual rays’, which, according to Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) in his treatise *On Painting* (1966), ‘carry the form of the thing seen to the sense’ (see Alberti 1966: 45–46). These lines emanate from the visual world and converge on the eye of the observer in a single point. The picture plane, as Panofsky notes, intersects this visual pyramid such that, if it were to record the rays at the points they passed through, it would reproduce the scene as perceived by the observer exactly. For Panofsky, pictures constructed according to this system obey a consistent set of laws leading to now familiar features such as a vanishing point (or points), a horizon line and the progressive diminution in size of equal dimensions as they recede in space (Panofsky 1991: 28).

Paradoxically, because parallel lines appeared to converge, from the viewer’s perspective, within the visual field, and coincidentally, because figures and objects appear to diminish in size according to distance, a second cone or

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132 Panofsky notes Alberti’s account in *On painting*: ‘I inscribe a quadrangle […] which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint’ (Alberti 1966: 56).
pyramid is suggestively implied ‘behind’ the picture plane mirroring the one emanating from the viewer’s eye; that is, its base sits on the reverse side of the picture plane and its vertex lies on the central vanishing point to which parallel lines converge and towards which objects diminish in size (see Edgerton 1975: 136–137). As Rudolf Arnheim notes in his 1972 essay ‘Inverted Perspective in Art: Display and Expression’, the effect of this linear perspectival system is of a sense of movement from the viewer into the illusory depth of the painting: ‘Any convergent shape creates a sense of movement in the direction of its apex. […] the dominant direction of central perspective is that of leading the viewer into pictorial space towards the apex of the [second] visual pyramid, the vanishing point’ (Arnheim 1972: 133). Viewers of pictures constructed according to this system are therefore placed in a powerfully panoptic relationship in which the spatial world of the picture is laid out passively before their gaze.

A non-Euclidean alternative: The peculiar aesthetic of Byzantine and Russian icons
In contrast to the homogeneous space created by linear and optical perspective, the artists of the Russian avant-garde seemed to favour what appears at first glance to be a reverse arrangement. This is one in which the vanishing point in effect lies before the picture, in the place where the spectator is standing. Instead of the sense of space receding into an imaginary ‘picture space’ behind the canvas, attention is drawn to the surface of the work itself as a reality and a part of the space before it. It is as if the work is entering the room to fix the spectator in its gaze, rather than inviting the spectator’s gaze to enter an imaginary world behind and within it. As noted above, commentators such as Lodder, Linton and Spira have observed that these Russian artists had an indigenous national example of just such a reverse arrangement in the form of the Russian icon, a tradition dating back to the country’s conversion to Christianity by the Byzantine empire in 988 AD. Commonly painted on a doska (wooden board), the Russian icon shared with its earlier Byzantine predecessor a heavily stylised aesthetic that sought to convey the holy rather than the

133 For a discussion of Brunelleschi’s experimental set-up with the mirror, see Appendix 1.26.
human reality of the image. In a manner mirrored by the Cubists and Cubo-Futurists the surface texture and beauty of the painting was highlighted and no attempt was made to disguise the reality of the icon as a painted object occupying the same space as the spectator. As such, no consistent use was made of the geometry of linear and optical perspective and it was not employed as a unifying system for creating a ‘world’ in the painting into which the viewer was to be drawn. Instead, the icon operated as a ‘window onto eternity’, except that this was a window through which the eternal world gazed onto the world of the spectators as much as they gazed onto it. Eternity, as represented by the face of Christ or the saints, returns each spectator’s gaze with a total and chilling implacability.

This metaphysics of the icon, which posits the manifestation of a ‘real’ presence in our reality as an emissary or envoy from a more ‘real’ but concealed reality—a ‘reality behind reality’—comes directly from the Byzantine techniques developed to answer the iconoclasts’ accusations of idolatry. The icon had to be an image that was true, an artefact that instantiated the paradox of the ‘true copy’—a material reality in this world that in its formal arrangement and construction was an envoy or messenger from the next. From the perspective of this ‘real’ reality the painting is not seen as a copy or Platonic simulacrum, but is rather understood to create its own reality derived from the eternal world. The icon’s role was therefore not to create illusion but to exist as a real object in this world and act as a window or interface with eternity. (Adding a further layer of metaphorical complexity, icons are also sometimes dizzyingly described as mirrors not of this world, but of the next.) Consequently, the elements depicted by icons do not invite the viewer to look through them voyeuristically as into an illusory ‘real’ world created by the trick of linear and optical perspective. This would be too passive a role for something that was thought to be an active intermediary from eternity. In icons, the image is flat and often draws as much attention to its surface and its frame. Also, icons were often encased in silver sculpted coverings with apertures for the hands and faces of the figures to show through. Iconographers were unafraid of acknowledging the material presence of their work because they did not rely on the illusory tricks of realistic painting.
In this they demonstrate a commonality with aspects of Suprematist and Constructivist art.

The peculiar presence of the figure depicted in the icon is managed through the use of several artistic techniques, analogous to some of those used by Suprematist and early Constructivist artists. One of these is the use of a concept of ‘rhythm’, a sense of the dynamic relationship or interplay between the ‘space’ of the picture-world, the surface of the picture plane, and the space of the viewer in front of it. Another technique is the use of a non-perspectival sense of light. Further, the concept of simultaneous time is also employed in icons to depict non-contiguous biblical narratives in the same work. There are also various other ways in which the laws of perspective are apparently disregarded through the use of what Antonova has termed ‘supplementary planes’ or spaces, that is, surfaces or objects that would not normally be observable under the laws of linear and optical perspective. Iconographers adhere to strict canonical features and characteristics of biblical figures and saints, and install the personage into the icon through a dynamic and abstract compositional arrangement of forms that make up the figures and background. Key to this is the use of a range of strategies that have become known by the blanket terms of ‘reverse’ or ‘inverse perspective’. As I have noted, in what is now seen as traditional Renaissance or linear and optical perspective, lines converge towards the centre of the picture plane to create an illusion of a cone of depth that vanishes into the picture. This technique is based on the illusion that objects appear smaller the further away they are from the viewer. In reverse perspective, the opposite is the case. The cone of depth is reversed and objects in the icon, such as mountains, expand as they move away from the observer. Space in the icon unfurls around the spectator, and the only point at which the lines of sight intersect are the one where the viewer is standing. The spectator therefore is included in the icon. This is one of the reasons for the peculiar quality of icons, that they are often said to be alive, and that the eyes, which seem so abstract, seem to look directly at the observer in a particularly penetrating manner. Echoes of this projection by the artwork of its presence into the space of the viewer can be seen in Marjorie Perloff’s description of Tatlin’s
Corner Relief in her 1985 book *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, which, she writes:

> is perceived by the viewer as a forward projection from the actual walls upon which it is anchored. The thin and airy sheets of metal are assembled so as to extend outward into space rather than coalescing around a central core.

(Perloff 2003: 71)

As noted above, Tatlin and artists such as Popova made non-representational use of real materials in their artworks. As Lodder (2008) observes:

Tatlin tends to be regarded as a staunch materialist, but this may have been overstated because of his rivalry with Malevich and later career as a designer. His paintings such as the *Nude* of 1913 had been based on the pictorial technique and composition of icon painting, while in his reliefs he sometimes used old icon boards and methods associated with icon painting. He also used ‘found’ materials, which bore the imprint of their experiences over time in the form of dents, scratches, etc. Indeed, the emerging concept of *faktura* (texture) in Russian art was closely associated with metaphysical notions. Vladimir Markov pointed out: ‘Through the resonance of the [icon’s] colours, the sound of the materials, the assemblage of textures (*faktura*), we call the people to beauty, to religion, to God’. Tatlin even confessed to Berthold Lubetkin that ‘if it were not for the icons... I should have remained preoccupied with water drips, sponges, rags and aquarelles’.

(Lodder 2008: 193–194, italics and ellipsis in original)

In his preoccupation with the ‘poor object’ and ‘poor reality’ Kantor can be seen, consciously or not, to be following Tatlin’s preoccupation with the metaphysics of *faktura*. In his own criticism of linear and optical perspective Kantor also seems to allude to a metaphysics of space analogous with that of icon painting. In his third *Milano Lesson*, Kantor criticises the homogenised space of linear and optical perspective:

> The tradition of painting, starting with the Renaissance and the application of the laws of optical perspective found in the picture only a single space in force in the field of the entire image. TENSION is created through the laws of perspective and this uniform, single space.
ABSTRACTION has discovered and applied the law of MULTI-SPACE (This is my interpretation of this new space).

(Kantor 1991b: 33; my translation, see Appendix 1.25 for original Polish text)

The use of multiple planes and spaces within the same picture was something that the Cubists, Futurists and Russian Cubo-Futurists had experimented with. It is also, as noted by Antonova, who refers to this phenomenon as the use of ‘supplementary’ or ‘simultaneous’ planes, predates the first-wave avant-garde as one of the characteristics of the use of space in Russian icons (see Antonova 2010: 105).\(^{134}\)

In addition, the presence of a sophisticated philosophical discourse at the heart of the early Russian and Soviet avant-gardes, exemplified by the writings of Pavel Florensky (to be discussed shortly), justifies a certain blurring of the distinction between artistic movements that have subsequently become ossified into the firmly divided categories of Suprematism and Constructivism. While it is true that these movements, to some extent, identified themselves around separate concerns, the distinction has tended to obscure the common metaphysical ground that united rather than divided them. The fascination with Orthodox icons shared by key practitioners of both movements, already noted, can be seen as a shared interest in icons as an antidote to a painterly realism that had been increasingly tested by Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism. As the illusion of three-dimensional depth in the picture-space, created by the mastery of Renaissance linear and optical perspective, was increasingly brought forward towards the reality of the flatness of the two-dimensional plane of the canvas, the Byzantine tradition of the icon that had been inherited by the Russian Orthodox Church was seen as providing a ready-made alternative to what seemed to many, then, a spent historical model.

Artists like Malevich wanted to make an art that was real, not a representation based on the techniques of illusion, but on an idea of reality.

\(^{134}\) See Appendix 1.27 for a brief account of Antonova’s new definition of ‘reverse perspective’ as ‘simultaneous planes’. 
derived from the metaphysics of the Orthodox Church that was finding popular expression at the time in ideas about the ‘fourth dimension’ through such figures as Piotr Ouspensky and G. I. Gurdjieff. Malevich’s Suprematist canvases were not representations of geometrical shapes: they were those shapes. On the one hand they were representations of those figures floating in space. But, on the other hand, because of the nature of the figures and the ‘space’, presented only as a white background, they were simultaneously real in the sense that they were identical with the geometrical shapes that they manifested. These geometrical, two-dimensional figures performed the actual relationship that they were in with each other within their white ground. Also, the dynamic arrangement of each painting forms a further relationship in the perception of the spectator. Kantor discusses Malevich’s Black Square in The Milano Lessons:

Malevich’s square lives in its own realness. It is then an object. His imitators were nothing more than aesthetes.

This real square exists in the same way as self-generated notions function in geometry. To use a religious language—this square is G O D.

(Kantor 1993: 215)

As I will show, Kantor appropriated Malevich’s idea of the artwork as paradoxical ‘living object’—as something that is both dead and alive. The idea was ‘discovered’ with the ‘poor object’ of 1944 in the form of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’ of objects such as the chair, the muddy cartwheel and the plank of wood. It was ‘rediscovered’ in 1975 with the ideas surrounding the ‘bio-object’ and the actor-as-dead-person: the conception behind the ‘theatre of death’ was of a performance that, like the ‘poor object’ occurred at the threshold between the garbage dump and eternity, between this life and the next.

Pavel Florensky and the aesthetics of eternity: ‘Reverse Perspective’ and ‘Reverse Time’

Panofsky’s 1927 critique of linear and optical perspective in Perspective as Symbolic Form was predated by a lecture written in 1919 and delivered in 1920 (although not published until much later, in 1967) by the Russian theologian,
mathematician, and philosopher Pavel Florensky. Entitled ‘Obratnaia perspektiva’ (Reverse Perspective), this lecture was delivered to the Byzantine Section of MIKhIM, and, in it, Florensky developed his ideas on space and spatiality in the work of art. These were subsequently the main topic of his teaching in the classes he taught at VKhUTEMAS between 1921 and 1924 (See Misler in Florensky 2002: 199). Florensky’s lecture is ostensibly a spirited defence of what appear to be the peculiarities of spatiality in Russian icon painting, derived from the aesthetic traditions of Byzantine art:

Those who become acquainted with Russian icons of the fourteenth, fifteenth and part of the sixteenth centuries for the first time are usually astonished by the unexpected perspectival relationships, especially in the depiction of objects with flat sides and rectilinear edges, as for instance buildings, tables and chairs, and especially books, specifically the Gospels which the Saviour and the saints are usually shown holding. These particular relationships stand in glaring contradiction to the rules of linear perspective, from whose viewpoint they can only be considered examples of crudely illiterate drawing.

(Florensky 2002: 201)

In his defence of these peculiarities of icon art Florensky goes far beyond Panofsky’s 1927 critique of linear and optical perspective and in doing so, develops a metaphysical aesthetics that, in many ways, parallels that of Malevich who was his contemporary. Indeed, although Florensky’s interests were predominantly spiritual, mathematical and philosophical, he was familiar with the currents of interest in the Russian artistic avant-garde and was acquainted with some of its key practitioners. In his essay Florensky is keen to champion a theory of art that, like Malevich’s, is anti-representational. In doing so, he directly equates linear and optical perspective with the traditional

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135 See Appendix 28.

136 See Appendix 28.

137 Before teaching at the Vkhutemas for example, Florensky was on visiting terms with the Constructivist artist Liubov Popova and her circle, which included artists such as Vladimir Tatlin (see Pyman 2010: 128–129).
Platonic notion of representational imitation. In a passage that identifies the root of representationality as lying in the ancient theatre, the task of painting, Florensky argues:

is not to duplicate reality, but to give the most profound penetration of its architectonics, of its material, of its meaning. And the penetration of this meaning, of this stuff of reality, its architectonics, is offered to the artist’s contemplative eye in living contact with reality, by growing accustomed to and empathising with reality, whereas theatre decoration wants as much as possible to replace reality with its outward appearance. The aesthetics of this outward appearance lie in the inner connectedness of its elements, but in no way is it the symbolic signifying of the prototype via the image, realised by means of artistic technique. Stage design is a deception, albeit a seductive one; while pure painting is, or at least wants to be, above all true to life, not a substitute for life but merely the symbolic signifier of its deepest reality. Stage design is a screen that thickens the light of existence, while pure painting is a window opened wide on reality. [...] And so, presupposing that the spectator or the stage designer was chained fast, like the prisoner of Plato’s cave, to a theatre bench and neither could nor should have a direct vital relationship to reality, these first theoreticians of perspective provided rules for a deception that ensnared the theatre spectator as if he were separated from the stage by a glass barrier and there were just one immobile eye, observing without penetrating the very essence of life and, most important, with his will paralysed, for the very essence of a theatre that has become mundane demands a will-less looking at the stage, as at some ‘untruth’, something ‘not really there’, some empty deception. Anaxagoras and Democritus replace the living man with a spectator, paralysed by curare, and so they thereby make clear the rules for deceiving this spectator.

(Florensky 2002: 209–210, italic and underlined emphases in original)

A number of key ideas that have been discussed in previous chapters, and that occur in some of Kantor’s Theatrical Place essays, are anticipated and combined in this passage. Firstly, as with the Polish notion of informe seen in Kantor’s postwar work, reality is conceived of as a living phenomenon, and

138 Discussed in chapter three of this thesis.
painting as participating in that liveness. Secondly, theatre is demonised as a falsifier of reality, in opposition to fine art, a recurrent theme of Kantor’s. Thirdly, the art of theatre is likened to a ‘screen’ that obscures the real, while ‘pure painting’ is ‘a window opened wide on reality’. This idea stands in opposition to Dürer’s notion of the ‘transparent’ nature of perspective mentioned by Panofsky. For Florensky, the painting is not a window in the sense of the picture plane as conceived by Alberti and Dürer. (In any case, the system of linear and optical perspective, as the 1425 demonstration of Filippo Brunelleschi reveals, requires the logic of the reflecting mirror to reveal its Euclidean geometry, rather than the transparency of a window.) For Florensky, ‘pure painting’ is, rather, a metaphorical window, a symbol of direct communion with a reality behind appearances, rather than a view onto those appearances themselves. This is an idea that comes from the metaphysics of icons. Fourthly, the analogy with Plato’s Cave is evoked to describe the relation between the stage and the spectator. For Florensky, the spectator is chained in position before the stage and separated from it as if by a ‘glass barrier’. And, as in Agamben’s critique of the aesthetic relation discussed in chapter four, the living human being is replaced with a ‘spectator’—an immobile simulacrum of a real human being, a figure ‘paralysed by curare’—a replacement necessary to fit in with the particular logic of linear and optical perspective. As I will show later in this chapter, these four ideas point directly towards Kantor’s concerns with art and representation and resonate strongly with his theoretical discourse.

As Clemena Antonova observes in her book *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (2010), Florensky’s critique of linear and optical perspective was based on, and justified by, his understanding of nineteenth-century scientific research (Antonova 2010: 32). He was attempting to defend icon art in an official culture that, at the time, was beginning to seek to devalue it. His discourse around reverse perspective demonstrates a sophisticated argument against conventional realism, and represents an appeal to older traditions in support of what was otherwise perceived as ‘new’ and forward-looking. As Antonova notes, the advocacy of the peculiarities of icon painting:
originated at a particular point in the development of early modernism, when traditional ideas about geometrical and physical space were breaking down both in science and art. The ‘reverse perspective’ of ‘ancient’ Russian art was hailed as a prophetic kind of non-Euclidean geometry. It is evident that this argument suited the Russian aspirations of re-validating ancient Russian art as a counter to the Western naturalistic tradition.

(Antonova 2010: 60–61)

Whilst this is undoubtedly true, it is also true that for philosophically minded artists such as Malevich, and artistically minded philosophers such as Florensky the point about criticising the Western naturalistic tradition was not the question of whether a work of art ‘looked like’ reality; it was not a question of knowledge, of epistemology. It was rather a metaphysical question of existence, of being, of ontology. The tessellated canvases of the Cubists and Futurists, and the geometric abstractions of the Suprematists, might not, on the surface have looked much like the apparently anti-geometrical formlessness of Kantor’s *informel* canvasses of the late 1950s and early 1960s, but what was at stake was very similar: an attempt to articulate the being of reality, its ‘is-ness’ and to liberate it from the suffocating constraints of existing systems. That this turn from epistemology to ontology should be expressed from ‘within the realm it purports to attack’ is often the nature of the avant-garde. There is, perhaps, no choice but to *détourner* the tools to hand: thus ‘perspective’ becomes ‘reversed’ to sabotage the rationale of the dominant practice. This *détournement* of representational terminology can unfortunately lead to the sense that what was happening in the avant-garde of pre-Revolutionary Russia and the first years of the Soviet Union was a change in *representational practices*. This is to misunderstand the break with realism. Malevich was very clear when he declared in his 1915 manifesto: ‘I have transformed myself in the zero of form and through zero have reached creation’ (Malevich 2011: 122). In this sense art was about *creation* rather than *representation*.

