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Introduction:
Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?
The Art of the Ephemeral in Eighteenth-Century France

The etymology of the word ephemeral, *ephēmeros*, denotes something transient, fleeting, not long-lasting.¹ In the arts, I argue that this notion can be applied to tangible requirements created to be experienced, rather than simply consumed (e.g. stage settings, symbols, and scents used during public celebrations); unique even when replicated with the same modalities (e.g. fireworks and of performances), and objects which represent the material arrangements of a more complex live-experience (e.g. dance costumes as indicators of movement).

Since the late nineteenth-century, progress in photo and video technology has allowed ‘immaterial’² forms of art to become enduring, sustainable, and collectable, changing our perspective of ‘ephemeral’ consumption. For example, think of the extensive photographic documentation of the Ballets Russes, showing us lavish costumes and experimental stage settings; or of the recorded material of Marina Abramovich performances, providing extensive visual information of the way she dresses and acts, and the audience’s reaction.

1 Cf. also the more articulated Italian definition of effimero provided by the Treccani Dictionary. All links were last accessed on 30 January 2025.

2 I use the words ‘immaterial’ as synonyms of ‘ephemeral’. A useful definition of ‘ephemeral’ or ‘immaterial’ forms of art, is the more articulated meaning of *beni non oggettuali*, proposed by the Italian anthropologist Alberto Mario Cirese in relation to artistic practices, works, but also human experiences that cannot be objectified (Cirese 2002, 68; Cirese, Clemente, ed. Molteni 2006).

If photo and video recordings do not allow reliving ephemeral experiences, indeed they facilitate their perpetuation, allowing preservation and replicability. They also provide visibility of ephemeral glimpses of life (and moments of history) that, if not objectified, would otherwise remain absent in collective memory. Recalling the title of this special issue, the media are now powerful in catching and documenting the ephemerality of a ‘here today’ moment, avoiding the ‘gone tomorrow’ process.

By contrast, the significance of ephemeral moments and artistic expressions that existed before the advent of these technologies remains challenging to trace, to understand, and to value. In the context of eighteenth-century France (including the Napoleonic Empire), through court feasts, theatre, festivals, and public events, ephemerality held a crucial place in entertainment, migration, and innovation transfer – along with being a key tool for exhibiting power. However, despite the pervasive use of ephemeral artistic practices across the century, an interdisciplinary conversation on the ‘communicative encounter’ (to borrow a definition from studies on contemporary theatre)³ between the immateriality of human actions (i.e. gestures, movement, vocalisation) and the materiality of the objects (i.e. costumes, sets, artworks) still represents a scholarly challenge. Studies on theatre history and literature, for example, do not often stray far from the text itself, despite a good half of the elements composing the theatrical event being immaterial.⁴ In the past decade of art history studies, aspects of the ephemeral have been mainly considered in relation to the fragile and provisional nature of certain art objects (Taws 2013; Wunsch 2024). Some compelling theoretical engagements about specific performative eighteenth-century moments have been provided by cultural historians who have also advanced socio-political analysis (Ozouf 1976; Darlow 2012) and discussed the theatricality of political events (Friedland 2002), but neglected artistic and performative considerations that

3 Sauter 2000.

4 In the context of French theatre, some theatre historians have made extensive efforts in problematising the unseen complexities of staging, also in relation to the political context (Frantz 1998; Frantz, Perrazolo and Piva 2013; Julian 2022), while others have focused on the symbolism of French power (Scholz and Schröer 2007). Specific studies on stage design are usually a precious source of information to reconstruct the immaterial aspects of performances, see for example De la Gorce 1997; 2005 and 2010; Sajous D’Oria 2007 and 2022. Cf. also Lemaigre-Gaffier 2012; Bourdin 2004 and 2010.

would be crucial to amplify the significance of the ephemeral as a result of material production and human knowledge.

The starting hypothesis of this monographic issue moves from Arlette Farge's socio-anthropological assumption that in the eighteenth-century we can find human experience in and in spite of ephemerality, since the human experience is not recorded in the permanence of material objects, but as traces of knowledge, beliefs, and connections (2016). Farge's point of view may be seen as the Ariadne's thread of this volume, specifically in her powerful statement that "dans l'éphémère, quelque chose subsiste" (Ibid.). Our research thus asks: what remains? How do we target and research what was ephemeral and contingent in the eighteenth-century? Why should we do it and how?

I argue that in order to exist, ephemerality needs materiality, since any creative process intersects with the material requirements that both artworks and performances need: materials, locations, settings, scripts, costumes, and even bodies. Therefore, from the materiality of the art object (or textual source), the historian can explore the dichotomy between material and immaterial, going beyond its aesthetic significance. Through this dichotomy it is possible to analyse the cultural and political meanings of the ephemeral, connecting – for example – artworks to social contexts and sociability, dance costumes to movements, locations to performances, public festivals to human reception and perception.

Perhaps, the fields of theatre and performance studies may be seen as those more immediately connected with the topic of ephemerality in the arts.⁵ However, the aim of this volume is not thematic, but highly interdisciplinary, with articles spanning from art and theatre history, to costume-making and performance studies. The volume approaches the different and multifaceted aspects of ephemerality by challenging boundaries and entanglements between creative disciplines⁶ and by extending the notion of the ephemeral to a wide range of examples providing multiple contexts where this is applied.

