

MINDING THE GAP – OF INDIFFERENCE: APPROACHING PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY WITH SALOMO FRIEDLAENDER (1871-1946)

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One of the playful – and therefore also deadly serious – debates that has continued to polarise discussions within and around the Performance Philosophy network since its inaugural conference in Surrey in 2013, is the question of whether, or how, or in what way, or for what reason, and with what effect, we should, or should not, "mind the gap" between the wor(l)ds 'Performance' and 'Philosophy'. There are those who argue in favour and those who argue against drawing a clear distinction between the two terms. I will not attempt to reconstruct the intricacies of the respective arguments or examine the sound reasoning on either side of this debate, nor will I begin to analyse the extent to which there might be (and probably is) some common ground between them.¹ My purpose is not to consider the content so much as the *structure* of this debate, namely a 'this vs. that' or 'either/or' structure, and to present this as an example of *polar differentiation*, which, according to the artist-philosopher, or performance philosopher, Salomo Friedlaender (1871-1946), corresponds to nothing less than the principle of all life-knowledge.

Central to Friedlaender's philosophy is the recognition of the importance of a *non-place*, a place of neutrality, which lies at the zero point of polar differentiation, i.e. between two polarities whatever they may be. According to Friedlaender's theory, which draws most explicitly on the works of Kant and Nietzsche, this mysterious place "in between", the gap, in other words, or zone of indifferentiation, is the very place from which all polarity stems. Its principle, the force from which differentiation emerges, is what Friedlaender refers to at times as "the nought of the world" or as the "absolute", as " ∞ ", as "I" or "ego" (but in a non empirical, non subjective sense), as "heliocentre" or, most frequently and famously, as " $sch\"{o}pferische Indifferenz$ ": Creative Indifference.

In what follows, I will briefly introduce the person of Salomo Friedlaender before outlining, in broad strokes, his central thesis. In so doing I will focus on how this important, though much neglected, author may be read as a significant source for contemporary Performance Philosophy and how his key concept, Creative Indifference, may perhaps be drawn on to introduce a different perspective, a middle-way of sorts, in the Mind-the-Gap debate.

Salomo Friedlaender - a very brief biography

Born into a liberal, middle-class Jewish family in 1871 in a small town called Golantsch near the Polish city of Poznań (which between 1793 and 1919, and thus at the time of his birth, was part of Prussia), Salomo Friedlaender began studying medicine in Munich before breaking off to focus on philosophy in Berlin and Jena, where he wrote his doctoral degree on Schopenhauer and Kant in 1902. Soon after that, Friedlaender moved to Berlin where he spent his time in Expressionist circles and worked as a freelance journalist, contributing to such periodicals as *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*. A prolific writer, throughout his life he published a number of books on philosophy (especially on Nietzsche and Kant but also commentaries on Max Scheler, Ernst Bloch, Henri Bergson, Hugo Ball, Albert Einstein, Jean-Paul Sartre and many more) as well as satirical texts and grotesque tales which he wrote under the pseudonym Mynona – the German word for anonymous, *anonym*, spelt backwards.

Friedlaender/Mynona (hereafter referred to as F/M) was a regular patron at the Café des Westens in Berlin's Charlottenburg and a prominent figure amongst the group of artists and intellectuals who convened there. He was personally acquainted with, amongst many others, Paul Scheerbart, Alfred Kubin, Erich Mühsam, Kurt Hiller, Walter Benjamin, Raoul Hausmann, Joseph Roth, Hannah Höch, Else Lasker-Schüler, Martin Buber, Ernst Marcus and Kurt Schwitters, and he became an inspirational reference for the emerging Berlin Dada scene (Lhot 2013, 33-76; Taylor 1990).