What the early twentieth-century break with linear and optical perspective reveals is an engagement with, and questioning of, the nature of subjectivity that the Renaissance development prefigured and prepared the ground for. As
Panofsky observes, linear and optical perspective ‘was a translation of psychophysiological space into mathematical space; in other words, an objectification of the subjective’ (Panofsky 1991: 66). Moreover, ‘Perspective, in transforming the ousia (reality) into the phainomenon (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine’ (Ibid.: 72). It was noted in chapter five that Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* had been interpreted as a portrayal of the Cartesian rational subject’s relationship with the objective world, a relationship in which the world is laid out like a corpse before the inquiring incorporeal soul. As Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., argues at the end of *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (1975: 164–165), the rapid popularisation of the perspectival system acted as a catalyst for the scientific revolution. This was characterised by the new perspectives opened up onto both the microcosm and the macrocosm, as enshrined in 1543 with the publication of the *De humani corporis fabrica* of Andreas Vesalius and the *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* of Nicolaus Copernicus. The impulse to conceptualise the relationship between the viewing subject and the objective world that was embodied in the linear perspectival model of Brunelleschi and Alberti was part of a shift in thinking that would lead to the Enlightenment scientific project. A certain idea of the domination of reality became possible because of the techniques and manner in which reality was ‘rendered’ visualisable. As Robert D. Romanyshyn notes in his 2008 essay ‘The Despotic Eye: An Illustration of Metabletic Phenomenology and Its Implications’:

Fifteenth century linear perspective as a psychology of infinite distance places us in the world in such a way that we become fixed, immobile see-ers, visionaries if you will, who gaze upon the world as an object, as something over against us and to be viewed with the detachment of infinite distance.  
(Romanyshyn 2008: 516)

For Panofsky:

the history of perspective may be understood […] as a triumph of the distancising and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human
struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self.

(Panofsky 1991: 67–68)

This sense of godlike separation from reality is, of course, an illusion. As was noted in chapter three, the practice of representation, whilst appearing to reproduce and copy, overlays reality with an appearance that can be controlled and manipulated. And, as noted in chapter five, in the practice of biopolitics and examples such as the Nazi’s treatment of the Jewish race this can have terrible consequences.

Seen in this context, the avant-garde idea of setting representation at zero to liberate reality acquires a certain metaphysical force. In Florensky’s terms, the perspective is reversed. Instead of the monarchical and voyeururistic relationship in which the artist-observer, and later the spectator, stand in an apparently privileged position as they gaze into the depths of the illusory picture plane, the viewer of Malevich’s *Black Square* is confronted and fixed by the work. As with the effect of icon paintings, the movement is in precisely the opposite direction to that of linear and optical perspective, hence Florensky’s use of the term ‘reverse perspective’. In the conception of art that emerged in the Russian and early Soviet avant-garde, the artist is a liberator of a reality that communicates with its spectators. Perhaps similarly to the way in which ‘Tadeusz’s great head’, seen though the large magnifying lens, made such an impact on his first wife in the *Museum de la Découverte* in Paris in 1946, works such as Malevich’s *Black Square* and Tatlin’s *Counter-Relief* in the ‘Zero-Ten’ exhibition leapt out and shocked their audience in 1915. What both exhibitions had in common was the opening up of a window, in the symbolic sense that Florensky describes, that allows for the metaphysical shock of a direct communication between reality and human being. It is a shock because human being is itself *figured* by what is coming from the other side of the ‘window’; it is no longer in control, no longer in its illusory, sovereign, disembodied role that it had become habituated to through the long familiarity with linear and optical perspective. In his collection of writings from the seventies and eighties
Theatrical Place, Kantor cites his notes from 1961 concerning the wardrobe in which he set the ‘action’ of Witkacy’s 1921 drama The Country House. In this account, somewhat reminiscent of Schulz’s language around the descriptions of matter discussed in chapter five, the wardrobe does not open as if onto the linear and optical perspective of a box stage but instead:

It expands
on that other side.
Its wings,
like backstage, suddenly open up
to the deeper and murkier regions of
this, one could say domestic, INTERIOR.
Now, in this oppressive and stifling climate,
dreams unfold,
the nightmares of the night are born,
the practices escaping the light of the day corrupt
behaviours,
shameless and cruel,
are carried out.
Now—
and not in some mystical misty space—
but here, separated from the everyday reality by this thin
and weak wall,
we feel that we touch upon the condition of non-existence
and Death.
(Kantor 2009c: 363)

The world that the wardrobe opens onto is that of the vitality of matter, as revealed by the 1947 exhibition at the Palais de la Découverte. This world is one that stares back at the spectator unlike the passive world of Enlightenment rational spatiality that the mechanisms of linear and optical perspective unfurled before its sovereign gaze. In 1980s Kantor created an installation artwork of the wardrobe with a naked male mannequin hanging from a coat hanger inside it (see Pleśniarowicz 2004: 82), ill.15). The work does not draw its viewers into its depths but confronts them directly from within its depths with the mannequin’s glassy gaze and humiliatingly revealed genitalia. As such, it operates in an icon-like manner, similar to Malevich’s Black Square and Tatlin’s Corner Counter-Relief.
As I noted earlier, the fact that Malevich chose to display his *Black Square* diagonally across the corner of its exhibition space, and that Tatlin’s relief also occupied a corner from which it projected out into the spectator’s space was no accident. The Russian avant-garde’s interest in Russian icons extended to the spatial peculiarities in them that Florensky characterises under the term ‘reverse perspective’. Suprematism and Russian Constructivism have been understood as a utopian, forward-looking artistic movements, characterised, in the words of two of the artists from that period, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Olga Stepanova, by the slogan ‘The Future is Our Only Goal!’¹³⁹ However, through their interest in icons, Malevich, Natalia Goncharova and Tatlin were just as much looking to the past for inspiration, to an Eastern ‘ancient’ tradition of sacred art inherited from Byzantium, as to the recent ‘new’ Western avant-gardes of Cubism and Futurism. And, as can be seen from the contemporary discourse exemplified by Florensky, the sense of mysticism characteristic of Russian Symbolism and its writers such as Andrei Bely, was completely woven into the fabric of the Russian avant-garde, linking it to a particular Eastern Christian sense of spiritual reality inherent in the Russian national psyche.¹⁴⁰

It is not surprising therefore, that this ‘new’ Russian and early Soviet art had a strongly metaphysical character that sought to question the ontological nature of artistic practice. The break with illusory realism that occurred with the advent of Modernism is paradoxical in the sense that it is not a break with ‘reality’ or the ‘truth’ as such. Artists still wished to engage with reality but saw that the realism facilitated by linear and optical perspective was simply an illusionistic method that created a representational barrier and concealed more than it revealed. Although they were almost certainly unknown to each other, in their discussions of art, the Russian Florensky and the German Heidegger are often remarkably sympathetic. As Antonova points out, in his discussions of art ‘Heidegger’s highly specific language sounds at times close to’ Florensky’s valorisation of the symbolic in his discussions of icons. She goes on to argue


¹⁴⁰ For example, see Bely 1981 for his Symbolist reading of Anton Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. 

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that, whereas ‘Heidegger, as the romantics before him, sees the symbol at work in classical Greek art […] for Florensky it is the medieval Russian icon that is ultimately symbolic’ (Antonova 2010: 99 and 100). For Heidegger, ‘reality’ was ‘is-ness’—the fact that there was something rather than nothing, the Being of being. Central to this ‘is-ness’ of reality was the being of human being, the ‘is-ness’ on which the conscious awareness of reality is grounded. However, as discussed in chapter four, human being is already always subject to the same problem—that of its being already in its own ground, in mediis rebus—‘in the middest’—as Kermode puts it in The Sense of an Ending (1967: 7), the fact that one is always already in one’s experience of being. In a sense, and to borrow Kantor’s term (and to revisit the temporal sense of human being discussed in chapter three), human being is already emballaged (wrapped) in the very priorness of its own being; it is thrown ‘into the middest’ already enfolded between the concerns of its past experience and the anticipation of the future that arises from it. In his own way, Kantor expresses a similar point in his 1988 piece for the monograph of his work Ma Création, Mon Voyage: Commentaires Intimes (1991a):

Human flesh is but
a fragile and ‘poetic’
Emballage, of
the skeleton, of death,
and of hope that it will last
until Doomsday.
(Kantor 2009d: 15)

This ‘emballage of being’ is its fundamental appearance for itself—the ‘skin’ through which everything is felt and experienced, the barrier between the Kantian ding an sich (thing in itself) and conscious awareness. In early Modernist painting, the picture plane becomes a metaphor for the barrier between the observer and visual reality. As Suchan noted of Kantor’s relationship with his informel paintings (discussed in chapter three), the way in which the picture plane is conceived is as much about the artist’s being (and therefore by implication humanity’s) as about the being of the truth of the reality that the artist is attempting to articulate, the being of the artwork itself. The ‘call
of being’ is one that comes from the depths of the soul just as much as it comes from the depth of things. It is in this sense that eternity, an impossible, ‘abstract’ and unreal concept from the human perspective, acquires its practical force. As Borges observed in 1936 in his history of eternity (Borges 2001c) ‘When we can feel this oneness [i.e. with reality], time is a delusion which the indifference and inseparability of a moment from its apparent yesterday and from its apparent today suffice to disintegrate’ (Ibid.: 138). This particular aspect of reality as it impinges on the awareness is, for Borges, ‘the true moment of ecstasy and the possible intimation of eternity’ (Ibid.: 139).

The embalage of the real: Florensky’s ‘reverse time’

In his final theological work Iconostasis, composed in 1922, a work that explores the metaphysical significance of icons, Florensky attempts to articulate this relationship between the visible and the invisible and the nature of the barrier that separates them. In his opening discussion of the ‘spiritual structure of dreams’ he posits dreams as the threshold between the visible and invisible realms of reality. In doing so he engages in a discourse of dreams which does not so much follow Freud or suggest Surrealism, but rather seems to prefigure some of the concerns articulated by Schulz in his writings just over a decade later. Dreams, according to Florensky, are ‘our first and simplest [...] entry into the invisible world [...] This entry is, more often than not, the lowest’ (Florensky 1996: 34). The chief characteristic that marks the dream world off from the visible world of waking reality, Florensky argues, is the behaviour of time. In a passage that anticipates the language of Schulz’s discussions of time, Florensky suggests that:

Few have sufficiently considered [...] the infinite speed of the dream-time, the time that turns inside out, the time that flows backward. For, indeed, very long sequences of visible time can, in the dream, be wholly instantaneous—and can flow from future to past, from effects to causes. This happens precisely when we are moving from the visible world to the invisible, between the actual and the imaginary.

(Ibid.: 35)
Following on from the term used in the title of his lecture on ‘Reverse Perspective’, Florensky characterises this quality of dream-time as ‘reverse time’, where dream ‘flows reversely to what we expect when we think in the Kantian sense of time. […] here, in the time of the invisible world, it happens inside out’ (Ibid.: 41). So, in the dream, time flows in the reverse direction. Except, it also does this in no time, that is, according to Florensky ‘at infinite speed’ or, as a time that is ‘wholly instantaneous’ (Ibid.: 35). As Antonova points out in her analysis of Florensky’s discussion, ‘there are two interrelated features of reverse time—one is its direction, the other its duration’ (Antonova 2010: 21). This leads her to interpret Florensky’s ‘reverse time’ as ‘an in-depth reversal of kind. The very reversal of time suggests a lack of duration—this is exactly what “infinite in speed” and “instant” imply. The lack of duration […] is an aspect of the concept of timelessness’ (Ibid.: 22), that is to say, eternity. From his discussion and analysis Florensky concludes that:

dreams are the images that separate the visible world from the invisible—and at the same time join them. This boundary-space of the dream establishes the relationship of the dream images to this world as well as to that world. From the perspective of the visible world and its ordinary images (i.e., what we call ‘actuality’), a dream is ‘merely a dream,’ nothing—nihil visibile, yes nihil, but visible nothing, visible and perceptible and therefore always approaching the images of this ‘actuality.’ But time in the dream—i.e. its most general characteristic—runs reversely to time in the visible world. And therefore although it is something perceived, the dream is wholly teleological, saturated with the meanings of the invisible world, meanings that are invisible, immaterial, eternal yet nevertheless visibly manifest and (as it were) vividly material. A dream is therefore pure meaning wrapped in the thinnest membrane of materiality; it is almost wholly a phenomenon of the other world. The dream is the common limit of both the sequence of earthly states and the sequence of heavenly states, the boundary where the final determination of earth meet the increasing densifications of heaven. The dream makes into symbols this meeting of the lowest experiences of the highest world with the highest experience of the lowest world; thus the dream is the last splashes of the higher world into the lower—although the perceptible patterns of these
heavenly splashes are predetermined by our earthly circumstances.

[...]

A dream, then, is a sign of movement between two realms—and also a symbol: of what? From the heavenly view, the dream symbolizes earth, from the earthly perspective, it symbolizes heaven. A dream therefore occurs when—simultaneously but with differing orders of clarity—both shores of existence are given to consciousness. We might say, then, that a dream happens whenever we cross from one shore to the other: but it may be more accurate to say that the dream happens whenever our consciousness hugs the boundary of the crossing and therefore sustains the double perceptiveness that occurs whenever we either lightly dream or drowsily keep awake.

(Florensky 1996: 42–43, emphases in original)

In this passage can be seen the traditional ontological ranking of heaven and earth and the explanation why the dreams are ranked as ‘low’ entrances to the eternal realm. Nevertheless, it is also possible to perceive in Florensky’s account of the liminal nature of dreams a metaphysical conception of the artwork that resonates not only with Malevich’s but also with the work of Schulz and Kantor. Earlier, in chapter two, I mentioned Sandauer’s citing of Mann’s view that: ‘the artist is a kind of Hermes mid-way between the lower and upper realm, between the subconscious and consciousness, body and spirit’ (Sandauer 1971: 96; my translation). In that instance Sandauer wished to characterise Schulz as just such a Hermes-like figure, and subsequently in chapter four, I argued that Kantor functioned as an artist in a similar way. This conception of an artist was already anticipated in Florensky’s discourse.

There can be a tendency to characterise abstraction, and especially Constructivism, as something more mechanical and functional rather than mystical and spiritual. However, such a characterisation is unjustified when Florensky’s work, little known in the West until relatively recently, is taken into account. The presence of this complex and sophisticated discourse around the metaphysical aesthetics of icons opens up the possibility that, in looking to the Eastern as well as to the Western avant-gardes, Kantor was as much influenced by these metaphysical-spiritual ideas as by more overtly artistic
considerations. Situated as he was, in Kraków in Poland, between Russia and Germany, Kantor was in the perfect geographical position to enjoy such a confluence of ideas. Kantor’s work developed in the context of this anti-illusionistic-realist tenor of Modernism, partly in response to the first avant-garde and later, in response to the second wave of the 1950s and 1960s. As a Polish artist he was in both a marginal and privileged position. Marginal in the sense that he was interacting not at the heart, in Paris or New York, but in the sidelines, but privileged in the sense that his encounters could be refracted through the peculiarities of his own country’s Modernist traditions. As noted in chapter two, the Modernism of Poland’s interwar years, embodied in the triumvirate of Witkacy, Schulz and Gombrowicz was a specific processing of earlier Polish Romantic and Symbolist strains running deep through that culture. In the remainder of this chapter I will return to questions of representation and relate them both to the underlying metaphysical-spiritual currents in early Eastern-European Modernism and to Kantor’s preoccupations with the ‘poor object’ and the idiosyncratic sense in which he might now be understood to employ the term ‘Constructivism’.

**Kantor’s aesthetic of ‘Poor Reality’**

In 1944, when Kantor began to forge ahead with an avant-garde appropriate to the conditions of war and German occupation, the ‘poor realism’ that he developed looked, on the surface, to be far removed from the ‘shiny’, new and colourful avant-garde that had developed in the East in Russian cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg before and after the Bolshevik revolution. Although, in subsequent years, Kantor’s version of ‘avant-garde’ would often look much like many other contemporary avant-gardes (albeit with his own ‘spin’) — *arte povera, informal, emballage* (packaging), happenings — it did at least continue to develop, unlike the Russian avant-garde in the Soviet era which was stifled under Stalin and the hegemony of Socialist Realism. However, unlike these early Russian avant-gardes, which had a manifestly utopian tenor, united loosely under the banner, as noted earlier, of ‘the future is our only goal’, Kantor’s art seems to look in the opposite direction towards the past, in the
manner of Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’. One of the symbols of the avant-garde in the early Soviet era, El Lissitzky’s mechanoid *New Man* (1923), a figure derived from his ‘recasting’ of Malevich’s designs for the 1913 Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, appears to be striding confidently from left to right, symbolically, one assumes, into the brave new world of the future. Kantor’s art in contrast, from its very beginnings, yearns for the loss of the past: in his 1938 production of *The Death of Tintagiles*, the sisters, Ygraine and Bellangère, mourn for their little brother Tintagiles, whose death, they fear, has occurred at the hands of their Queen on the other side the iron doors to her palace by which they wait; in his 1943 production of *Balladyna*, Kantor was looking back to a national classic from the era of Polish Romanticism with his revival of Słowacki’s 1834 tragedy; in Wyspiański’s *The Return of Odysseus*, the play that formed the basis of his 1944 production, the Sirens inform the eponymous hero that ‘No one alive will ever return a second time to the land of his youth’ (Wyspiański 1964: 65). Kantor’s postwar engagement with the European avant-gardes can be understood as a series of attempts to find new ways of making sense of his experience of occupation rather than attempts to look to the future. The revival of his interest in theatrical experimentation with the formation of Cricot 2 in 1955 was directed not towards new contemporary work but to the application of the latest avant-garde strategies to the work of Witkacy, an artist from the prewar avant-garde. For Kantor, artistic experimentation in postwar Poland was more about revivifying the past to revitalise the sense of Polish autonomous artistic identity, than it was about forging any sense of a utopian future (Communist or otherwise). In this sense the past for Poles became a form of resistance to a putative Soviet future. And, for Kantor, this identity-formation based on the past became more insistent as an artistic strategy with *The Dead Class* and the ‘theatre of death’. Towards the end of his life, in his 1987 self-portrait *I have had enough of sitting in this painting, I’m leaving* (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), Kantor depicts himself striding in the opposite direction from that of Lissitzky’s *New Man*, from right to left, and defiantly and contrarily stepping out of the confines of the canvas entirely, whilst looking over his shoulder perhaps at what might be
coming from the direction of the future. In his ‘continuation’ of the early
twentieth-century Russian and Soviet avant-gardes, it would seem that what
Kantor was choosing to continue was not the forward-looking utopianism, but
rather the sense of ‘reverse time’ in the spirit of Florensky’s exposition of the
metaphysics of icons. And similarly, whilst in Renaissance linear perspectival
scheme, the subject’s attention is invited to ‘fall into’ a perception of the illusory
perspectival space-world, in Kantor’s theatre and paintings this situation is also
reversed: in one series of late paintings fictional figures emerge out of the frame
into the spectator’s space and in Today is My Birthday, not only do figures ‘fall
out of’ their paintings but the ‘dead’ invade the world of the living also.

Viewed in relation to icons, it is possible to understand that Kantor did
not just regard Constructivism as a formal abstraction but was attuned to the
kind of underlying metaphysical meaning these works had for artists like
Malevich and Tatlin, and for commentators like Florensky, as I have
discussed. Kantor’s shift in 1944 to the use of ‘poor objects’, and his
renewed exploration of them with his later ‘theatre of death’, might seem a
radical break with the aesthetic style of Constructivism, but as I will show,
nevertheless constitutes a continuation of its underlying metaphysical
concerns. In particular, there are strong parallels between some of
Florensky’s concepts and Kantor’s explanation of his concerns in his
writings around his ‘theatre of death’. It is in this sense that Kantor’s ‘poor
objects’ can be seen to be icons, having the material, non-illusionistic
presence of icons that use reverse perspective. Moreover, actors, whose
mode of performing is modelled on the mannequin or the dead articulate the
kind of reverse time that Florensky theorised. Together they comprise
elements in Kantor’s ‘theatre of death’ that mediate between the ephemeral
world and the eternal.

As noted in chapter one, the aesthetic of ‘Poor Reality’, and the ‘Poor
Object’ were discovered, according to Kantor, during the preparation for his last
Clandestine Underground production of Wyspiański’s The Return of Odysseus
in Kraków in 1944, towards the end of the Nazi occupation. The setting of
Wyspiański’s drama, Kantor insisted, must be a room to which Odysseus ‘really returned’ (Kantor 2009a: 101 and 2009c: 349). It was a real room, part of a first-floor apartment on ulica Grabowskiego 3 belonging to the Stryjeński family.\footnote{According to Pleśniarowicz (2004: 40–41), the apartment was opposite the Schutzdienst Polizei (Nazi police). My own visits to Kraków have confirmed that it was also close to the Gestapo cells located on the corner of ulicy Pomorksa and Królewska opposite Plac Inwalidów, where prisoners were tortured.}

Kantor transformed this room into the place of performance in the following manner:

In the room where \textit{The Return of Odysseus} took place I did not make any decorations and there was no division between the stage and the house, so practically there was no borderline which usually marks the area of the stage, the space of illusion … . I said to myself that the room had to be real. I created a room destroyed by the War; it was real, because there were thousands of such rooms in Poland at that time. The room in Stryjenska’s flat had to be made up so that it looked destroyed. We damaged the walls so that bricks and rubble were seen; we broke up some of the floor; we brought old cardboard boxes from the attic; they were covered with lime and dust, and the spectators sat on them.

\textit{(Kantor in Pleśniarowicz 1994: 58–9; ellipsis in original)}

In this final version of his 1944 \textit{Odysseus},\footnote{As noted by Pleśniarowicz (1994b), there were two different versions of this production planned during the first half of 1944 before the final version performed in June or July of that year (Pleśniarowicz 1994b: 57–59).} Kantor used a real room to encircle both actors and spectators. Later, writing in \textit{Theatrical Place}, Kantor recalled the process he went through in 1944, of stripping away all symbolic elements of the production design to begin to arrive at his conception of the bare room as a site of performance:

Finally, I make a decision to accept the empty and colorless whitewashed walls of the room as part of [the] ‘artistic work’.

The walls are bare, naked.

They cordon off the room.

An awfully empty world.

And in this emptiness—USELESS WRECKS.

Under the wall-heaven, there lies a long and heavy gun barrel.
Odysseus sits on it.
Somewhere on the other end of this world-room,
there is a piece of poor, simple wooden plank—
remains of a shipwreck. A Wreck.
Maybe at the very end,
‘on the horizon,’
under the wall, the audience will be seated.
But still the reality of this room—
these walls—heaven
produce imaginary illusion.
I would like to paint them myself—using grays and whites—
an empty canvas.
Maybe this can never happen,
that a real, living space of a room, a room in which we live,
becomes part of the domain of imagination;
that this real room
becomes a site of events, situations, objects, and people,
belonging to imagination;
that life is mixed with illusion;
reality with art.
(Kantor 2003c: 331–332)

In this transition from the formal, symbolic abstraction used in his 1943 production of *Balladyna* to the ‘poor reality’ of the final version of *Odysseus*, it is possible to see Kantor in this earlier, not yet fully realised, conception of the room, searching for a non-representational and anti-illusionistic way of articulating reality. It is as if the picture plane surface of the canvas, the illusory window of Renaissance linear and optical perspective, is being reconceptualised and wrapped around the space of performance, encircling both actors and spectators. In this way, the ‘horizon’ or ‘vanishing point’ in traditional perspectival construction, now surrounds the performance event, enfolding both actors and spectators in the manner of Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s cave discussed in chapter three.

As well as working at the spatial reconceptualisation of the performance, Kantor was also developing a radical temporal conception about the subject matter of place and character. Kantor had originally wanted to stage his production on one of the platforms of Kraków’s main railway station (see Kantor 2009c: 346 and Kaproń 2003). In his conversation with Borowski, Kantor stated
that: ‘We wanted Odysseus, returning from the ancient, mournful and geometrical reality, to come straight to the railway station; the dirt, the grubbiness and the people who did not even care about him’ (cited in Pleśniarowicz 1994b: 59–60). Kantor’s idea was that mythical and fictional figures, operated from outside of time, in a sense as representatives of eternity. As such, these eternal characters manifest themselves throughout time as real people in real places, delineated by the character-geometry of their prototype. Further, his conception of the mythical characters from Wyspiański’s drama was also very particular. Writing about his conception later in *Theatrical Place*, Kantor stated his belief that:

> what happens in a play, does really happen in life, today, all around me. [...] Everything happens at the threshold between imagination and life. I started to believe that the characters from a play would appear in my (our) life; that they would return and, maybe, would remain with us for some time.

(Kantor 2009c: 343)

In this way, Kantor figured, that in 1944, the Greek war criminal Odysseus, the mastermind behind the Trojan Horse, would take the form of an SS soldier disembarking from a train returning from the siege of Stalingrad. However, because it was too dangerous to stage an illegal theatre performance in such a public space, the room in the private apartment was instead chosen as the place of performance. Nevertheless, there was a real element of danger for all concerned: other clandestine performances had been raided by the Gestapo and their participants arrested. The Gestapo cells were literally five minutes’ walk around the corner. The fact, therefore, that the entrance to the room bore a notice that read: ‘You do not enter the theatre with impunity’ (cited in Pleśniarowicz 1994b: 56), was not an idle joke. Also, in the production, Odysseus was indeed dressed with the greatcoat and helmet of a *Wehrmacht* soldier. This, understandably, caused a certain frisson when Odysseus entered the room where the spectators were seated.

As Kantor would later theorise in the *Theatrical Place* essays, this ‘real room’ redefined the boundary between fiction and reality. In a sense, the
fictional, eternal figure of Odysseus, had been installed into the reality of 1944 occupied Kraków. As such, the spectators and the performers shared a single space containing an invisible boundary between the temporal and the eternal realms: a room both of its time and timeless. The walls of the room became the horizon-line of the traditional picture stage, which surrounded both actors and spectators in a space in which was layered and commingled the fictional-eternal and the real-temporal. Different versions of this commingling of the eternal and the real in one space formed the basis of *The Dead Class*, and the ‘theatre of death’ productions that followed it. This reconceptualisation of theatrical space recalls Søren Kierkegaard’s analysis of the relation between time and eternity in his 1844 work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, in which human being is described as ‘a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal’ (Kierkegaard 1980: 85, italics in original). For Kierkegaard, the moment was the ‘merely vanishing’ (Ibid.: 88), while the eternal ‘on the contrary, is the present’ (Ibid.: 86). In this analysis ‘the moment is spatialized’ (Ibid.): ‘for abstract thought, time and space are entirely identical, and become so for representation, and are truly so in the definition of God as omnipresent’ (Ibid.: 86 fn.). In this way ‘The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other’ (Ibid.: 89). In *The Return of Odysseus*, and later in the ‘theatre of death’, Kantor brings his spectators and actors together in a relationship in which they perch on the threshold between time and eternity. Kantor would later recall in ‘My Work—My Journey’ (1988) that he ‘turned Odysseus, a Homeric hero, into / “something,” / that was bundled up, wrapped in poor, dirty rags of a military overcoat’ (Kantor in Kobialka 2009: 15). Installed in the reality of 1944 as a poor, dishevelled Wehrmacht soldier, the figure of Odysseus in Kantor’s production can be understood as functioning in an icon-like manner, as an *eikon*, an image that acts as an *envoi* or messenger from the eternal realm. Just as the icon is designed to ‘occupy’ the spectators’ space, and impress on them the reality of the other world, so too does Kantor’s Odysseus occupy the space of the spectators in the room and brings to them, in tangible terms, an expression of the eternal verities of the Odysseus myth through the reality of occupied Kraków.
Into this ‘Poor Room’ Kantor also placed ‘Poor Objects’, torn from their normal station in life:

*les objet prêt*: an authentic German megaphone [stolen from the Planty],\(^{143}\) a gun (an imitation as obviously it was difficult to get a real one) on trestles and the famous cartwheel leaning against the wall, mud-caked, brought from the Kleparz (a marketplace in Kraków) by Tadzio Brzozowski [the actor playing Odysseus].

(Kantor ibid.)

Reflecting on the ‘poor object’ further in the first Milano Lesson, Kantor characterised its ‘poorness’ as follows:

It was a P O O R object unable to perform any functions in life,
an object about to be discarded.
An object that was bereft of a life function that would save it.
An object that was stripped, functionless, a r t i s t i c !
An object that would make one feel for it pity and affection.
This was an object that was completely different from that other [earlier] object.

(Kantor 1993: 211, the insertion in square brackets is Kobialka’s)

The difference can be understood in that Kantor’s ‘poor object’, like the figure of Odysseus, functions in an icon-like manner. Shorn of their habitual use-value, the wheel, plank and gun-barrel reveal, as objects in their own right, a presence that was previously concealed. As such they confront the spectators from their own realm, one that lies beyond human experience. In this sense, these ‘poor objects’ are also *envois* or messengers. They reveal a ‘truth’ to human being about itself: the truth of object-hood. This is a truth that is akin to death, in that death is what reminds human being of its fundamental otherness, the fact that it is itself an object, albeit an animated one, that will return to its own, yet alien, inanimate state. The being of human being depends not only on ‘what is’, but is also defined by a more tacit, hidden, sense of ‘what is not’. To re-characterise Heidegger’s preoccupation with *Dasein* as ‘being-for-death’ (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), ‘what is not’ is not just what all human being

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\(^{143}\) See Appendix 1.29.
has come from but also, what all human being will become. This hidden otherness, which Sartre and Merleau-Ponty also refer to in their philosophy, is what is revealed when objects are allowed to manifest their own presence from out of the normally hidden ‘corners’ of their existence. It is in this way that they may be understood as *envois* of truth, and as such, to function as icons.

In terms of Kantor’s artistic development, the turn to ‘Poor Reality’ in his production of *The Return of Odysseus* might seem a decisive break with Constructivism and the prevailing ideas of abstraction. Malevich’s Suprematist canvases appear clear and clean; the constructions of Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksander Rodchenko, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy and the stage experiments of Oskar Schlemmer seem bright and clear-cut. The sense of abstraction realised by these artists is full of vibrant, clean colours, hard lines and edges. While Kantor’s stage designs of the late 1930s and early 1940s were essays in this Constructivist language, the objects of Kantor’s ‘Poor Reality’ in *The Return of Odysseus* by contrast are shabby, trashy, dirty, worn and worthless. Their appearance is rickety and jittery, not hard, clear and geometrically rigorous. They indeed seem to be the ‘poor’ distant cousins of International Constructivism. On the other hand, they are abstractions of a sort, maybe more akin to the found objects in Tatlin’s *Corner Counter-Reliefs*, as well as to Kurt Schwitters’ *Merz*. Kantor’s room to which Odysseus ‘really returned’ has, after all, an abstract quality of its own, as evidenced in the various paintings and small and large-scale maquettes and reconstructions that Kantor made of it in the 1980s (for example see Kantor 1991a: 22, pl. 10, Porębski 1997: 157, Pleśniarowicz 1997: 57 and 60, and Kobialka 2009: 41). The disembodied gun barrel and wheel, the horizontal wooden plank hanging overhead, the bare walls and rectangular square window with the crosspieces dividing its four blank panes delineating the form of a black cross. It is as if the dynamic, geometrical forms from one of Malevich’s Suprematist canvases have fallen out of their ideal Platonic realm into this world and have been traumatised into reality. The ‘poor’ objects, wrenched from their normal context in our world now exist on the borderline between this world and the next: half wheel, half abstract shape.
In a sense, Kantor’s abstracted ‘Poor Objects’ are assembled as real elements in a new, dynamic relation to a constructed reality just as much as was the case with the geometric forms in Malevich’s canvases or with the found materials in Tatlin’s counterreliefs. As Perloff (2003) points out in *The Futurist Moment*, the assembly and juxtaposition of found materials was a key feature of avant-garde art as it moved from Cubo-Futurism towards Constructivism:

‘Badges’ of the ‘real’ world, such as bits of rope, damaged wood, or discarded sheet metal inevitably retain connotations of their former use. [Tatlin’s] counterrelief thus occupies a middle space between representation on the one hand and formal construction on the other, depending on whether we choose to stress the nature of the materials and the contexts from which they are drawn, or the actual arrangement. Its structure, in Martyn Chalk’s words, ‘is neither Art nor Engineering, but the result of some intuitive grasp of how the world might be put together’.

(Perloff 2003: 71–72)

What is seen in Kantor’s ‘Poor Reality’—the constructive arrangement of ‘poor objects’ in a ‘poor space’—is a particular modification and development of Constructivism rather than a turning away or a refutation of it.

Clearly, key aspects of the aesthetics of icon art are present in Suprematism and early Constructivism. Although Kantor does not discuss the connection explicitly, it is clear, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, that he was preoccupied with notions of eternity in association with the ‘Poor Object’. In his filmed interview with Bablet, he recalls:

Many years later, when I wrote the Emballage or Packaging manifesto, I wrote ‘the object lies between eternity and the garbage’. It’s a very fine comparison, almost a metaphor, but it translates my efforts very exactly, since the wheel I found was next to the garbage, and in my theatre work it has become eternal. So the object must be poor, next to the garbage, and the artist’s genius endows it with the value of eternity—it’s very poetic. For me, eternity is death.

(Kantor interviewed in the film documentary *The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor* 1991)
In his quest to honour the ‘eternal’ qualities of the ‘Poor Object’ Kantor can also be seen to employ ideas analogous with those found in icon art.\textsuperscript{144}

In the texts associated with \textit{The Dead Class} Kantor frequently referred to his use of the idea of a dead person as a model for his performers and that the dead stand before the living audience as if separated by an invisible barrier. As noted above, Florensky saw dreams as forming a boundary between the eternal and earthly shores of existence (Florensky 1996: 43). In \textit{Theatrical Place}, in the section entitled ‘The Essential Meaning of the Theatre’, Kantor offers a conception of his theatre based on a similar idea:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Theatre}—I still claim—is a place that reveals, like some secret river fords, the traces of the ‘passage’ from ‘the other side’ to our life.

Before the eyes of the spectators stands an ACTOR, who assumes the condition of the DEAD. This spectacle, similar in character to ritual and ceremony, operates on the spectators as a shock. I name it metaphysical.

(Kantor 2004: 387; my translation, see Appendix 1.30 for original)
\end{quote}

For Kantor a mannequin was a symptom of the ‘reality of the lowest rank’; it was an empty object, a carapace, a shell, and as such functioned as an \textit{envoi} or messenger of death. Kantor viewed this emissary of death as a model for the actor (see Kantor 2009b: section 8). The conception of the actor’s performance was purely formal, modelled on empty, dummy-like gestures, rather than on gestures imitative of natural human expressions or based on the idea of portraying inner thoughts and emotions. By articulating their nature as objects the actors align themselves with the physical-mechanical aspect of their being. In appearing true to this aspect of life, they achieve a degree of realness in their

\textsuperscript{144} I am suggesting that Kantor, whether consciously or not, was influenced by the aesthetics of icon art as this was indirectly refracted through the aesthetics of Suprematism and early Constructivism. However, there may have been more direct connections given that Kantor knew the Polish artist and iconographer Jerzy Nowosielski, who had trained as an icon-painter at the monastery in Lwów, was involved with the Independent Clandestine Theatre, and was Kantor’s assistant when he was a professor at the Fine Art Academy in the late 1940s (see Pleśniarowicz 2004: 54).
performance that can be otherwise elusive for actors operating in more realistic or naturalistic traditions. Although Kantor, in his *Theatre of Death* manifesto, cites Heinrich von Kleist’s and Edward Gordon Craig’s championing of the mannequin over the live performer, he argued that he did not believe:

that a mannequin (or a WAX FIGURE) might be substituted for a LIVING ACTOR (like Kleist and Craig demanded). It would be too easy and naive. I am trying to define the motives and destination of the unusual entity which has suddenly come into my thoughts and ideas. Its emergence is compatible with my increasingly strong belief that life can be expressed in art only by the lack of life and a resort to DEATH, by APPEARANCES, by the VOID and the lack of any MESSAGE. In my theatre a MANNEQUIN should become a MODEL embodying and transmitting a powerful feeling of DEATH and of the condition of the dead—the MODEL for a Living ACTOR.

(Kantor 1975, Section 8: n.p.)

Craig’s ur-narrative of the genesis of the actor is essentially Platonic in character, his account following the tradition from Plato’s critique of all art as imitative re-presentation of the prototype (Craig 1958: 94). In section nine of *The Theatre of Death* manifesto, Kantor reverses Craig’s ur-narrative in ‘an opposite image, with reversed meaning of events’ (Ibid. Section 9: n.p., my italics). In his ‘reversed’ account, Kantor characterises the ur-actor as a messenger of the eternal:

OPPOSITE those who remained on this side, there stood a HUMAN DECEPTIVELY SIMILAR to them, yet (by some secret and ingenious operation’) infinitely DISTANT, shockingly FOREIGN, as if DEAD, cut off by an invisible BARRIER—no less horrible and inconceivable, whose real meaning and THREAT appear to us only in DREAMS. As if in the blinding flash of lightening, they suddenly perceived a glaring, tragically circus-like IMAGE OF A HUMAN, as if they had seen him FOR THE FIRST TIME, as if they had seen THEIR VERY SELVES. This must have been a SHOCK—a metaphysical shock. The life image of a HUMAN emerging out of the shadows, as if constantly walking forward—was a moving MESSAGE of its new HUMAN CONDITION, only HUMAN, with its RESPONSIBILITY, with its tragic CONSCIOUSNESS, measuring its FATE on an inexorable and final scale, the
This revelatory MESSAGE, which was transmitted from the realm of DEATH, evoked in the SPECTATORS (let us use our term here) a metaphysical shock, and the craft of the art of this ACTOR (also according to our terminology) revealed that realm of DEATH and its tragic and full-of-DREAD beauty.