F/M belonged to the first generation of Nietzschean intellectuals. Georg Simmel personally helped get his book on Nietzsche published in 1911 (Friedlaender/Mynona 2009). Many of his writings, the satirical tales in particular, but also some journalistic pieces, can be read as bravely outspoken attacks on the darkly looming National Socialist threat after World War I. Eventually driven out of Berlin, F/M fled to Paris in 1933 to escape the Nazis, and it is there, albeit in abject poverty and ill health, that he was to write the largest proportion of his texts, which, due to these adverse circumstances, were slow to be published (and thus even slower to be received). He died in Paris in 1946 at the age of 75.

Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona: Performance Philosopher avant la lettre

F/M is of great interest from a Performance Philosophy point of view for many reasons and from manifold perspectives. Firstly, and most obviously, is the fact that he was both a serious philosopher (although never conventionally 'academic', and to this day his works remain largely neglected by academic philosophy²) as well as an extremely prolific writer of brilliant – and often

hilarious – satirical narratives otherwise known as grotesques (*Grotesken*). Moreover, these weren't simply two separate hats that he wore Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr Hyde-like at different times: artist-writer by day, discursive (albeit always playful) philosopher by night; rather, throughout his extensive oeuvre, the two styles of writing, and F/M's two identities, were welded together by his continuous concern to communicate the thought of Creative Indifference. In fact, in performative terms (though long before J. L. Austin's theorisation thereof), F/M was acutely aware of how, at their best perhaps, art and writing do well to embody the content they convey. Thus, the philosophical texts and grotesque tales can be read as *polar opposites*, which, when read together, demonstrate, i.e. *perform*, the theory they contain. (Similarly, Friedlaender's choice of the word *Mynona* as a pseudonym can clearly be read as a performative embodiment of the notion, explored at length within his theory, that "'I' is but a pseudonym for the eternally anonymous person" [Friedlaender/Mynona 2008, 160].³)

Self-described as a synthesis between Kant and clown (Haakenson 2009, 137, 144), without a doubt, F/M was a remarkably eccentric figure, even amongst his most bohemian peers, some of whom referred to him as the "Charlie Chaplin of philosophy" or as the "German Voltaire" (Frambach 2003, 114). The unique manner in which he merged literature and philosophy would alone suffice for him to qualify as an "artist-philosopher" (treading closely in the footsteps of Nietzsche, his other main philosophical inspiration next to Kant), or indeed as a 'performance philosopher' avant la lettre, but there is much more to his work which is of relevance to the present debate.

For example, F/M's writings and his central concept of Creative Indifference clearly played a significant role in helping to shape the Berlin Dada movement.⁴ And the same central concept (along with its counterpart, the notion of polarity or polar differentiation) is recognized as having been the key inspiration for the conceptualisation of Gestalt Theory and the related holistic Gestalt therapy practice to which it gave birth. Indeed, Friedlaender was personally acquainted with the bodywork teaching of Elsa Gindler in Berlin, as was Laura Perls (née Posener), one of the founders of Gestalt therapy theory alongside Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman. The work of Elsa Gindler can be traced back as the original source of the many important bodywork movements of the 20th century, including, in addition to Gestalt Therapy, the pedagogical teachings of Heinrich Jacoby, Elfriede Hengstenberg and Emmi Pikler, the bodywork therapy of Wilhelm Reich, Moshe Feldenkrais, Charlotte Selver's Sensory Awareness and many more.⁵ What is interesting here is that in the case of the Berlin Dada movement, it was the particular synthesis of philosophical, aesthetic, and political concerns in F/M's writing that clearly struck a chord with those around Richard Huelsenbeck et al. in the Berlin circle (see the Dada manifesto etc.). Whereas in the bodywork context, it was a different synergy that the founders of Gestalt therapy found so enlightening, namely the manner in which the philosophy of Creative Indifference connects metaphysics and human sensory consciousness.

From this we may deduce that it is the very *connecting force* at work in much of F/M's thinking and writing, through the notion of Creative Indifference, which seems to be most relevant in helping to create new forms of knowledge and practice. In beginning to explore the concept here, I will therefore focus on highlighting precisely this synergetic power. My hunch is that F/M's conceptual

framework – the very idea of Creative Indifference – presents us with a thought-provoking critical tool which we might, in turn, apply to the particular field of Performance Philosophy in order to draw some conclusions with regard to its own scope and potential.