(Kantor 2009b: 237)

This conception of the actor, and of the actor-spectator relationship, articulated in Kantor’s writings around the time of The Dead Class and Theatrical Space would seem to be directly related to reflections on the 1944 production of The Return of Odysseus. The equation between the categories of ‘fiction’ and ‘eternity’ have now been themselves equated with the category of ‘death’. As an intimation of eternity: ‘death’—the negation of human being—is its embalillage (packaging). In seizing on ‘death’ as a model for the actor, Kantor effectively transforms the actor into an icon-like performer: one who presents the image of human being as an envoi from the eternal world. In conceptualising the performance in this way, Kantor can be seen to be mapping the reverse perspective, characteristic of icons and the first avant-garde, onto the actors as well as the poor objects that he turns into performers, and onto the stage setting as a whole.

Kantor’s comments on the barrier between human and eternal reality appear more logical when read in the light of the icon’s metaphysical situation on the same threshold. If the proscenium arch and its stage space (i.e. the picture stage) is seen as a three-dimensional analogy of the picture plane, then Kantor can be seen to have approximated the aesthetic of icons in several ways.

Firstly, in reflecting on his 1944 production of The Return of Odysseus, with its found ‘poor place’ (the room), and its ‘poor objects’, it is significant that Kantor foregrounded the idea of marginality, and especially ‘the corner’. It is surely not mere coincidence that, just as Malevich and Tatlin placed their key works in corners at the Zero Ten exhibition, Kantor explicitly set his Dead Class

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145 I am intentionally using two translations of Kantor’s Theatre of Death manifesto, Piotr Graff’s from 1975 and Kobialka’s newer version from 2009. This is because all the nuances that I wish to bring out from the original Polish (Kantor 2004b) are not present in any one single translation.
in ‘the last forgotten outpost of our memory […] in a crowded corner’ (Kantor n.d.(a): 1):

The audience gradually take their seats. On a wooden floor in the CORNER there are several rows of school DESKS. These are old-fashioned, poor-looking desks from a country school.

This poor classroom is divided on both sides, looking from the audience, with a ROPE.

(Ibid.: 8)

For Kantor, the essence of the piece was based on the idea of the marginality of the corner, and this allowed The Dead Class to manifest its ‘corner-ness’ wherever it was performed,146 from the cellars of the Krzysztofory mansion to the stages of the grandest theatres, Kantor’s school benches confronted each audience as if perched on the edge of a forgotten corner of eternity: ‘In this performance where the action takes place on the borderline between life and death […]’ (Ibid: 155). For Kantor these school desks were: ‘always in a CLASSROOM. But it was not a / CLASSROOM—REAL PLACE. / It was a black hole, a / void, in front of which / the whole auditorium / s t o p e d ’ (Kantor 2009b: 365). In his 1974 texts written in preparation for The Dead Class, Kantor wrote of an ‘unusually simple idea which had never been used before’ (Kantor n.d.(a): 10–11). Recalling his 1963 production based on Witkacy’s The Madman and The Nun, under the banner of the ‘zero theatre’, Kantor recalls ‘considering staging a secret performance done “on the side”, …. Yes, exactly: “on the side!” In the CORNER! ! ….’ (Ibid.). Kantor goes on to describe the paradoxical power of this idea of marginality:

If in a room full of people you make somebody act ‘abnormally’ in the middle of the room, all people gathered will take it for a performance. If the same happens on the side, in the corner of the room, everybody will watch it with embarrassment, or even apprehension. The same activity when carried ‘in the middle’ of the room, before an audience, was regarded as performing, pretending, safe, but when it happened in the corner, it

146 See Appendix 1.31 for details of the location of this premiere.
became true, real. The line of division and strangeness became a fact.

The stage has alw ays been placed ‘in the middle’ ‘on the axis’ of the spectator, for the performance to be watched, observed. However, it is enough to move the PLACE of the so-called PERFORMANCE to the side, to the corner, place it not ‘on the axis’, and a strange thing happens. The spectator loses ‘natural’ sight of something that used to be ‘performed’, or, to be exact, pretended and demonstrated. In the corner it will acquire the features of embarrassing exhibitionism, shameful dealing not meant for the spectator, completely independent, STRANGE and self-sufficient! which [sic] does not require the presence of the spectator.

(Kantor n.d.(a): 11)

In this passage can be seen the metaphysics of Schulzian ‘degraded reality’ articulated in terms of an anti-representational theory of performance. In the same way that the materiality of the icon’s physical presence in the spectator’s space allows it to escape the negative connotations of being a ‘copy’, conceptually relocating the performance to the ‘side’ and the ‘corner’ allows it to acquire an independent, autonomous quality. As things previously hidden suddenly reveal themselves and impinge on the spectator with a forceful impression, so Kantor’s conceptual marginalisation of the performance action acquires a peculiar force.

Secondly, the manner of performance of his actors, in which they are used, and use themselves, as found objects, also allows them to function in the manner of the figures in icon art. The very ‘emptiness’ of Kantor’s actors in their performance endows them with a sense of eternity which confronts the audience in the manner of the ‘Poor Object’. In the early sections of The Dead Class, the actors confront the spectators from behind their desks, at first by simply staring, then by raising their hands as if trying to attract the attention of a schoolteacher, later by wailing as if in ecstatic Jewish prayer and later still with grimaces, ‘pulling faces at the audience’, as Żurowski has noted. However, this is a performance and not a painting, and this confrontational engagement with the spectator acquires a choreographic dimension through movement. In a pattern that recurs throughout the ‘theatre of death’, the actors periodically
recede into and advance from the darkness at the rear of the performance space. Following their re-entrance, they engage in a circling movement around the stage, a movement that has also has the effect of withdrawing and advancing to and from proximity with the spectator. As they pass the front of the performance area, on the threshold with the spectator’s space, the actors fix their audience with mask-like expressions and beady eyes. The effect of this dynamic orientation towards the spectator is, I argue, akin to the way that the icon directly confronts the viewer rather than passively offering itself up to the spectators’ gaze. However, the layered incongruities with which Kantor has endowed his actors contributes a further effect. On the one hand there is the incongruity that it is old people who stare back at the spectator from behind the schooldesks. But, upon their return to the stage after their first exit, they are adorned with mannequins of their childhood selves. It is not just that the actors’ performance is modelled on death. Their juxtaposition of their old, corpse-like-selves with real objects-in-children’s-form doubles the truth-message that human being is being-for-death, a being that comes from nothing and returns to nothing. In his *Partytura* writings for *The Dead Class*, Kantor discusses this paradoxical, layered pairing of the actor-mannequin ‘bio-objects’:

> The little corpses of children—their own childhoods—which they bear and which alone could enliven their memories … are dead. The pupils are themselves almost dead, stricken with a deadly disease. They have a chance of becoming OBJECTS of art at the cost of STRANGENESS and DEATH. This very STRANGENESS makes them approach the state of OBJECTS, deprives them of their biological, organic and naturalistic liveliness for which there is hardly any room in art.
>
> Through this ‘offering’, they become elements of a work of art. The living one!

(Kantor n.d.(a): 176–177; ellipsis in original)

In this, Kantor seems to echo Malevich’s characterisation of his *Black Square* as a ‘living royal infant’. This playing with the idea of human being around the borderland of life and death serves to affirm the very peculiarity of human being.
Thirdly, in a manner that is directly comparable to the aesthetic of timelessness in icons, Kantor frequently represents multiple times in the same stage space at the same time. In *Let the Artists Die*, he shows himself as a six-year old child, as a dying man, and as the observer of himself dying. In *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole*, he layers events and characters from different times and places within the same place. If the perspective of time is considered, then Kantor’s representation of memory can be understood using the analogy of reverse perspective that Florensky deploys in his concept of ‘reverse time’ in the discussion of dreams in *Iconostasis*. In the ‘theatre of death’, the depth of time functions in reverse in that the past is moved up to press against the present and stand before the spectators, its reality adjacent to theirs behind the invisible barrier separating them from the action. In its juxtaposition of the theme of death with that of schoolroom pranks and children’s games, *The Dead Class* again seems to echo Kierkegaard’s discourse surrounding the relationship between human being and eternity, and his reference to a Danish idiomatic folk phrase, that:

> the whole of life was a game that came to an end, and in which everyone, the greatest [as] well as the least, made their departures like school children, extinguished like sparks of burning paper, and last of all the soul itself as the schoolmaster. And so there is also a muteness of annihilation found in the fact that the whole was merely a children’s game, and now the game is over.

(Kierkegaard 1980: 93 fn.)

However, in *The Dead Class*, Kantor is not the schoolmaster, he is the Florenskian window through which the spectator engages with the threshold of eternity which the performance brings into presence.

Finally, Kantor’s potential to transform himself into an icon can be seen in his ‘Little Manifesto’, discussed in chapter four, in which he recedes into the past to stand before his audience, ‘accused I know not what of’, in the corner of a forgotten schoolroom. In his final work, during the period 1985–1990, Kantor increasingly moved from the periphery to the centre of his work. In this way he gradually advanced ‘the thing that he was’ towards the status of an icon, until, in
Today is My Birthday, events conspired to produce a performance work in which occurred the peculiar effect of the absent, dead presence of the artist, who, in effect, ‘stared’ out at his audience from the very centre of the work. This movement further into the artwork, until the artist is wholly iconised within it, will be explored in the next chapter.
Introduction: Thrown into the stanza of being

So far in my discussion I have focused primarily on Kantor’s work up to The Dead Class and Wielopole, Wielopole. In this chapter I wish to focus on the major works of his last decade mentioned above: Niech sczesną artiści (Let the Artists Die, 1985), Nigdy tu już nie powróczę (I Shall Never Return, 1988) and Dziś są moje urodziny (Today is My Birthday, 1991), together with his last cycle of paintings, Dalej już nic … (Further on, Nothing … , 1987–89). With his development of the idea of ‘the poor little room of the imagination’, from the schoolroom of The Dead Class to the family room of Wielopole, Wielopole, Kantor opened up the way to include himself more tangibly within his work. In doing so it is possible to draw a parallel between Kantor’s late work and that of Franz Kafka, especially Kafka’s late story ‘A Fasting Showman’ in the way that each used their work to deal with their own impending deaths. At stake in the metaphysics of mortality informing each artists’ work are issues concerning truth and freedom, which I shall discuss with reference to Heidegger and the early twentieth-century Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). These, I shall show, add another dimension to understanding why Kantor called the theatre stage his ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’. With The Dead Class and Wielopole, Wielopole, and in his writings such as Theatrical Place, Kantor began to articulate his engagement with the problem of human being in terms of his idea of memory. Increasingly, the site of this engagement with memory became more clearly a room: at first a schoolroom in 1975 and then a family room in 1980. In later productions the identity of this room would shift its form and become a dying room, a prison cell and torture chamber in Let the Artists Die (1985), a disreputable inn of memory in I Shall Never Return (1988), and the artist’s own studio in Today is My Birthday (1991). Rooms also featured in Kantor’s late paintings and in the two cricotages that he created with students around the time he was working on his last two large-scale productions. In Bardzo krótkie lekcja (A Very Short Lesson), performed at the Institut
International de la Marionette at Charleville-Mézières in 1988, material associated with *I Shall Never Return* is set in a room inspired by a sketch for Kantor’s 1989 painting *Mój dom* (My House), which depicts a smoking, ramshackled chimney stack, rising from bare floorboards in an otherwise empty room. Kantor never suffered the physical destruction of any of his homes. This ‘house’ is an idea of ‘home’ that seems to owe more to Heidegger’s idea of the nature of the problematic dwelling of *Dasein* and its ‘thrownness’ into the world than to any physical dwelling. The image of this chimney was fully realised in the scenography of Kantor’s last cricotage, *Cicha noc* (Silent Night) performed in Avignon in 1990 which was created during the period of rehearsals for *Today is My Birthday*. For Kantor, the ‘Poor Object’ had gradually come to include the idea of memory itself as an ‘object’, and in these last works the ideas coalesced into the concept of the ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’:

—an open interior of our imagination—
which exists in a different dimension.
This is where the threats of our memory are woven;
where our freedom is born….
We are standing at the door giving a long farewell to our childhood;
we are standing helpless
at the threshold of eternity and death.
In front of us,
in this poor and dusky room,
behind the doors,
a storm and an inferno rage,
and the waters of the flood rise.
The weak walls of our ROOM;
of our everyday or
linear time
will not save us….
Important events stand behind the doors
it is enough to open them….

(Kantor 2009c: 366; ellipses in original)

This ‘room’ is a space replete with potential in which Kantor can ‘remember’ a pre-First-World-War Galician schoolroom that can metamorphose into a Jewish *cheder*; where he can ‘remember’ a wedding between his parents that occurred

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147 According to Anna Halczak, the painting depicts the only element of the house that had not been destroyed (Halczak 2005a).
before his birth, and where Austro-Hungarian recruits colonise the corner of his childhood family room; where he can ‘remember’ his own death occurring in the same family room where his six-year-old self played with his lead soldiers; where characters from his own past productions come back to remonstrate with him and where his father who left before he was born is ‘remembered’ as a grotesque tableau of his execution in Auschwitz; where an image of Jehovah tending to his creation mingles with that of a field hospital for the war-wounded, where late friends from his artistic circle in Kraków share his studio with a dead hero from the era of Constructivism and where the celebration of his own birthday shares the same studio space with that of his father’s birthday celebrations depicted in a family photograph taken before he was born. The idea that the life of memory in the faculty of imagination, both individually and collectively, is the only reality—the truly real—is one that finds resonance in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, who, in one of his late poems stages his ‘Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour’ ‘in a room / In which we rest and, for small reason, think / The world imagined is the ultimate good’ (Stevens 1997: 444).

The imaginative act, central to the act of poiesis, the production into being which is what, for Stevens, seems to be the essence of poetry, is related to Heidegger’s idea that: ‘Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell’ (Heidegger 1998c: 239). Agamben develops this relationship in his 1996 essay “Corn”: From Anatomy to Poetics (in Agamben 1999f), where he cites Dante Alighieri’s definition of the elements of poetic form in his De vulgari eloquentia, II, IX, 2–3:

And here you must know that this word [stanza] was coined solely for the purpose of discussing poetic technique, so that the object in which the whole art of the canzone [song] was enshrined should be called a stanza, that is, a capacious storehouse or receptacle for the art in its entirety. *For just as the canzone is the lap of its subject-matter, so the stanza enlaps its whole technique* […]

(Dante Alighieri 1996: 72–73. Cited in Agamben 1999f: 35; his emphasis)
Stanza is of course the Italian word for ‘room’. Agamben uses this thirteenth-century idea of stanza\textsuperscript{148}—‘a capacious storehouse or receptacle’—as a metaphor for Being, for Heidegger’s ‘house of being’. For Dante the stanza was a container for the poet’s art, a ‘room’ in which the poem’s meanings were contained and in which they dwelt. In this sense they were like the Heraclitean ideas of \textit{ēthos} and \textit{moira} discussed in chapter three: the span of human life viewed as the ‘allotted portion’ or container for the individual’s existence.

Viewed in this way it is possible to see how Kantor’s rooms, and his idea of the room, is able to operate for him as a stage for human being. ‘The Poor Little Room of the Imagination’ facilitates a space for the free play of memory, sometimes personal and sometimes collective (in the sense used by Maurice Halbwachs 1980 and 1992). In the final decade of his life Kantor played with this idea almost obsessively, as this chapter will show.

**Human and animal being and their relation to finitude**

In his 1929 lectures on the fundamental concepts of metaphysics Heidegger, citing a fragment of Novalis, characterised the human condition as a state of homesickness (1995: 5). In chapter five I discussed the problem of the representation of human being in relation to non-human animal being in which the Aristotelian question concerning the possible nature of a specifically human kind of being acquires a biopolitical dimension. For Heidegger, human being, ‘thrown’ into the world, found itself out of attunement. Heidegger’s solution to this state of restlessness was to formulate a conception of human being, or \textit{Dasein}, that was based on an attempt to establish a fundamental difference between animal and human nature. To do this he made use of radical contemporary scientific theories of the nature of living things to establish a particular understanding of the hierarchical ranking of human and animal life.

In his late short story, ‘A Fasting Showman’ (1922)—part of a suite of four short stories written and prepared for publication shortly before his death by consumption in 1924 and published together under the title ‘A Hunger Artist’—

\textsuperscript{148}Agamben had highlighted this definition at the beginning of his second book published in 1977: \textit{Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture} (1993b).
Kafka portrays his protagonist as a dying, caged human being, who is placed in direct competition with the animal menagerie of the circus in which he is exhibited. The hunger artist is compared unfavourably with the other animal attractions and is eventually thrown out and replaced by a vibrant young panther. Kafka was influenced by Rilke’s poetry, and Heidegger, in a later series of lectures delivered at the University of Freiburg in 1942–43 on the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, also refers to Rilke in his discussion of the poet’s eighth Duino Elegy, a poem written in the same year as ‘A Fasting Showman’. The eighth Duino Elegy deals with the concept of the ‘open’, which Rilke uses to make an unfavourable comparison between humans and animal nature in general. For Rilke, the ‘natural’ state of the animal lends it a more ‘open’ nature, whereas human being is turned back upon itself, closing itself up to possibilities. In its eulogisation of animal nature this poem prefigures the vital freedom suggested by Kafka’s panther in contrast with the discarded hunger artist. Heidegger however, in his discussion of this poem, reverses Rilke’s hierarchical ranking by arguing that it is humans that truly see the open rather than animals.

Contrasting visions by Rilke and Heidegger of the relative ranking of human and animal nature hinge on a metaphysical preoccupation with death. For Rilke, ‘nearing death, one doesn’t see death; but staring beyond, perhaps with an animal’s vast gaze’ (1987: 193). For Heidegger, the essential radical nature of human being was finitude, or being-for-death—the essential transitoriness of human existence. The implication of Heidegger’s perspective is that the animal’s ‘vast gaze’ in Rilke’s poem is simply innocent ignorance; only the sentience of human being truly has the potential to transcend its situation by recognising the imminence of death as an essential defining feature of its being.

149 The inspiration for Kafka’s panther is thought to have been Rilke’s 1903 poem ‘The Panther in the Paris Zoo’ (Rilke 1987: 25). However, Rilke’s panther is rather a sad animal in comparison to Kafka’s. Heidegger does not refer to this poem and it is rather the account of the vibrancy of animal nature in the eighth Duino Elegy that provides the matter for his discussion.

150 For a stimulating recent discussion of Heidegger, Rilke and the concept of ‘open’ see: Agamben 2004a.
Franz Kafka was also much preoccupied with death, which often occurs in his writing with reference to animal nature (as with, for example, Jozef K., who, on the final page of *The Trial*, dies ‘like a dog’—‘as if the shame of it would outlive him’ (Kafka 1977: 254). As Joachim Beug has pointed out in his 1980 essay ‘The Cunning of a Writer’ Kafka’s writing of death scenes ‘was inseparably entangled with the anticipation of his own death’ (1980: 131). In his diaries and letters Kafka often referred to the anticipation of his own end: ‘Sometimes a naïve person will wish, “I would like to die and see how everyone mourns me”—this is the scene such a writer is continually staging’ (Kafka quoted in: Beug 1980: 132). Indeed, Kafka’s tale about the hunger artist was intimately connected with his own death. Kafka had completed his tale, which was clearly a reflection of his own worsening tuberculosis, in 1922. It was one of the few tales that he permitted his friend Max Brod to have published and he died in bed in 1924 whilst correcting the proofs (see Gilman 2005: 116 and 129).

Kantor too was an artist much preoccupied with death and, like Kafka, he was also involved in his artistic work right up to his end. Kantor was in the middle of making the final adjustments and preparations to what was to be his last theatre spectacle, *Today is My Birthday*, when he died on 8 December 1990. In their artistic attempts to deal with the existential anxiety of the human condition, both Kafka and Kantor made a home for themselves in their work. Moreover, in both his theatre and, in the paintings made during the last years of his life, Kantor was continually staging his own death. However, Kantor went even further than Kafka in putting himself on public display in the repeated pictorial and theatrical depictions of his soon-to-be-expiring self. The self that Kantor is exhibiting is one that is approaching death and with this passage towards non-existence and the apparent growing awareness of the poor fragile nature of the human individual Kantor might be likened to Rilke’s animal who ‘stares beyond’ death. However, in his increasing willingness to confront his own impending mortality, Kantor can rather be seen as a ‘poor’ version of Heidegger’s conception of fully realised human *Dasein* wrestling with the difficult reality of the finitude of human existence.
The following discussion uses the problematic juxtaposition between the hunger artist and the panther in Kafka’s tale, together with a consideration of Heidegger’s analyses of human and animal worlds and of the questions raised, as a key to understanding this final turn towards the confrontation of Kantor’s own impending mortality in his late work.

In the preparations for *Today is My Birthday* (1991), Kantor intended to exhibit himself on stage.\(^{151}\) He declared:

I have decided to move in and live on stage—
I have here my bed, my table, my chair, and, of course, my paintings.
I have often imagined my room in a theatre, inside of the theatre, on stage, rather than in a hotel.
So, my—as I call it—Poor Little Room of Imagination is placed on stage.

(Kantor in Di Mambro 1991: 6; Kantor 2005: 232)

As discussed in chapter five, in 1968 Kantor had previously anatomised an anonymous stranger’s clothing and pockets, in his *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt*, to identify ‘the genuine, / authentic side of / individuality, / the forgotten leftovers, / the shameful litter, / these wrinkled and crushed / pockets! / ridiculous organs of / human / instincts / given for preservation / and memory!’ (See Appendix 1.20). In his final production, he seemed to want to anatomise his own ‘authentic individuality’.

The setting Kantor conceived for himself was in the form of his own artist’s studio, with a table and chair, washbasin, stove and a bed. Three large picture frames defined the space of the room. The picture frame to the left contained the author’s living self-portrait, played by Andrzej Welmiński, seated with characteristic hat, scarf and coat. In the frame to the right was a figure in black lace depicting one of Kantor’s paintings based on the figure of the Infanta Margarita de Austria from Velázquez’ painting of 1656 *Las Meninas*. In between and to the rear and facing the audience stood the large, central frame in which would be depicted a re-enactment of a family photograph depicting the birthday

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\(^{151}\) ‘I am not the author. / No! I am something / more, / I am / in the very centre / of that which is going on / on stage’ (Kantor in Kraszewski 1994: 398).
celebration of Kantor’s father. From a central door in the darkness behind this large frame and from the other gloomy corners of this ‘Poor Room’ would enter various dead relatives and friends and the ‘massed forces of history’ that assaulted the artist in his refuge. Two figures, the author’s ‘shadow’ and a cleaning lady, supervised the ‘Poor Room’ and attempted to restore order following each incursion from the outside.

Kantor’s on-stage studio was not just a ‘room’ but also, as he said, a ‘Poor Room of the Imagination’. As such it was a metaphysical room, a metaphorical space situated on the border between two realities: conventional reality represented by the audience on one side, and the reality of the eternal world of fiction, art and memory on the other, installed by the portals formed by the three picture frames that defined the stage area. Kantor described this ‘Poor Room’ as ‘a dark hole into which fall various objects from the outside’ (Kantor cited in Pleśniarowicz 2004: 277). It is therefore clearly a vision of the imagination or the human mind: the world of individual subjective consciousness into which the objective world ‘falls’. However, Kantor’s metaphorical room would also seem to be a ‘poor’ version of the active, projecting mind championed in nineteenth-century Romantic metaphors. In Romantic philosophy the mind was a Neoplatonic ‘candle of the Lord’, that, unlike the passive mirror or tabula rasa of the English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, was an active partner in creating the world as opposed to a passive agent: a lamp rather than a mirror (see: Abrams 1979: 57–69). Of course, Kantor’s Romantic heritage was of a specifically Polish character. It is therefore not surprising that a sense of cruel fatalism informs his model of the mind. In the ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’ Kantor, his memories and art, shelter from the outer world, represented by war and the figures and agents of authority. Kantor envisaged this ‘Poor Little Room’ as the ultimate refuge or dwelling of the fragile individual human being. Kantor died on December the eighth before the final dress rehearsal of Today is My Birthday. The production that premiered in Toulouse on January 10, 1991, and that subsequently completed its tour of major...
European cities and New York, did so without its creator, in the almost-finished state that Kantor left it in.\textsuperscript{152}

Kantor had already exhibited theatrical versions of his own death in his preceding two major spectacles in response to the growing sense of his own impending mortality. In \textit{Let the Artists Die} identical twin actors repeatedly enact an imagined bedridden consumptive death, with one of the twins taking the part of the artist’s dying body and the other acting as a witness to the event. In \textit{I Shall Never Return} the setting was a ‘Poor Inn of Memory’ to which Kantor returned, carrying a coffin as a blatant symbol of his own death.

\textbf{On the threshold}

It was not only in his theatrical work that Kantor began to place himself on public display. Between 1985 and 1988 Kantor produced an extraordinary series of paintings which were exhibited in Kraków in 1988 under the title \textit{Further on, Nothing ….} These paintings were a shock to many of Kantor’s critics as they marked a turn away from the particular avant-garde strategies of his previous paintings which had been preoccupied with the abstraction of \textit{informel}, the aesthetics of \textit{emballage} and the happening. These new paintings marked a return to figuration\textsuperscript{153} and in many of them the figure depicted (as indeed Żurowski had complained about the artist’s onstage presence in his 1985 essay) was Kantor himself. In the paintings dating mostly from 1987, Kantor depicted himself in a number of narrative situations that employed playful paradoxes embodied in their titles: \textit{Mam dość siedzenia w obrazie. Wychodzę} (I’ve had enough of sitting in this painting. I’m leaving, 1987); \textit{Trzymam obraz, na którym jestem namalowany jak trzymam obraz} (I am holding a picture in which I am shown holding a picture, 1987); and \textit{Ścieram obraz, na którym

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\textsuperscript{152} In the performance of \textit{Today is My Birthday} that played after Kantor’s death, the dead artist’s absence was made present by an oil lamp placed on the on-stage table where he was to have been seated during the performance. In the opening sequence this lamp was lit for the duration of the performance by Andrzej Welmiński, the actor who played the part of Kantor’s self-portrait. At certain points during the performance Welmiński would protectively pick up the oil lamp to shelter it from the hostile forces that periodically invaded the room.

\textsuperscript{153} These late paintings marked a return to figuration after a period of some forty years. For an account of the paintings in this exhibition see Borowski (1989) and Golubiew (2000).
\end{flushleft}
In these works the paradox is achieved by the addition of sculptural objects which extend the figure beyond the confines of the canvas into the ‘real world’. Artificial legs and arms continue the painted limbs into real space in such a way that the painterly representation of Kantor seems to achieve the impossible: of stepping out of the painting, of holding his own painting of himself up, or of wiping off the paint from the very canvas that portrays him.

Although these paintings are in one sense clearly a return to figuration, the representational instability that the playful conceits and additions lend to these canvases make them as well a continuation of Kantor’s critique of representation as any of Kantor’s work. In a sense these paintings perform their own self-criticism. Just as Malevich’s *Black Square* is not a representation of a black square, but a black square in its own right; similarly Kantor’s self-portraits clearly signal what they are by going so far in the attempt to create an illusion that they render themselves as three-dimensional objects in their own right. Whereas in naturalistic paintings and films, the aim is for the viewer to forget the medium by being engrossed in the illusory reality of the represented world, in Kantor’s late paintings this is not possible. Even the titles draw attention to their status as real objects in the real world at the same time as alluding to the ridiculous and impossible actions they purport to perform.

The apparent playfulness of the 1987 paintings belies a certain darker restlessness, for the paintings from 1988 eschew sculptural extensions and rely purely on painterly means to achieve a more sombre affect. In the self-portraits in this later sequence, Kantor’s self-portrayal has more the sense of himself as a victim, or prisoner. Whereas in the sculptural paintings the figure seemed to emanate a vital energy, in these later paintings there is the sense of frailty, infirmity and death. In *Mam wam coś do powiedzenia* (I have something to tell you, 1988) an emaciated, naked figure of an aged Kantor stares forlornly out of

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154 See Kantor 1991a: plates 263, 262 and 268; The Polish titles and dates are taken from Golubiew 2000: 13, 14 and 17.
a black background directly at the observer. In *Pewnego dnia żołdek napoleoński z obrazu Goi wtargnął do mego pokoju* (One day Napoleon’s soldier from Goya’s painting invaded my room, 1988) the figure of Kantor, dressed in Bohemian coat, hat and scarf, after the manner of Craig, stands in frail defiance as one of the soldiers from Goya’s 1814 painting, *The Executions of the Defenders of Madrid*, takes aim at him. In another series of paintings from the same year, titled *Cholernie spadam!* (I am falling down like hell! 1988) the naked and emaciated figure of the artist appears to float over featureless landscapes in which the church from his home village of Wielopole sits in the distance. Finally, and in stark contrast to the sculptural escape from the earlier work *I’ve had enough of sitting in this picture...*, a painting depicting Kantor on his deathbed illuminated by a single candle against a black background, is titled: *W tym obrazie muszę pozostać [Z tego obrazu już nie wyjdę]* (In this picture I must stay [From this picture I cannot leave], 1988).¹⁵⁵ This prefigures Kantor’s decision to ‘move in and live on stage’ in *Today is My Birthday*. This only serves to highlight the sense of continuum between painting and performance in Kantor’s work: his theatre spectacles are moving paintings; his playful paintings imply performance.

As I have already indicated, this increasing preoccupation with the presentation of his soon-to-be-expiring self in his late work suggests parallels between Kantor and the protagonist in Kafka’s tale about the hunger artist. The fasting showmen of the late nineteenth century, upon which Kafka’s figure is apparently based, starved themselves for around forty days and then celebrated the end of this successful feat of endurance with a large feast. On December 21, 1890, Giovanni Succi broke a forty-five-day fast in New York. As the *Daily Tribune* reported: ‘Succi arose from his couch and then it seemed as if the persons looking at him were welcoming him back from the grave a long-lost brother’ (cited in Russell 2006: 4). By staging an approach to death by self-starvation and then turning back from the brink, the performance of the hunger

¹⁵⁵ See Kantor 1991a: plates 261 (titled here, *Autoportrait*), 265 and 269 (The *Cholernie spadam!* series is not reproduced in this album); The Polish titles and dates are taken from Golubiew 2000: 11, 19, 23–26 and 20.
artist could be seen as life-affirming: death has been denied and the appetite for life re-embraced. The hunger artist’s self-sacrifice becomes a rebirth and therefore a cause for celebration. Kafka’s hunger artist, however, desires to go beyond the normal pattern for his fasts and break his previous record. He wants to excel at his ‘art’. But, as Kafka’s story finally reveals, the artist was simply a fussy eater who couldn’t find anything he liked to eat (Kafka 1978: 173–174).

For Kafka, the hunger artist, together with the other protagonists in the collection he was correcting for the publisher at the time of his death, stands as a symbol of the existential nature of the artist’s troubled relation to society. Kafka’s artist wants to do a good job, but, because he starves himself out of a lack of appetite, he knows that he is, in a sense, a fraud. The very reason for his success, the fact that fasting is so easy for him, means that it isn’t really much of an achievement and contributes to his sense of failure: the very reason that he should not be admired. Because of this, Kafka’s protagonists appear to be not so life-affirming, but rather to exemplify Nietzsche’s view of a ‘sick’ and problematic humanity: a sick species in existential crisis. As Nietzsche comments in On the Genealogy of Morals: ‘man is more sick, more uncertain, more mutable, less defined than any other animal, there is no doubt about that—he is the sick animal …’ (Nietzsche 1996: 100).

One of the most telling aspects of Kafka’s story is that the hunger artist, placed in direct competition with the circus’s animal menagerie, loses the public’s interest and is eventually thrown out and replaced by ‘a young panther’. (In typically Kafkaesque fashion, the hunger artist, ‘in order to spare his own feelings … avoided reading the conditions of his contract’ (Kafka 1978: 170).) This beast captures the public’s attention completely and seems to be presented by the Jewish, consumptive Kafka as the complete antithesis of the weak and starving artist: the new animal is like a Blakean Tyger, ‘burning bright’ with vital energy and a healthy appetite. As Kafka puts it, the panther’s:

noble body, furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it […] the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But
they braced themselves, crowded round the cage and did not want ever to move away.

(Kafka 1978: 174)

The public in Kafka's story, uninterested in his version of the hunger artist, find themselves captivated by the apparent life-affirming spectacle of the panther.

Perhaps panthers are to be preferred? But, if they are more desirable, why is the 'noble body' of the panther taken as such an attractive and powerful antidote to the emaciated and sickly, but still human, form of the hunger artist? This apparent inversion in the usual relation in rank between humans and animals in the final paragraph of Kafka’s tale relates to the similar reversal in Rilke’s eighth *Duino Elegy*. In Rilke’s poem ‘With all its eyes the natural world looks out / into the Open. Only our eyes are turned / backward … like traps …’ (1987: 193). For animals, according to Rilke’s poem, ‘everything is womb’ (Ibid.: 195) for, like Kafka’s panther, they carry their world around with them: they are ‘at home in the world’ in contrast to Heidegger’s conception of humanity as existing in a state of ‘homesickness’. As Heidegger discusses in his lectures on Parmenides:

According to Rilke the animal sees more than man does, for the animal’s gaze is not trammelled by any objects but can go on infinitely, in some unknown way, into the objectless. The animal has before itself the limitless. It never encounters a limit on its path, hence not even death. The animal is ‘free from death’ as it goes on into the limitless; its advance is never doubled back, as is the case with human representing, and it never sees what is behind itself.

(Heidegger 1998f: 157–8)

Heidegger’s account of Rilke’s view of the animals’ ‘openness’ carries connotations of Craig’s description of the ‘carved eyes’ in the figures in Ancient Egyptian art that carry a strong sense of death that ‘will deny you until the crack of doom’ an ‘attitude so silent that it is death-like’ (Craig 1958: 87). This ‘gaze’ also seems reminiscent of the implacable gaze of the eyes of icons, which famously appear to follow their observers around the room.
Concerning humanity Rilke asks: 'Who has twisted us round like this, so that no matter what we do, we are in the posture of someone going away?' (1987: 197). From a Nietzschean perspective Kafka’s figure of the panther is perceived by the public as refreshingly free from the ‘sickness’ of the hunger artist who stands, instead, as an unwelcome reminder of their own ‘sick’ humanity with his unhealthy ‘game with death’. The panther embodies a pure ‘will to life’ and, as Heidegger points out, knows nothing of death. It is this that so captivates the public. The hunger artist, however, is caught in his game between desire for public recognition and the desire to justify his ‘art’, which he practices, after all, out of habitual compulsion rather than conscious choice. In this he is caught in the dilemma of the artist analysed by Agamben in *The Man Without Content*, discussed in chapter four, in conflict between the desire to create, and the aesthetic ‘taste’ of the spectator. The hunger artist, therefore, embodies the messy reality of human existence characterised by this split, caught up in its own self-regard and petty contingent worries and concerns which contrasts with the panther’s apparent purity of being.

For Heidegger, Rilke’s version of the hierarchical relationship between animal and human being was an illusion: the apparent freedom carried around by the animal is rather a consequence of the limited nature of its existence. According to Heidegger it is humanity who have the true potential for freedom. The essence of human being, for Heidegger, lies exactly in the finitude of its existence, and the ‘sickness’ of humanity lies not in any morbid preoccupation with death but rather in its failure to accept and dwell within this essential being-for-death. For Heidegger it is, paradoxically, death that defines us and only humanity has the capacity for the recognition that opens the individual up to the true nature of being. This recognition of the mortal context of existence is, for Heidegger, denied to animal nature. For Rilke, it is only the animal that sees the open, whereas, for Heidegger, it is only human being that has this capacity.

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156 ‘Finitude is not some property that is merely attached to us, but is our fundamental way of being’ (Heidegger 1995: 6).
In his lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995) Heidegger outlined a ranking of the categories of the inanimate, the animal and the human, and sets forth the thesis that the stone is *worldless*, the animal is *poor in world*, and the human being is *world-forming* (1995: 177). In this discussion Heidegger refers extensively to the theories of the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll, focussing on his concept of *Umwelt* or the environment of the living creature as subjectively perceived.\(^{157}\) For Uexküll, each animal exists in a world which it knows only through a limited number of ‘carriers of significance’ which act as ‘disinhibitors’ or triggers for certain aspects of the creature’s repertoire of behaviour. Heidegger takes this idea and uses it to sketch out a sense of the difference between animal and human being. As Heidegger puts it ‘Plant and animal are suspended in something outside of themselves without ever being able to ‘see’ either the outside or the inside’ (1998: 160). In his famous description of the *Umwelt* of the tick, Uexküll had sought to demonstrate that the animal knows nothing of the world it moves and acts in other than the specific ‘carriers of significance’ in its environment. As such, according to Heidegger, the animal lives in a circle of captivation, bound within the horizon of the specific stimuli with which it is adapted to interface. The more complex the animal, the less limiting the ‘circle of captivation’ and the more varied the *Umwelt*. With animals, any sense of awareness beyond this horizon is mere anthropomorphism on the part of the human observer; animals simply do not have the capacity to transcend their *Umwelt*. It is this lack of ability to question the horizon of their world that Heidegger interprets as *poor in world*: the idea that the animal is trapped or ‘captivated’ in a perfectly engineered interlocking set of stimuli and responses. Uexküll uses as an illustrative example of the perfect ‘captivation’, and state of blissful sympathy with which it is enjoined with its world, the humble tick, which survives with only three ‘carriers of significance’: the odour of butyric acid characteristic of mammalian sweat, the temperature of 37° characteristic of the temperature of mammalian blood, and the typology of mammalian skin (see Agamben 2004a:

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\(^{157}\) See Appendix 1.32 for a brief account of the significance of new scientific perspectives on Phenomenology.
But, insofar as all animals (except, according to Heidegger, humans) are defined by their carriers of significance, the number makes little difference: Rilke’s animal and Kafka’s panther no more ‘sees’ its environment than Uexküll’s tick has a conception of the warm-blooded host that it drops onto. Conversely, human beings have the capacity, according to Heidegger, to form their own world because they, unlike animals, have the potential to see beyond their immediate Umwelt and sense the wider context of their existence. It is in this sense of the ‘open’ as the potential to transcend the horizon of their Umwelt that characterises Heidegger’s idea of openness in contrast to Rilke’s. As Merleau-Ponty noted in the course notes for his lectures delivered at the Collège de France from 1957–58 on ‘The Concept of Nature: Animality, the Human Body and the Passage to Culture’, the Umwelt of human beings is more open than that of animals (2003: 178).