Polar Differentiation and Creative Indifference

F/M's notion of Creative Indifference is intrinsically bound up with his concept of polar differentiation. The basic principle of polar differentiation may seem straightforward at first, and will certainly sound familiar to anyone brought up academically in the language of (post-) structuralism. The fundamental insight that F/M elaborates and articulates in manifold ways throughout all his writings is this: that "the most general characteristic of any possible phenomenon is the distinction, that is, difference, which can go to extremes" (Friedlaender/Mynona 2009, 98, my translation). Things acquire meaning by being distinguished from each other in terms of polar opposites. This foundational premise corresponds to a basic law of (linguistic) signification. It is, in many ways, similar to the principle of differentiation – différance - that lies at the heart (or should one say 'margins'?) of Jacques Derrida's later method of deconstruction. There are, in fact, a host of extraordinary analogies to be found between F/M and Derrida. But the motivation and telos of their respective theoretical constructs are arguably different – at least in terms of what they most obviously emphasise.8 Whilst Derrida's philosophical gesture relies on the recognition of binary opposites in order, first, to underline society's tendency to impose a hierarchy of value between the two elements of a binary structure, and then to question this blind attribution of value and to shake and destabilise its premise (through the method of deconstruction), F/M's recognition of the principle of polar differentiation is in some ways yet more radical. Indeed his purpose is not only (like Derrida's) to emphasise the basic structural equality between distinctive elements connected through polar differentiation (thus implicitly and automatically rendering inoperative any arbitrary prioritisation or hierarchy between them), but also, and above all, to point to the necessary theoretical (and I am tempted to say here diagrammatological) space of connection between them. It is this very space in between, the place of overlap where opposites touch, so to speak, that he suggests has been overlooked and neglected in its significance. F/M's early practice of deconstruction, if you like, (for his writing foreshadows even Heidegger's notion of *Destruktion* from which Derrida later takes his cue), is to shake the structural foundation of meaning by drawing us into the zone of indifference that necessarily exists alongside any difference, and which must exist, he contends, for structural differentiation to occur. "From time immemorial", he writes, "when dealing with polarities, more attention has been paid to the poles than to their indifference. Yet in this indifference lies the real secret, the creative will, the polarizing one itself, which objectively is absolutely nothing. However, without indifference there would be no world" (Friedlaender/Mynona 2009, 436, my emphasis).9

F/M was by no means the inventor of "Creative Indifference" per se, nor was he the first to be interested in the notion of 'indifference' in general, or even the first to think signification in terms of polarity. A full genealogy of the concept would require its reconstruction both in terms of its relation to the traditions of stoicism and scepticism as well as in terms of its position in the works

of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Schelling (not to mention later in the works of Husserl, Benjamin, Heidegger, Blanchot, Deleuze and Agamben, to name some of the most salient thinkers of indifference). ¹⁰ Polar thinking can indeed be shown to constitute something of a leitmotif connecting discoveries in the natural sciences and mathematics (Newton, Galvani, Brugman) with emerging philosophies of nature (Schlegel, Schiller, Goethe) throughout the Romantic period. ¹¹ But F/M was surely the first to make it so explicitly his central and most sustained subject of interest, and to do so, as highlighted above, not just in the form of a sophisticated philosophical treatise but also as an artist philosopher / performance philosopher avant la lettre. In what follows I would like to offer some preliminary pointers as to how the idea of Creative Indifference might apply specifically to the field of Performance Philosophy and the Mind-the-Gap debate.