Kafka’s panther only appears, therefore, to express a sense of freedom in comparison to the hunger artist. Its strong body threatens to burst from the confines of its cage giving a sense of barely restrained danger that threatens to transcends the boundaries of its prison: ‘Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so long been dreary’ (Kafka 1978: 174). Like Rilke’s animals in the Duino Elegy the panther seems to carry its Umwelt around with it. In contrast, the hunger artist does not convey the full potential of human being. By allowing himself to be placed next to the other animals, Kafka’s hunger artist emanates a sense of defeated, caged humanity. In this sense the hunger artist points towards the denial of the potential of human being—and death—whilst the panther points vividly towards a sense of its, more limited, life.

‘I’ve had enough of sitting in this painting. I’m leaving’
It might seem at first that the Umwelt of Kantor’s self portrayals—the spaces of the painting and the ‘Poor Room of the Imagination’ in which he imagines his existence—present just as bleak and closed a vision of humanity as that in Kafka’s story of the caged hunger artist. However, this is not the effect evoked by these works.
In one of the paintings from 1987, *I’ve had enough of sitting in this painting. I’m leaving*, the figure of Kantor seems reminiscent of both Rilke’s image of a humanity ‘twisted around’ and, at the same time, of Kafka’s panther. In this painting Kantor depicts himself in the act of stepping out of the fictional, two-dimensional world of the picture into the real, three-dimensional, world of the observer. In this sense the picture would seem to enact an escape from the confines of the *Umwelt* of the picture frame, showing also, perhaps, an unwillingness to simply sit down and accept the given situation of existence. However, the figure’s orientation towards the world of the painting and the world of external reality contains a number of paradoxes. The figure of Kantor is in one sense only partially visible, his torso, right arm and shoulder, and left leg are cut off by the left-hand edge of the canvas that he is in the process of leaving. Instead of looking out towards the reality he is stepping into, the upper part of the figure is turned back, like Rilke’s image of humanity, to look under his raised left arm, towards the right of the picture at the chair where he was sitting. As with the figure, the chair is only half visible, also cut off, in this case by the right-hand edge of the canvas. Only the left leg of the figure has made it to the outside world in the form of a three-dimensional artificial leg attached to the edge of the canvas. In its posture and attitude, the figure of Kantor in this painting might be seen as a ‘poor’ and ‘reversed’ version of Lissitzky’s *New Man* discussed in chapter six. In that picture, the clean cut and confident geometry of the mechanical figure is striding dynamically from left to right, not right to left as Kantor’s is. Also, Lissitzky’s figure looks confidently forward whereas Kantor’s looks backwards into the picture. In comparison to Kantor’s naked figure, Lissitzky’s vibrant figure seems to have more of the ‘noble body, furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed’ of Kafka’s panther. Its ‘limbs’ form an open star shape whereas one of Kantor’s arms is wrapped awkwardly behind his head, the other is invisible beyond the picture frame and the ‘real’ left leg that projects into the spectator’s space looks decidedly suspicious, carrying a connotation of the collection of artificial limbs in one of the vitrines at the Auschwitz museum. The key difference, however, is that Lissitzky’s figure lies
wholly within the frame of its picture. It is the attempt of Kantor’s figure to exit the frame that lends it its particular power.

Kantor’s painting sets up a paradoxical interplay of references to both the visible and the invisible. The fact that only the fictional portions of Kantor and the chair are visible whilst the implied versions of them in the real world of the viewer are invisible might lead to the interpretation of the painting as indicative of the overall title of the series: *Further on, Nothing* … Is Kantor stepping into the void of non-existence, looking back at the past and away from the death he already has one foot in? Is the one protruding leg merely a dead relic? In this sense the paradox of this painting can be seen as the tension between, on the one hand the longing for the past, and for life, and on the other, the potency and courage of being able to choose to step into the void of non-existence.

But, on the other hand, the protruding leg is three-dimensional in comparison with the two-dimensionality of the rest of the picture. In that sense it is more ‘real’ than the painted leg. However, it is nevertheless artificial and not animate: it is not a real leg, merely a real artificial leg. There is more than one layer of imitation at play within this work. The artificiality of the three-dimensional leg in one sense destroys the illusion it is apparently purporting to create. If that leg is an indication of the ‘reality’ of the figure—ex-painting—then it would be a very un-übermarionette indeed, a very poor-mannequin-of-a-figure. Paradoxically, when viewed in this way, the painted version of the figure would seem more ‘real’. But, in that case, the illusion of the fiction of the painted figure would trounce reality. But, as with Malevich’s *Black Square* and its distillation of the presencing of reality performed by icons, there is a sense in which Kantor’s painting confounds the binary opposition of ‘real’ and ‘illusory’, ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’, fiction and reality. For example, viewed from the perspective of the painted figure inside the painting, the ‘real’ and ‘visible’ would equate with the two-dimensional realm contained within the surface of the canvas. The ‘illusory’ and ‘invisible’ world for this figure would equate to the four-dimensional spatiotemporal reality of the viewer’s world. Viewed from the spectator’s perspective it is the world of the figure in the painting that is
‘illusory’. However, what, for the spectator in the real world outside of the painting, equates with the ‘invisible’? Surely it is the world of the painting that is implicitly extended past the borders of the canvas in the form of the artificial leg. However, this ‘world’ seems partially visible, in the form of the artificial leg, and partly invisible in the (non)form of the half of the chair that has been cut off by the right hand edge of the painting (from the spectator’s perspective). This aspect of the painting’s world does not enjoy a visible physical presence outside of its canvas in the way that the left leg of the painted figure does. The force of this painting is, therefore, partly to do with the impossible act that it is attempting to stage. The spectator of the painting knows that the idea of the painted figure actually stepping out of the canvas into the real world is an impossibility. Even the idea of it is an illusion. The ‘reality’ of this idea is itself invisible; the artificial limb is merely a stimulus for the idea. This is signalled all the more by the ‘poor’ and somewhat inept nature of the artificial limb. One could imagine, for example, artists such as Jeff Koons, or Jake and Dinos Chapman, articulating a more polished form for this limb’s entrance to the spectator’s dimension.

Kantor’s limb is in the spirit of Schulz’s celebration of the *tandeta* of sham reality in the Street of Crocodiles. It is a Schulzian limb, a poor and shoddy imitation, a joke. Nevertheless, both the spectator and the painted figure confront one another in an uneasy dialogue around this limb, because the work imposes on the viewer the idea of its own movement beyond itself, beyond its immediate painted reality. However, this ‘beyond itself’, in its very impossibility, suggests another reality—a ‘reality beyond reality’, perhaps the ‘reality’ of eternity, perhaps the ‘reality’ of death. Like the figures chasing each other around John Keats’ ‘Grecian Urn’, ‘For ever warm and still to be enjoyed, / For ever panting, and for ever young (Keats 1973: 345, ll. 26–27), Kantor’s painting is forever enacting the potentiality of its own impossible, paradoxical transgression. As discussed in chapter 3, for the prisoners in Plato’s cave, the reality of the machinery of illusion behind them is concealed, as is the sunlit world beyond the cave’s entrance. However, in Kantor’s painting, it is not clear who is in the situation of the Platonic prisoner: the spectator or the painted figure in the picture? Both are arguably in positions of ignorance regarding the potential
reality proposed by the painting: the painted figure of the world outside his frame; the spectator of that same ‘reality’ in so far as its very invisibility presages another reality beyond his or her own.

The ‘Last Supper’ in the ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’: Kantor’s fatal return

Although Kantor’s eyes in this painting are ‘looking back’ in the manner of Rilke’s image of humanity, which Heidegger criticises, Kantor’s figure is still stepping forward. This paradoxical sense of simultaneous reverse and forward movement between past and future is a characteristic found throughout Kantor’s work, but is particularly evident in the late works considered here. In his penultimate major spectacle, *I Shall Never Return*, made during the same period as the *Further on, Nothing* … series of paintings, Kantor invokes the myth of the return of Odysseus to Ithaca. For Kantor, this myth stood as an allegory of the artist’s relationship with reality\(^{158}\) and the meaning was that ‘return’ is only possible as a ‘return’ to death. The figure of Penelope in this respect stands as a symbol for Death as the ultimate reality: she was portrayed in the 1988 production as a young woman who longs for the return of her betrothed. For Kantor, who, like Kafka, found love anew at the end of his life, the paradoxical proximity of Love and Death was a powerful reality.\(^{159}\) This is why, in his late work, Kantor portrayed Death as an attractive young woman, and why the figure of Penelope, the faithful wife who waits for her husband’s eventual return, became the symbol of both Death and Reality, in opposition to the Imagination. The ‘life’ of human being, viewed from this perspective is truly ‘a machine of love and death’: a mechanism that produces the particular being of humanity within its finite temporal bubble, hanging in the timelessness of eternity.

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\(^{158}\) In *I Shall Never Return* Kantor is confronted by his own actors in the guise of roles from his previous productions, culminating in a re-staging of the banquet scene in which Odysseus murders the suitors.

\(^{159}\) In 1923 Kafka, then just turned forty, met the twenty-five year old Dora Diamant, with whom he fell in love. Dora helped nurse Kafka until his death in 1924 (Murray 2005: 357–384). Around 1985 Kantor met and began an affair with Anna Halczak who became his companion and muse during his final years. The affair continued until Kantor’s death (see: Gołubiew 2000: 50–52 for a discussion of Kantor’s recognition of the proximity of love and death in his last years).
The sense of defeat that is present in the hunger artist’s death, and in so many of Kafka’s protagonists, is not present in Kantor’s stagings of his own crossing of the barrier between life and death. At the end of *Today is My Birthday*, the ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’ is filled with cemetery crosses before being overrun by soldiers, police cars, tanks, party-secretaries, secret policemen and murderers. To the accompaniment of the rising and falling strains of, alternatively, Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène* and the funeral march from the second movement of Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony, caged and screaming human figures are wheeled about the stage as if they were circus animals on display. In the midst of this carnage, the figures of Kantor’s remembered family members stage a slow funeral procession bearing a single wooden plank through the chaos to the front of the stage. They arrange the plank into a crude table which they sit behind as if for a Last Supper, reminiscent of the final image of *Wielopole, Wielopole*. Despite the apparent defeat of this last refuge of the individual:

Against
these ‘powers’
stands the
Small,
Poor,
Defenceless,
but magnificent
history of
individual,
human
life.

(Kantor in: Kobialka 1993: 167)

This final tableau, with its intimations of the eternal, advances the silent strength of the bare fact of the fragile, individual, poor human life.

**Conclusion**

As Agamben noted, rooms or *stanzas* are not just literally rooms but also homes in which human being dwells, a space for the free play of memory. In Kantor’s late work, rooms become a poetic space, a means for pointing towards the unveiling of truth about mortality and finitude. In these last works where he
repeatedly attempted to visualise the crossing of the borderline between existence and non-existence, even as he approached that frontier himself, Kantor, like his self-portrait attempting to leave his own painting, seems to have been attempting the impossible. He was attempting to linger at the threshold of nothingness as if to see for himself, and to show his spectators, what lies beyond the negation of existence. In this way Kantor can be seen to have organised the live enactment of the icon’s manner of presencing truth. In a sense it is reversed again, for while the icon looks at its spectator, and while that is still the case with his late and last work, Kantor looks back at eternity and, in doing so, encourages his spectators to join him in the contemplation of this impossible but all-enveloping idea. It is, therefore, no surprise that these works can be read in the light of Heidegger and Kafka who both, in their own ways, attempted to characterise the nature of human existence in its relation to finitude—to death. Heidegger envisages an abstract dwelling for human being illuminated by the truth of the revealed true nature of the temporal transience and finitude of human existence, while Kafka’s protagonists die like dogs, sometimes glimpsing a distant radiance. Kantor’s late paintings and theatre works present a ‘poor’ but nevertheless positive vision of the human animal: a poor individual temporarily lodged for a while in the ‘Poor Little Room of the Imagination’.
CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION: THE ‘BEING’ BEHIND ‘DOING’

Underlying the theme of my thesis has been a desire to engage positively with Nietzsche’s observation in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that: ‘[…] there is no “being” behind doing, acting becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything’ (Nietzsche 1998: 29). A contemporary trend, as noted briefly in chapter four, is to conclude, on the apparent evidence of neuroscience and evolutionary speculation, that ‘the self does not exist’. In following Kantor’s engagements with reality and human being a different sense emerges. As with Heidegger, who engages positively with human being as ‘a lieutenant of the nothing’, Kantor would seem to value keenly the tremulous, ghostly presence of a ‘something’ within the ‘nothing’. With the title of this thesis I intended to declare that I see Kantor as a poetic artist, an artist who speaks poetically about human being. By this I understand ‘the poetic’ as the aesthetic expression of metaphysics, that ‘the poetic’ is in its essence metaphysical. In this sense I see Kantor as an artist who communicates with a poetic, metaphysical force through a variety of media. To portray Kantor’s work in the way that I have experienced it I have dealt with the range of his work as a whole, engaging with the writing, happenings and paintings, as well as with the more famous later performance works. I have embraced his peculiarities and attempted to understand them through working from and through my own context as an English observer of his work, someone who is attempting to engage with its underlying contexts, contexts that were, for me, initially alien. To work through this problem I have employed Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian philosophical discourse as a way of informing my hermeneutic strategy and as a way of articulating my developing argument concerning how I see Kantor as an artist who speaks about human being.

In chapter one I have given a synopticon of Kantor’s art at one point in his career, in the late 1960s, as a way of indicating the apparent confusion and difficulty that it presented for the interpretations that I surveyed in chapter two. However, if I were to give now, at the end of this thesis, a similar synopticon

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viewed from the perspective of Kantor’s work from *The Dead Class* until his death, it would become a series of images that themselves refer, on the basis of informed understanding, to all of his work dating from 1938 and his Bauhaus-Constructivist production of Maeterlinck’s *The Death of Tintagiles*. But, more than that, these *eikons* of his mature work would refer, as do the icons of the Orthodox tradition, to a sense of timelessness that speaks of the bare, naked existence of human being, dwelling on the threshold of eternity itself.

In chapter three I looked at Plato’s cave allegory and used the discourse Heidegger and Agamben around the question of human being to read the allegory as a narrative of the revealing of the enfolding or, in Kantorian terms, the *emballage* (packaging), of the truth of human being in the world. Through my critique of Żurowski’s (mis)reading of Kantor’s Hermes-like role on stage I went on in chapter four to read Kantor’s ‘Little Manifesto’ in similar performative terms—in which Kantor transforms himself from a recipient of the Rembrandt Prize, through a reversed narrative of twentieth-century avant-garde art, into a reversed version of adult human being in the form of a small child, who, like Plato’s servant boy in the *Meno* (82b–86c), stands at the threshold of remembering and forgetting. In Chapter five I discussed Kantor’s relationship with art and reality from a biographical perspective that read his preoccupation with materiality—an almost Epicurean sense of the seething aliveness of matter—as a subversive response to the treatment of human being by the Nazi occupation. The image of human being as a poor scarecrow whose soul flaps in the wind like tattered clothing was borrowed from Yeats’ late poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. This poem contains the implicit paradox of setting the poorness of tattered human being against the glittering images of eternity in Byzantine art. This juxtaposition leads towards the discussion of time and eternity in chapter six in relation to the aesthetics of the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde. Through a discussion of the metaphysics underlying the aesthetics of Malevich’s Suprematist and Tatlin’s Constructivist work I have shown how Kantor’s work can be seen to have strong resonance with icon art in terms similar to those discussed by Florensky in his work on ‘reverse perspective’ and ‘reverse time’. Following this discussion, in chapter seven, I read Kantor’s late
work in terms of Heidegger’s critique of human being to consider his increasingly personal presence in his paintings and theatre works. Kantor can be seen to realise the vision of his ‘Little Manifesto’ by installing himself permanently, for eternity, in his ‘poor little room of the imagination’. In this he gradually moves towards the realisation of a performative revealing of the ‘truth’ of human being—as a curious ‘nothing’ that is yet ‘something’—a process of remembering and forgetting that hovers on the threshold between this world and eternity. In this sense, the *emballage* (packaging) of human being in both flesh and time is what reveals the traces of this ‘nothing’.

Although icons have no ‘depth’, as understood in the post-Renaissance Western tradition of painting, they nevertheless have a strong presence. As Antonova has noted:

> this principle of the organization of pictorial space turns the icon into a highly specific image—an image invested with the power of containing real presence. This could question the very distinction between subject and object which lies at the heart of aesthetics. In whatever sense we understand presence, an animated image cannot be regarded as a passive object. In a manner, when ‘the object stares back’ the relationship between viewing subject and viewed object is radically transformed.

( Antonova 2010: 154)

What, however, is the basis of this presence if there is no illusion of depth ‘behind’ the image? What, to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase, is the ‘being’ behind doing? If Kantor’s work stands as an *eikon*, or image of human being, what is the basis of its presence?

When spectators gaze at Kantor’s work, whether at one of his paintings, objects or performances, they are confronted by a ‘surface’ that stares back at them. In this confrontation lies a tacit questioning of the spectators’ being. In the last volume of his lectures on Nietzsche, on ‘Nihilism’, Heidegger discusses the problem of human being in terms of the ontological difference, the apparent differentiation of individual beings from Being itself—the underlying existence of

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reality. This is the ontological version of the hermeneutic circle: a path that: ‘leads from beings to Being and from Being to beings’ (Heidegger 1991: 188). Heidegger goes on to imagine ‘that beings and Being are found to stand on opposite banks of a stream we cannot and perhaps never could identify’ (Ibid.). There is a striking similarity between this image and Kantor’s formulation of the relationship between the spectator and the actor discussed in chapter six, in which the actor, who is modelled on the idea of a dead person, confronts the spectator across the line dividing the ‘stage’ from the ‘house’, art from reality. There is a sense of a presence speaking from the opposite bank of a stream that separates the spectators from their image staring back at them as dead people: the reality of the void. In an interview with Bablet, Kantor commented: ‘I find means which are exactly like objects, I mean there’s no soul—no soul, no interior’. It might seem negative to characterise the essence of human being as a void, as empty, as nothingness. However, as Raymond Tallis has argued in *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (2011: 250–275), it depends on what conception of human being is being used as a basis for framing the discussion. The framework that I developed in chapter three is one in which human being was a temporal construct, a being that manufactures itself out of the ‘nothing’ of the past and the future, in the ‘nothing’ of the ‘now’. Whilst the biological machinery that performs this feat is physical, the ‘being’ that arises from this ‘doing’ is not: it is literally *metaphysical*. It is in this sense that the ‘nothingness’ that constitutes human being is an essential ‘something’ behind the ‘doing’. In this the manner of the existence of human being in time is especially important.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche voices a sense of disgust that accompanies the self-contemplation of human being stripped of all meaning:

Where might one escape this veiled look, which leaves one with a deep feeling of sorrow as one walks away, that introspective look of the man deformed from the outset, a look which reveals the way in which such a man speaks to himself—that gaze which is a sigh! ‘I wish I were anyone else but myself!’ this gaze sighs: ‘but there is no hope of

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162 Kantor interviewed by Bablet in the film *The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor* (1991)
that. I am who I am: how could I escape from myself? And yet—I have had enough of myself!…

(Nietzsche 1998: 101)

The sentiment here recalls the discussion in chapter seven concerning the comparison between Kafka’s hunger artist and the vibrant young panther: the public were dismayed by the apparition of the hunger artist and turned away to crowd around the cage of the new addition to the zoo. I argued there that Kantor’s self-display in his ‘poor little room of the imagination’ did not evoke such negativity. With Kantor there is no ‘sigh’. He has not ‘had enough of himself,’ but rather he has had enough of the painting he is sitting in. As Kantor grew nearer to death he would later change his mind about leaving ‘the painting’ to instead accept that he would remain within it.

In his 1922 poem The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot wrote: ‘And I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / I will show you fear in a handful of dust’ (Eliot 1969: 61). Although Kantor shares and expresses a fear of oblivion, fear is not the primary element that his work displays even with the strong preoccupation with death evident in his late work. For Eliot, the shadow of death is striding in one direction only: death is a certain fate awaiting each individual. However, in Kantor’s work the sense is of a more convoluted but optimistic sense of time, one in which it is turned back upon itself in the manner of the figure in the I have had enough… painting. But, as with the framing of human being, the framework within which time is viewed makes all the difference. As Agamben observes in his essay on ‘Creation and Salvation’, in relation to a totality the normal sense of time is reversed: ‘what seems to follow is actually anterior. Salvation is not a remedy for the Fall of created beings but rather that which makes creation comprehensible, what give it its sense’ (Agamben 2011a: 3). In the economy of Divine Creation it is the ‘making sense’ of temporal existence that retrospectively constitutes its being. In a late piece of writing titled ‘Ocalić przed zapomnieniem’ (To Save From Oblivion, 1988), Kantor conducts ‘a rigorous “inspection” of my combat unit / called /

“individual human life”, which, he declares, is ‘Too weak!’ (2009: 392). Kantor’s strategy for the battle between his individual self, and the world and death, is to recognise its frail individuality and ‘bring it now / onto the stage. / Show it to the public’ (Ibid.: 393). Kantor does not install himself as a performer but instead, by using poor fragments of his own life as ready-made objects for public display, he anatomises the reality of human being, which in its nothingness is, each in its own individuality, a collection of ready-made memories of experience. In their capacity to be remembered these fragments are saved and become, at least potentially, eternal.

The world in which human being exists is indeed a ‘reality beyond reality’. The conscious awareness of memory may be an arbitrary manifestation of the evolutionary process, but it is nevertheless an immaterial world in which specifically human being has its dwelling. This stanza of being, the poetic and capacious dwelling place, is what Kantor characterises as memory, a plane of reality that is continually being destroyed and saved in individual and collective terms. Kantor’s ‘poor little room of the imagination’ is one poignant poetic instantiation that reveals the oikonomia of this reality. In his late poem ‘The Rock’ (1954), in the section entitled ‘The Poem as Icon’, Wallace Stevens writes: ‘Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness, / And the icon is the man’ (Stevens 1997: 446). If human being ‘was made in the image of God’ then truly its figure is an icon. But, when the transient presence of living human being gazes upon its icon, it is only the truth of the mystery that stares back. ‘We say God and the imagination are one …’ writes Stevens in his ‘Final Soliloquy’, but immediately qualifies this potential solution to Nietzsche’s nihilism of ‘God is dead’ with the words ‘And how high that highest candle lights the dark’ (Ibid.: 444). In his essay ‘Nudity’, on the idea of the nakedness of truth, Agamben observes that: ‘This simple dwelling of appearance in the absence of secrets is its special trembling—it is the nudity that, like the choirboy’s “white” voice, signifies nothing and, precisely for this reason, manages to penetrate us’ (Agamben 2011a: 90). As Agamben (2004a) also commented in an earlier

164 In The Gay Science Nietzsche writes: ‘God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him’ (Nietzsche 1974: 181).
work, Linnaeus’s anthropological machine is a mirror in which human being has to reflect on itself to create the possibilities for its own potential as human being. When humanity stares at its own iconicity it generates that possibility anew, and when Kantor ended his *Milano Lessons* with the words „o wszystkim pamiętać / i wszystko zapomnieć…” (Remember everything / and forget everything…)\(^{165}\) he articulates this paradoxical nothingness of his mere being—the poetics of the naked bareness of being ‘even the thing that he is…’.

APPENDIX

1.1 The 1st Exhibition of Modern Art

As the notes for the 2005 exhibition *Tadeusz Kantor: Interior of Imagination* at the Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw explain:

The 1st Exhibition of Modern Art, organised with a great flourish by Tadeusz Kantor and Mieczysław Porębski at the end of 1948 in the Cracow Palace of Art, presented the latest works of 37 avant-garde artists from Poland. The exhibition was an attempt to rebuild the connection, severed by the war, with the international avant-garde, but this proved possible only to an extent. The experience of the war clearly influenced the dramatic nature of the exhibited works, which were intended to demonstrate a connection between contemporary art, in its scientific, technical, and social aspect, and life. In line with Kantor’s suggestion, Zbigniew Dłubak made, for the photomontage room, a series of large-size photographs showing the extraordinariness of everyday objects, the infinity and complexity of nature. Exhibited in the foyer, the magnifications of the mechanism of a watch, an x-ray photo of the human lungs, the firmament, and the cross section of a cabbage head were to prove that contemporary art and science had common horizons.

The exhibition was closed by the authorities in January 1949, and all copies of the catalogue destroyed. In April that year, at the 4th General Congress of the Polish Fine Artists Association, preceded by the infamous council at Nieborów, socialist realism was decreed as the only allowed style in art. Kantor withdrew from the official artistic life and started working as a set designer. He did not direct until 1955.

(Julia Leopold, on the basis of the script for the exhibition *Tadeusz Kantor: Interior of Imagination* by Marek Świca and Jarosław Suchan)

Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, commenting on the scientific tenor of the opening gallery to the 1948 exhibition notes that:

A letter to Bohdan Urbanowicz of October 9, 1948 indicates that Kantor drew on his Paris experience in deciding that ‘the first (side) room will show living forms discovered by contemporary science (microscopic photographs—X-rays—cosmic rays—biology,
etc.)’ [Kantor, Letter of October 9, 1948, to Bohdan Urbanowicz, in: Chrobak (ed.), W kregu lat czterdziestych, vol. II, Cracow 1991, 10]. It was significant that such pictures filled the first room in an exhibit of modern art. Aside from the main exhibition of paintings, the last room also contained ten spatial models built by participants in the exhibition. This final element was, as Kantor put it, ‘a warehouse of forms outside the frames of the pictures’ [Kantor interviewed by Borowski 1982: 38].

(Pleśniarowicz 2004: 56)

1.2 Kantor’s published statements on the formation of Cricot 2 and the idea of ‘autonomous theatre’

1.3 Cricot 2 productions toured following Kantor’s death
The Dead Class was toured by Kantor’s Cricot 2 company, along with his final production, Today is My Birthday, for two years after his death owing to contractual obligations. The final performance was in Brno in 1992 (Pleśniarowicz 2004: 304). The importance of The Dead Class both for Kantor and his audience is shown by the fact that it was the only production other than Today is My Birthday that Kantor authorised to be performed after his death. All his other productions, in this sense, died with him.
1.4 Nicholas Serota on Kantor’s reception in Edinburgh and London

In his short essay ‘Tadeusz Kantor at the Whitechapel’, Nicholas Serota recollects that:

In both Edinburgh and London Kantor’s performances were received with enormous enthusiasm, presenting a European tradition of ‘physical’ theatre which would only find expression in England in the work of Simon McBurney and the Théâtre de Complicité in the late eighties and nineties. For a predominantly young audience Kantor’s performances were a powerful, highly charged and novel experience. In comparison with English theatre they were raucous, intense and psychologically complex in their juxtaposition of actors and life-sized mannequins overseen by the ever-present figure of the director himself.

(Nicholas Serota in: Suchan 2005: 122)

Serota’s preoccupation here, with Kantor’s performance work in a short essay ostensible discussing his presence as a contemporary ‘fine’ artist in the Whitechapel gallery serves to demonstrate the ‘theatrical’ bias in the way Kantor was perceived in the UK.

1.5 The video archive of Kantor’s live work

The video record held by the Cricoteka archives, although invaluable is necessarily flawed partly because the collection consists of the films made in different ways and for different purposes. Some are records of live performances and these vary wildly because sometimes the strategy has been to shoot the whole performance area in a long shot, which is by far the better approach in my view as one has a sense of the performance within the whole space. In other recordings, the director and/or camera operator have tried to be more ‘creative’ and filmed close-ups that are then edited together. What is gained in terms of detail is lost in terms of the composition as a whole. Of course, any recording of a live event is of necessity partial.
1.6 Kantor’s theatrical objects and their ‘second life’ as art objects in gallery exhibitions

As Pleśniarowicz (2004: 232, fn. 596) comments in his editorial notes to the second volume of Kantor’s writings, fragments of Kantor’s *partytura* text are omitted in Kantor 1990. In addition to the *partytura*, the English publication includes an edited selection of Kantor’s production and rehearsal notes and other selected short essays. As Pleśniarowicz observes that this English version ‘proved to be a more modest selection of texts published earlier in Italy and Poland, consisting only of: *Sytuacja artysty* [The Situation of the Artist], *Dziewiło i proces* [Artwork and Process], *Spirytualizm i uduchowienie* [Spiritualism and Spirituality], *Cudowność realności* [Miraculous Reality]—combined with arbitrary essays from *Miejsce teatralne* [Theatrical Place] in one chapter title bearing little relation to Kantor, ‘The Artist and the Theatre’ (in Kantor 2004: 483; italics in original; my translation). (In fact this list is not entirely accurate as detailed below.) Whereas in the Polish 1984 edition the *partytura* is sandwiched between two complete collections of Kantor’s essays, *Teksty autonomiczne*
(Autonomous Texts) and *Miejsce teatralne* (Theatrical Place) the texts in Hyde’s and Tchorek’s edition are placed at the end of the book following the *partytura*. They are grouped into two sections under the editors’ own (i.e. not Kantor’s) titles of ‘Director’s Notes on Rehearsals’ and ‘The Artist and the Theatre’. Individual parts from *Teksty Autonomiczne* are split between these two sections and parts of *Miejsce teatralne* are also included in the second. Hyde’s and Tchorek’s publication of *Wielopole* is curiously subtitled ‘an exercise in theatre’. Given his strong views against theatre, it seems unlikely that Kantor would have approved of such a description, which does not occur in the 1984 or 2004 Polish publications. Hyde gives an entertaining and colourful account of working on this translation with Tchorek in Norwich in his contribution to the book *Kantor Was Here* (Murawska-Muthesius and Zarzecka 2011: 101–111, see especially p.106).

1.8 Kantor and Grotowski
Kantor was famously rude about Jerzy Grotowski, calling him ‘that thief!’ (see Pleśnjarowicz 2004: 43). There is no real comparison between Grotowski’s ‘Poor Theatre’ and Kantor’s aesthetic of ‘poor reality’ although Teemu Paavolainen (2011) discusses the difference at length in his recent thesis. Eugenio Barba describes how he was once rebuffed by Kantor when the artist learned that Barba was working with Grotowski (Barba 1999: 43n). Of course, Grotowski’s international fame as a theatre director preceded Kantor’s.

1.9 Information given on the cover and title page of Kobialka’s *A Journey Through Other Spaces* (1993)
The titling of Kobialka’s 1993 book is curious. The front cover and title page read: ‘A Journey Through Other Spaces / Essays and Manifestos 1944–1990 Tadeusz Kantor / Edited and Translated by Michal Kobialka / with a Critical Study of Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre by Michal Kobialka’. The spine is headed by both writers’ names in the form ‘Kantor / Kobialka’ at right-angles to the length of the spine, with the title *A Journey Through Other Spaces / Essays and*
Manifestos 1944–1990 running at right angles to this along the length of the spine in the normal manner underneath. There is therefore some ambiguity whether this is to be seen as a book by Kantor or Kobialka and it has been referenced in both ways. Given that almost a third of the book consists of Kobialka’s essays and scholarly apparatus, and that Kantor’s writings have been translated and ‘invisibly’ abridged and stitched together by the later author, I have taken the decision to treat this as a book unequivocally ‘by’ Kobialka. As I note above, the 2009 book eschews this ambiguity entirely and I understand that the Polish edition to be shortly published by the Cricoteka will be in the same format, despite Pleśniarowicz’s definitive edition of Kantor’s writings already being separately in print.

1.10 The Partitioning of Poland

The partitioning of the First Polish Republic was effected by its neighbours Prussia, Austria and Russia in three stages, in 1773, 1793 and 1795. According to the historian Norman Davies this ‘was without precedent in modern European History. […] Poland was the victim of political vivisection—by mutilation, amputation, and in the end total dismemberment; and the only excuse given was that the patient had not been feeling well’ (Davies 2005: 387). The official reason for partition was that Poland, ‘The Republic of Anarchy’, was incapable of governing itself. As Davies states the ‘developments of the Partition period can never properly be understood unless it is realised that Poland’s internal troubles were systematically promoted by her more powerful neighbours’ (Davies 2005: 388).

1.11 Czesław Miłosz’s account of Wyspiański’s straw man

As the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz in his history of Polish literature describes Wyspiański’s scene:

The personified mulch takes over as a kind of maestro, and the play ends as the company begins a somnambulic dance under the spell of the straw man and his fiddle.
there are two groups of characters: ‘living persons’ and ‘persons of the drama’ (i.e., the embodied dreams and desires of the wedding guests). Viewed as a whole, the play offers a pitilessly exposed cross section of Polish society that is touched by a strange paralysis of the will ….

(Miłosz 1983: 356)

1.12 Kantor and Tintin: an unexplored relationship

It is surely obvious to many that Waclaw and Leszek Janiccy, the identical twins that performed in many of Kantor’s productions, are strikingly reminiscent of the bungling detectives Thomson and Thompson, characters who first appeared in Hergé’s Tintin adventures in *Cigars of the Pharaoh* (1934). I have been unable to find any evidence whether Kantor was familiar with the *Tintin* books, however, there are other intriguing potential links between Kantor’s work and the world of *Tintin*. In *The Adventures of Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (1999, originally published in French in 1930), an entire frame appears at the bottom of page 106 as simply a black square, unmistakably reminiscent of Malevich’s 1915 painting *Black Square*. In the same adventure, on pages 29–30 Tintin discovers a fake factory, exclaiming: ‘Great snakes! … Just stage effects! … They’re simply burning bundles of straw to make smoke come out of false chimneys!’ (p. 30). As Tintin says this he is peering through the ‘factory’ door and sees that it is just stage flats propped up by wooden struts, a revelation that seems comparable to Kantor’s critique of the ‘Winter Palace of illusion’ in his *Theatrical Space* writings (Kantor 2009c: 337). In *The Blue Lotus* (1990, originally published in French in 1936) on pages 48–49 a would-be assassin masquerading as a photographer attempts to kill Tintin and his friend Chang with a machine-gun disguised as a camera (‘Infernal machine! My tommy-gun jammed!…’). The camera-machine-gun featured in *Wielopole, Wielopole* is strikingly similar. Finally, Hergé’s last and unfinished story, *Tintin and Alph-Art* (2004, originally published in French in 1986), is left with Tintin about to be murdered by being turned into a work of art in the style of the fictional modern sculptor César ‘the master of compressionism [and] expansionism […] we’re going to pour liquid polyester over you; you’ll become an expansion signed by
César and then authenticated by a well-known expert’ (2004: 48). In its playful and knowledgeable engagement with the contemporary art world, Hergé’s story seems itself reminiscent of Kantor’s *Multipart* experiment, in which multiple canvases had umbrellas crushed onto them, were then plasticised and authenticated as works of art before being contracted out to their buyers for further alteration. However, it also seems to point the way towards the last phase of Kantor’s work, in which he became a part of his own art.

1.13 The Polish text of Raczek’s 1982 *Polityka* essay


In his essay, Žurowski renders the translation of this passage entirely in italics, seemingly to further emphasise Raczek’s characterisation of Kantor’s on-stage presence.

1.14 Polish text of the reason Kantor was awarded the Rembrandt Prize

1.15 Orson Welles and Anthony Perkins on *The Trial*

Welles also commented: ‘He [Joseph K.] is a little bureaucrat. I consider him guilty. . . . He belongs to a guilty society; he collaborates with it.’ (This and the Perkins quotation found at: [http://victorian.fortunecity.com/vermeer/287/interpretations.htm](http://victorian.fortunecity.com/vermeer/287/interpretations.htm), accessed 12/7/11). Welles did not agree with Kafka’s rendering of the end of Josef K.’s life in the book version in which the protagonist dies ‘like a dog’. He argued in an interview with Hugh Weldon on the BBC in 1962:

> To me that ending is a ballet written by a Jewish intellectual before the advent of Hitler. Kafka wouldn’t have put that in after the death of six million Jews. It all seems very much pre-Auschwitz to me. I don't mean that my ending was a particularly good one, but it was the only possible solution. I had to step up the pace, if only for a few moments.

([http://www.wellesnet.com/trial%20bbc%20interview.htm](http://www.wellesnet.com/trial%20bbc%20interview.htm), accessed 12/7/11)

1.16 Kantor and Edward Gordon Craig

During 1980, whilst Kantor and the rest of the company travelled to Florence to create *Wielopole, Wielopole*, Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz remained behind to oversee the setting up of the first Cricoteka archive in Kraków (see the section titled ‘The Cricotheque’ on last page of the 1980 programme for this production, Kantor 1980). He told me, in conversation, that Kantor had been very explicit about where he had wanted to work in Florence: he wanted (and was granted by the Florentine municipal authorities) working space in a deconsecrated convent at via Santa Maria 25, near to where Craig had stayed when he had lived in Florence. This link with Craig had, according to Pleśniarowicz, been very important for Kantor. (See also Chrobak and Zarzecka (eds) 2007a for further material on Kantor in Florence.)
1.17 Unpublished anonymous translation of a section of Kantor’s ‘After the War: A Night Notebook or Metamorphoses (1947–1948)’

An earlier unpublished anonymous translation in the Cricoteka archives follows the format given in volume one of Pisma reads:

… space is not a passive container, in which objects and forms are placed …
SPACE is in itself the subject of creation.
The main subject!
SPACE loaded with energy.
Space which shrinks and expands.
These peculiar movements shape forms and objects.
Space gives birth to forms!
[…]
The human figure is shaped on the border area of a live, suffering organism and a mechanism functioning automatically and absurdly.
Prevalent [in this kind of space] are the laws of metamorphosis.
The human figure undergoes transformation, expansion, transplantation, and cross-breeding.