Minding the Gap - of Indifference

Again, without taking the time here to reconstruct any of the proposed arguments on either side of this debate, let me posit for the sake of argument, that 'performance' and 'philosophy' certainly can be, and indeed have often been, made to constitute, in various discursive contexts, polar opposites to each other. That is to say that each has been defined precisely in contrast to the other. Now, according to F/M's discourse of Creative Indifference, polar opposites, however far apart or close to each other they may be, are always connected, always overlap or merge in the space that corresponds to the axial centre of indifference. What is more, this axial centre is not just geometrically speaking intermediary, but it is also and essentially 'creative', F/M tells us, because it is from this space that the very process or advent of differentiation occurs. The reason for this has much to do with F/M's digestion of Kant, and the fundamental recognition that knowledge (i.e. perception, signification), in order to be such, must stem from a subjective perspective and that the perceiving/knowing subject can never disconnect itself from the content of its perception or knowledge. Stated bluntly and all too quickly: insofar as knowledge exists only in the eye - or mind - of the beholder, that beholder necessarily takes on a performative role in the constitution of that knowledge; it cannot be 'thought out' of the picture. The subject is, therefore, (for Kant as well as for F/M), "heliocentre" of the world. But precisely because F/M positions it at the axial centre of polar differentiation, it is a subject without personal characteristics, for any distinctive characteristic would shift it either side of the void-like centre - making it something as opposed to anything. Of course this "Mann ohne Eigenschaften" (Musil), this personne without qualities, 12 brings the subject into resonance with a host of other non-characterisable figures that have populated modern theory, from Maurice Blanchot's neutral night (which only the artist philosopher - read again 'performance philosopher' - can bear to address), to Paul Celan's "Niemandsrose", 13 to Giorgio Agamben's "whatever" subject of the future. 14 In F/M's terminology, the subject is ANONYM(ous).

Can this characterless subject, Creative Indifference, that lies at the heart of polar differentiation, be brought into a meaningful encounter with what we have begun to call 'Performance Philosophy', I wonder? What if Performance Philosophy itself were to be positioned at the axial centre, the middle point (also referred to by F/M as the nought or void) *between* performance and philosophy? Thinking about it in this way could perhaps offer a further alternative, maybe even a way out of,

the Mind-the-Gap debate, insofar as it would allow us to conceive of a manner in which the two sides can be thought of as *both* distinct from each other *and* simultaneously indifferent.

There are, moreover, at least two further advantages of positioning the field of Performance Philosophy in this space of Creative Indifference. First, it provides us with a way of conceptualising (and thus defending perhaps more effectively) the fragile yet nevertheless insistent *openness* that has been associated with the emerging field of Performance Philosophy from the start. Indeed, conceived of as the place of indifference between 'Performance' and 'Philosophy', Performance Philosophy must not bear (i.e. be reduced or limited to) any *particular* characteristic; it must be allowed to take on many different (dis)guises and thus be free to move this way or that on the differential axis that distinguishes one 'P' from the other.

Secondly, conceptualising Performance Philosophy in terms of Creative Indifference may result in an unexpected twist. Instead of Performance Philosophy being thought of as an extremely modern, still emerging field, something that has come about as a result of a certain (fairly recent) history of academic discourse, as a synthesis, say, between progressive strands of contemporary philosophy and Performance Studies; instead of thinking of Performance Philosophy, in other words, as emerging at the tail-end of this evolution, approaching it in terms of *Creative* Indifference means recognizing its role in the very creation of its constituent terms. The consequence of this shift is, in turn, twofold. On the one hand it means locating the 'birth' of Performance Philosophy not in the very near present, or even recent past, but way back at the dawn of philosophy (which, by the way, is very much in line with the familiar and well established (hi)story of the birth of theory from its origin in theatre). On the other hand, approaching Performance Philosophy in terms of Creative Indifference means acknowledging its essentially 'creative' potential. As such, it becomes the very task of the performance philosopher not just to receive and digest the history of the two constitutional elements of her field, and not just to position herself, one way or another, in relation to them, but to contribute creatively to their very conceptualisation. What performance is or might be, what it does or might do, and what philosophy is or might be, what it does or might do, as well as how they relate to each other, to our (anonymous) selves and to the world, is still, and always will be, in the making. In other words: Do Mind the Gap, for it is not one.

Notes

- ¹ For a reconstruction of some of the main premises of this debate see, e.g., Cull (2014), 19ff.
- ² There are clear signs that this is about to change as publication of the complete works of Salomo Friedlaender/Mynona (in over 35 volumes) is currently underway under the editorial direction of Hartmut Geerken & Detlef Thiel. Translations into English of F/M's writings are, however, but extremely scarce to date.
- ³ "denn ,lch' ist nur Pseudonym der ewig anonymen Person." "Aërosophie" (1911), in Friedlaender/Mynona (2008), 160.
- ⁴ Friedlaender's philosophy influenced the Berlin Dadaist's ideas of the "new man" and of the "new community". See Benson (1987); also Haakenson (2009), 120.
- ⁵ To follow this genealogy in further detail is bound to be fruitful from a Performance Philosophy perspective as it brings the notion of Creative Indifference down to earth, as it were, and into the body, which is something that F/M ceaselessly underlines himself, for instance, when he states, in one of the grotesques tales no less: "Widersprüche zu balancieren ist eine äquilibristische Fertigkeit, und die menschliche Physis ist hierin geistreicher als die menschliche Psyche (...)". ("To balance contradictions is an equilibratory skill, and the human physis is much more spiritually equipped to do so than the human psyche." my translation). For more on F/M's relation to Gestalt therapy theory, see Wulf (1996) and Frambach (2003). For more on the genealogy and influence of Elsa Gindler's work, see Rothe (2013) and Geuter, Heller, and Weaver (2010).
- ⁶ Huelsenbeck ([1920] 1989) makes explicit mention of F/M and the concept of Creative Indifference. For more on F/M's connection to Dada, see Taylor (1990), 192f.
- ⁷ For a fascinating initial exploration of these analogies see: Thiel (2012), 163-225.
- ⁸ Both Friedlaender and Derrida have been criticised (in their respective historical times) for being apolitical. In fact, I am convinced that a thorough analysis can reveal and without much difficulty the political (and indeed progressive) relevance of both writers. In the case of the much better known Derrida, this has been pretty well established by now (see Blair 2007, McQuillan 2007). But in terms of critical reception, in the case of F/M, much still remains to be done on all fronts (Taylor 1990 provides useful groundwork with regard to the political in F/M).
- ⁹ Slightly altered translation from that quoted in Frambach (2003), 118. In F/M's original voice: "Seit Alters hat man beim Polarisieren mehr auf die Pole als auf deren Indifferenz geachtet. In dieser aber erst steckt das eigentliche Geheimnis, der schöpferische Wille, der Polarisierende selber, der objektiv eben gar nichts ist. Ohne ihn aber gäbe es gar keine Welt" (Friedlaender and Mynona 2009, 436).
- ¹⁰ William Watkin (2014) offers an impressively thorough and compelling analysis of the place of indifference in the works of Agamben in particular. Also very insightful on the politics of creative indifference (focussing on Walter Benjamin in relation to F/M, and Agamben) is Moran (2011).
- ¹¹ For more on this see Thiel (2013), 327f.
- ¹² The French language captures the point nicely in that the word for person, *personne*, means both someone and no-one. (An enigmatic thread leads from here to the pseudonym, Οὖτις, meaning "no-body" used by the Homeric hero Odysseus in his encounter with Cyclope Polyphemus. When attacked by Odysseus, Polyphemus shouts out in pain to the other Cyclopes of the island that "Nobody" is trying to kill him, so no one comes to his rescue. See Odyssey, book 9 (in the Cyclopeia).
- ¹³ "Gelobt seiest Du, Niemand" ("Praised be you, no one") ("Psalm" in Celan 2001, 27; 2005, 78). Also quoted in Moran (2011).
- ¹⁴ "The coming being is whatever being" (Agamben 2003, 1).

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Biography

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