1.18 The reality of occupation as portrayed in Polanski’s The Pianist

This reality is vividly portrayed in Roman Polanski’s film The Pianist (2002). Polanski was himself a survivor of the Jewish ghetto in Podgórze, Kraków. Steven Spielberg had invited Polanski to direct the film version of Thomas Keneally’s novel Schindler’s Ark (released in 1993 as Schindler’s List), but Polanski had declined. He apparently felt more able to tackle The Pianist set, as it is, in and around the Warsaw ghetto as this afforded some distance from his own experience. Nevertheless, the scenes of brutal and random murder are realised with a certain chilling matter-of-factness that strongly suggests that they are based on Polanski’s actual experience of such events. Writing in his review of the film for New York magazine Peter Rainer comments:
The Pianist is based on the memoirs of Polish musician Władysław Szpilman, who survived the Warsaw ghetto, and it’s Roman Polanski’s strongest and most personally felt movie. This should not come as a great surprise, since as a child Polanski survived the Kraków ghetto and lost family members in the Holocaust. The real surprise is that the horrors on display in The Pianist are presented matter-of-factly—which of course makes them seem even more horrific. We are not accustomed to such reserve in a movie about the Holocaust, and especially not in a Polanski movie, where the violence has often been close to Grand Guignol. But in this film he is trying to be devastatingly true to his emotions, and so there is no need for hyperbole. At times, the tension between the unwavering directness of his technique and the anguish that is behind it is almost unbearable. When we see a Nazi soldier casually shoot a Jewish girl in the head for asking an innocent question, or when we see soldiers throw an old man in a wheelchair over a balcony, we are staring into an everyday inferno.

(Rainer 2003: n.p.)

In his perceptive and sensitive review of the film Clive James favourably compares Polanski’s film to Spielberg’s more sentimental and ‘uplifting’ Schindler’s List:

The story of The Pianist was about just one man being saved by a sheer fluke while everyone else was murdered. Here was a narrative much more congruent with Polanski’s view, and he was able to bring all his unsentimental skill to making the most of it on screen.

(James 2005: n.p.)

1.19 Transcription from Kantor’s address at the Cricoteka, December 1987:

a) Extract 1

The transcription of this passage from the event (the occasion for which was an audience held by Kantor at the Cricoteka in December 1987 on the occasion of Wyspiański’s jubilee) in the original Polish reads:

przez największe poniżenie, przez dojście do dna, chcę uzyskać ten pułap wielki. To zresztą […] w ‘Wielopolu’, […]
w tej małej izbie podnosi się pułap tej izby poprzez ewangelię. To znaczy że to wszystkie typy z mojej rodziny, [...] niezbyt przeze mnie ocenione, raczej niskiej kategorii, nagłe podnoszą się, ponieważ zaczynają wchodzić na teren ewangelii.

(Kantor 1987:10)

b) Extract 2

The original Polish reads:

jest jedną z czołowych wartości, że uzyskujemy wielkość —poprzez poniżenie [...] przez największe poniżenie, przez dojście do dna, chcę uzyskać ten pułap wielki. [...] Mnie chodzi o to pojęcie wielkości [...] nie mieści się w formie. I Kazimierz Wielki—największy wzlot potęgi polskiej—został przedstawiony przez Wyspiańskiego jako —kościotrup, szkielet, z resztakami świetności—korona, berle, jabłko. To jest wspaniała pomysł, to jest genialny pomysł. [...] Kiedy zacząłem robić ‘Umarłą klasę’, [...] to ten projekt witrażu był dla mnie takim potwierdzeniem, że wielkość uzyskuje się przez poniżenie kompletne.

(Kantor 1987: 10–11)
1.20 My translation of Kantor’s partytura for *An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* (1968)

*An Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* was realised several times as stated in the translated passage. As well as the sources cited above, fragments of the Polish text have been published in *Grammatica* 3 (1969). There is an English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski in his unpublished manuscript ‘Collected Theatrical Works and Happenings’ in the Cricoteka archival collection (pp. 437–40), and more recently, an English translation was published in the book accompanying the 2005 exhibition in Vienna and Warsaw: *The Impossible Theatre: Performativity in the Works of Pawel Althamer, Tadeusz Kantor, Katarzyna Kozyra, Robert Kusmirowski and Artur Zmijewski* (Wroblewska et al 2006, p. 109). The happening was filmed: edited fragments can be seen in the film *Kantor ist da: Die Künstler und Seine Welt* (Kantor is Here: The Artist and His World), directed by Dietrich Mahlow (1969), which is available on a DVD included with Schorlemmer 2007 and also in the collection of DVDs *The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor* available from Andrzej Białko (bialko@op.pl). I am grateful for the assistance of Elżbieta Kaproń, Tomasz Macios and Professor Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz in making the translation of Kantor’s partytura.
Lekcja anatomii wedle Rembranda
/partytura Happeningu/
[Happening realizowany kilkakrotnie: w Kunsthalle w Norymberdze (1968), w Galerii Foksal w Warszawie (1969), w Dourdan pod Paryżem (wrzesień 1971), w Henri Onstad Kunstsenter w Oslo (październik 1971). Trwał ok. 1 godziny.]

wystarczy zrobić tylko pierwszy krok, 
odważyć się coś oddzielić, 
aby odkryć nagle nowy wewnętrzny świat: 

podszewka! 
górna warstwa! 
środkowa! 
a oto dolna! 
oddzielam jedyną warstwę od drugiej, 
teraz natrafiamy na cienki pokład waty, 
który w tym miejscu przechodzi w wyraźne zgrubienia, 
uwaga! 

wewnętrzna kieszon! 
zapięta! 
odcinam, 
proszę zwrócić uwagę na te interesujące szczegóły: 
guziki! 
dziurki! 
hafiki! 
zastrzaski! 
agrafki! 
klameryki! 
które w ten cały organizm usiłują wprowadzić porządek, 
pozapinać, 
uszytywać, 

I oto jesteśmy już na antypodach ubioru! 
kieszienie! 
nie dajmy się zmylić konwencjonalnym 
i nic nieznaczącym pozorom, 
popatrzmy na nie z boku, 

pod innym kątem, 

albo od środka, 

w chałupkowym stanie utraconej pozycji, 
kiedy zasuwają, kiedy nie możemy już w nie wsadzić rąk, 
zastanówmy się co właściwie oznaczają 

te szczególne schówki, 

intymne i dwuznaczne zaulki, 
spuflone i tołustakie, 
przerwione i anonimowe, 

nie obawiajmy się światłych określeń: 
to są po prostu zwyczajne to r b y ! 
nie mniejmy zubień! 

wsadza się w nie wszystko, lub prawie wszystko! 
obigrzzone ołówki

Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt

score of the Happening
(The Happening was realised several times: in the Kunsthalle in Nuremberg (1968), in the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw (1969), in Dourdan near Paris (September 1971), and in Henri Onstad Art Centre in Oslo (October 1971). Duration about 1 hour.)

it is enough just to take the first step, 
to dare to separate something, 
in order to discover abruptly a new interior world: 
linings! 
the outer layer! 
I sever, 
the middle! 
and here is the bottom one! 
I separate layers one from another, 
now we meet the thin cotton padding, 
which passes here to a distinct swelling, 
attention! 

internal pocket! 
buckled-up! 
I cut, 
please take note of these interesting details: 
guys! 
button-holes! 
hooks and eyes! 
press-studs! 
safety pins! 
cclasps! 
each of which tries to introduce order in this whole organism, 
to fasten up, 
to stiffen, 
to confer a profile and a form, 
to create a style. 
And already we are in the antipodes of clothing! 
pockets! 

lots of pockets! 
let us not be tricked by conventional 
or insignificant outward appearance, 
let us look without prejudice, 
from different angles, 
or from the inside, 
in the piteous state of dislocation 
when they hang down, when we are now unable to insert our 

hands, 
we puzzle over what these special 
compartments actually mean, 
these intimate and ambiguous dead ends, 
familiar and confiding, 
pervasive and anonymous, 
let us not fear bold expressions: 
these are quite simply ordinary ba g s! 

let us not be under any illusions! 
one inserts into them everything, or else nearly everything! 
gnawed pencils

302
szczoteczki do zębów
resztki tytoniu
pogniecone papierosy
zapalki
kulki chleba
banknoty
paszporty
zdjęcia rodzinne
zdjęcia kochanek
zdjęcia dzieci
zdjęcia pornograficzne
biliecy do kina
biliecy tramwajowe
biliecy do metra
tabletki aspiryny
prezerwatywy
witaminy
chustki do nosa
papierowy serwetki
papiery urzędowe
rachunki kelnerów
urodzajne łyżeczki
urwane guziki
scyzoryki
noże
I pistolety
oto jest interesująca treść i zawartość tych intymnych schowków i ukrytych melin,
oto prawdziwa, nie sfałszowana strona indywidualności,
zapomniane resztki, wstydliwe odpadki, zmieścione i pogonezione
śmieszne organy ludzkiego instynktu
przechowywania i pamięci!

koniec z tzw. partycypacją!

**1.21 Primo Levi’s account of the ‘Special Squads’ at Auschwitz**

In his book *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989) Levi recounts that:

An extreme case of collaboration is represented by the *Sonderkommandos* of Auschwitz and the other extermination camps. Here one hesitates to speak of privilege: whoever belonged to this group was privileged only to the extent that—but at what cost—he had enough to eat for a few months, certainly not because he could be envied. With this duly vague definition, ‘Special Squad’, the SS referred to the group of prisoners who were entrusted with the running of the crematoria. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them) who must be sent into the gas chambers; to extract the corpses from the chambers, pull gold teeth from jaws, cut the women’s hair, sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of the luggage; transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens; extract and eliminate the ashes.

(Levi 1989: 34)

To ensure that they would not be able to speak of what they had seen, Levi reports, these groups were allowed to operate for only a few months before they were themselves exterminated. ‘[A]s its initiation the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors.’ In all, twelve squads operated during the life of Auschwitz (ibid.).

**1.22 The problem of dating ‘Klasa szkolna’**

In Kantor 2004 the title of this piece has the words ‘Rok 1971 lub 72. Nad Morzem’ (The year 1971 or 1972. At the seaside) appended to it in square brackets. These words are the first words of the essay as given in the collected writings, and it could easily be construed that they are conjectures as to its date of composition. Kobialka (2009), in the presentation of his translation of this essay, could also be interpreted as giving the date of composition as ‘1971/1972’. However, in Kantor 1995, in which a facsimile of the original typescript is given facing William Brand’s translation, there is an additional page of text bearing the title ‘Klasa szkolna’ with a date of composition of 1982. This...
text does not appear in the complete works or Kobialka’s translations. In both these pieces of writing, therefore, Kantor seems to refer to his installation *Klasa Szkolna: Dzielę zamknięte* (The Classroom: A Closed Work), first exhibited in 1982–3, and because of this it would seem that 1982 is the more likely date of composition of a piece reflecting on the memory of an event experienced in 1971 or 1972.

1.23 The similarity of the mannequins in *The Machine of Love and Death* to figures in Bauhaus, Futurist and Constructivist art.

The mannequins featured in the first half of *The Machine of Love and Death* (constructed according to Kantor’s design by Eugeniusz Bakalarz) recall the design of some of those used in the Bauhaus stage experiments, but also mannequin-like figures that occur in much Futurist and Constructivist art. For example, see Rodchenko’s *White Non-Objective Sculpture* 1918 (reproduced in Lodder 1983: 23, plate 1.23), which seems to point towards Kantor’s mechanical puppets of the Queen’s three messengers in part 1, the figures in Varvara Stepanova’s 1920 paintings *Dancing Forms on a White Background* and *The Red Room* (reproduced in Tupitsyn 2009: 78, 79); or Agli Sassu’s Futurist drawings from 1927–1929 such as *Il palancino, Guerrieri, Uomo che cammina, L’uomo meccanico*, and *La fucina* (reproduced in Sassu 1999: 39, 55, 68, 69, 83).

1.24 The 1920s *Bauhausbücher*

In the 1920s Albert Langen Verlag did indeed publish a series of *Bauhausbücher* in beautiful minimalist hardback yellow covers. Pleśniarowicz (2004: 26) suggests that the book Kantor was referring to was Oskar Schlemmer’s *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* (The Theatre of the Bauhaus, 1925), which was *Bauhausbücher* number 4 in the series. However, this volume, although it contains writings by Farkas Molnár, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy and Schlemmer, does not contain anything by Paul Klee, who was the author of the second volume in the series *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Pedagogical
Notebooks), published in 1925. Perhaps Kantor’s ‘little yellow book’ stands for more than one of these volumes. After all, other volumes would also have been of interest to Kantor: Piet Mondrian’s Neue Gestaltung. Neoplastizimus (New Design: Neoplasticism, 1925), Theo Van Doesburg’s Grundbegriffe der neuen gestaltenden Kunst (Basic Concepts of the New Creative Arts, 1924), Wassily Kandinsky’s Punkt und Linie zur Fläche. Beitrag zur Analyse der malerischen Elemente (Point, Line and Plane: Contribution to the Analysis of Pictorial Elements, 1926), Malevich’s Die gegenstandslose Welt (The Nonobjective World, 1927) and Albert Gleizes’ Kubismus (Cubism 1928) were all published in this influential series.

1.25 Original Polish text for extract from Lesson 3 of The Milano Lessons

Tradycja malarstwa rozpoczynająca się od Renesansu i od zastosowania optycznych praw perspektywy znalazła w obrazie jedną tylko przestrzeń obowiązującą w polu całego obrazu.

NAPIĘCIE tworzyło się dzięki właśnie tym prawom perspektywy i jednolitej, jednej przestrzeni.

ABSTRAKCJĄ odkryła i stosowała prawa WIELO-PRZESTRZENI (jest to moja interpretacja nowej przestrzeni).

(Kantor 1991b: 33)

Note: Kobialka (1993: 218) translates ‘wielo-przestrzeni’ as ‘hyperspace’, for which there seems little justification. Indeed it obscures the link with the idea of multiple, reverse-hierarchical spaces in discussed by Antonova that characterise many icons.
1.26 Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr.’s discussion of Brunelleschi's ‘reversed' visual pyramid

Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., in his book *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*, describes Brunelleschi’s experimental set-up with the mirror and argues that:

Brunelleschi could have concluded that the visual pyramid was actually reversed in the mirror; the apex—his eyes—of the first pyramid on the viewer’s side of the mirror was connected by the visual axis and *cathetus* to the apex of the second pyramid as reflected in reverse. *The apex on the mirror side also marked the centric vanishing point.* Brunelleschi would thus have come upon the fundamental logic of what came to be known as ‘one-point’ or frontal perspective.

(Edgerton 1975: 136–137; emphasis in original)

According to Edgerton’s glossary, the term *cathetus* is defined as a virtual extension of the visual axis into mirror-space as follows: 'In medieval optics (catoptrics), the imaginary line from the point of an object’s reflection in the mirror, into the mirror’s virtual space, to the apparent position of the object’s reflection itself' (Ibid.: 195).

1.27 Antonova’s proposed new definition of ‘reverse perspective’

In her book Antonova proposes a new definition of ‘reverse perspective’ as *the simultaneous representation of different planes of the same image* on the picture surface, regardless of whether the corresponding planes in the represented objects could be seen from a single viewpoint' (Antonova 2010: 105; emphasis in original). Her definition derives from Florensky's discussion of 'supplementary planes' in his 1920 essay 'Reverse Perspective', to be discussed below. This phenomenon was later also discussed by the artist Lev Zhegin and the writer Boris Uspensky in work published in the early 1970s, and according to Antonova, the idea 'constitutes a genuine contribution to the theory of “reverse perspective” that has so far remained unexploited (Ibid.). Antonova’s argument is persuasive in the sense that the idea of ‘simultaneous planes'
constitute a more accurate description of the reality presented in icons than the implications of the term 'reverse perspective' would tend to suggest, that is, as a simple reversal of the laws of linear and optical perspective. However, whilst this is true, the new definition is used specifically by Antonova to discuss the icon’s articulation of the perspective of God, who, being outside time, enjoys all perspectives simultaneously. What her view neglects is the sense of the performativity of icons, in which the ‘reversal’ rather concerns the reversal of the normative relationship between artwork and spectator inherent in linear and optical perspective as opposed to the dynamic sense of dialogue that is inherent in icon art.

1.28 MIKhIM and VKhUTEMAS
MIKhIM is the acronym for the Moskovskii institut istoriko-khudozhestvennykh izyskanii i muzeevedeniiia (Moscow Institute of Historical and Artistic Researches and Museology), (Florensky 2002: 10).

VKhUTEMAS is the acronym for Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), the Russian state art and technical school founded in 1920 in Moscow, and in many ways the Russian equivalent of the Bauhaus in Germany. VKhUTEMAS was a centre for the avant-garde and was associated with Suprematism and Constructivism. Malevich taught there from 1925, but had exhibited there as early as 1921. Key figures from the Russian avant-garde were on the teaching staff such as: Aleksandra Ekster, Gustav Klutsis, Ivan Klyun, El Lissitzky, Liubov Popova and Alexander Rodchenko (Lodder 1983: Chapter 4, 109–140).

1.29 The Planty
The Planty is a strip of parkland that encircles the centre of Kraków, occupying the area of the original city walls. It loops around the old town from the area just below Wawel Castle. It is a tree-lined network of pathways with benches and the German ‘megaphones’, or rather loudspeakers, that Kantor refers to would
have been mounted in the trees to broadcast official public announcements around the city.

1.30 Polish text from ‘The Essential Meaning of the Theatre’ in Theatrical Place

ISTOTNY SENS TEATRU

Teatr — twierdzę w dalszym ciągu — jest miejscem odsłaniającym, jak jakieś tajne rzeczne brody, ślady „przejścia” z „tamtej strony” do naszego życia.


(Kantor 2004: 387)

1.31 The venue of the first performance of The Dead Class

The classroom of The Dead Class was originally installed in a corner of one of the cellars of the Krzysztofory mansion on the corner of Kraków’s main square and Szczepańska Street. This is the location of the performance filmed by Andrzej Wajda in 1976 and is the most widely seen film version.

1.32 New scientific perspectives and twentieth-century Phenomenology

The new scientific conceptions of the nature of living things were not only of interest to Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty, in his 1950s lecture course on Nature refers to Uexküll along with the theories of other influential biologists such as George Ellet Coghill, whose Anatomy and the Problem of Behaviour (1926) had been influential in Gestalt psychology. These new conceptions were of interest to phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty because of their non-mechanical, anti-Cartesian and anti-dualistic conceptualisation of nature and the living creature. These philosophers found the naturalists’ work useful in their argument with the views of the mechanistic school of Behaviourism which was
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