This collective investigation also points us towards further questions, reflecting on the long-term effect of ephemerality and how we deal with the relative paucity of sources. This methodologic hurdle has moved the research

5 Sajewska 2015; Schneider 2011.

6 Inspiring reference is the methodology Mark Ledbury (2000 and 2013) approaches in his studies on art history.

far beyond the aesthetics scope, shedding light instead on controversial habits couched in immaterial forms of spectacle. In this respect, this editorial project aims to foster a debate around the following question: may our failure to deal with the ephemerality of the past have excluded and erased certain groups or cultures from present day discourse?

The volume opens up with two art-history papers. In *Mais le Lendemain Matin...*, art historian Mark Ledbury discusses how the ephemeral was understood in eighteenth-century France, and asks how we can find (and define) the ‘afterlives of the ephemeral’ in French art. Specifically, in his paper he takes into account works by Gabriel de Saint Aubin, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Jacques-Louis David. Based on Arlette Farge’s remarks (2016), Ledbury uses three keywords: *trace*, *griffure*, and *incrustation* to explore the various ways the intensity and togetherness of ephemeral experience leaves its mark on visual art, by traces and various forms of accretion visible in artworks themselves. This article’s considerations of ‘ephemerality’ and ‘posterity’ are a useful *fil rouge* for the rest of the volume.

The leitmotif of researching ephemerality through ‘traces’ continues in the second paper by Noémie Etienne and Meredith Martin. Through visual, material, and textual traces they explore the presence and display of African children and artifacts in eighteenth-century Paris, digging up hidden meanings that artworks and objects show, but without fully telling. In exploring how such traces can evoke or visualize human lives and ephemeral events, the authors examine a paradox they term ‘spectacular blindness’. This article situates ephemerality within the dichotomy of visibility and invisibility. Although individuals and artifacts of African descent were prominently visible at the French court, they were seldom fully recognised, especially in the case of enslaved children, whose subjectivity and trauma were rarely acknowledged. Paradoxically, the pervasive visibility of these individuals rendered their humanity invisible to enslavers or transformed it into a tool for elite white self-expression and domination. Constantly-displayed, they became spectacular blind spots, and until recently, they have been excluded from most art historical narratives. Even today, we see their existence and depiction with denial and silence.

The three following articles delve into the idea of ephemerality within French theatre history. Ilaria Lepore connects it to the actor, the most replaceable aspect of a performance, even more so than a dramatic text or musical score. Inspired by reflections from the actor Talma, Lepore highlights the

emergence of a memorial sensitivity, fostering new forms of self-portrayal and identity narration for actors. This ‘awareness of the ephemeral’ becomes more pronounced as actors, like Talma, begin to define themselves apart from tradition. In severing the ties of heritage –, preserving and transmitting characters, costumes, attitudes, and traits – actors relinquish temporal continuity with the past, while simultaneously shaping their own future myth.

Renaud Bret-Vitoz examines Voltaire’s tragedy *Ériphyle*, an ‘ephemeral’ piece written after the success of *Sémiramis*. *Ériphyle* vanished from the Comédie-Française stage after a brief and failed run leaving only manuscripts and posthumous editions, in fact two very different versions, one of which was never staged. The play integrates allusions and political debates into its ancient, mythological plot. Bret-Vitoz highlights how *Ériphyle* employs the most fleeting aspects of performance, such as innovative stage sets and non-verbal elements, which were often incompatible with the technical conditions of the time.

Pierre Frantz explores how French Revolutionary exemplifies the ephemeral nature of theatrical experience as a component of the historical process. First, this theatre is non-existent today. Second, it constantly confronted the contradiction between its aspiration to be historicised as part of an eternal French Republic, and the reality of fleeting historical events. Its goal was to capture new customs, political dreams, current circumstances in performance, thus engaging in the ever-changing historical process. Theatrical performance newly played a crucial role, often fixing meaning and sometimes contradicting the text, through the interaction of actors, sets, and costumes as well as the performance, the audience, and the historical circumstances.

The conversation continues by going back to artworks and reflecting on David’s role as visual interpreter of the Revolution. Daniella Berman focuses on David’s project for a painting and Pantheonization ceremony honouring a virtually unknown child martyr, Joseph Bara, afforded by Maximilien Robespierre to cult status through Jacobin rhetoric. Specifically, Berman confronts the idea of ephemerality in relation to the materiality of the painting, reflective of the ceremony to which it is fundamentally linked. The article reinterprets the painting’s aesthetics alongside David’s stage directions for a celebration that never occurred. It posits that both the Revolutionary *fête* and David’s new visual language should be seen as ephemeral performance with the spectator co-creating meaning. The painting commemorates the unrealized ceremony depicting the apotheosis of a child martyr, rather than the death of

an individual. This article shows how the Revolution's contingency manifested materially and conceptually in the arts.

Papers by Emanuele De Luca and Alessandra Mignatti make the core of the conversation on ephemerality, since they both present papers on fireworks and temporary settings. De Luca discusses it through the activity of the Ruggieris, Italian firework makers settled in Paris. They worked both for public celebrations, as 'artificiers du roi de France' and for pyrotechnical performances held at the Comédie-Italienne, where the Ruggieris were provided the opportunity to introduce fireworks to indoor theatre performances. De Luca reconstructs the Ruggieris' story by describing the inventions that sparked the art of pyrotechnics in Paris. The article demonstrates how the ephemeral celebration of fire became a theatrical experience, subject to the logics of spectacle, but also to repetition and profit.

Mignatti instead moves towards the years of Napoleonic domination in Italy, focusing on how public celebrations in Milan were political acts of propaganda and diplomacy, designed to demonstrate power and assert new values. Public festivals also put forward a utopian vision of Milan, with ephemeral structures that foreshadowed a new urban layout and society. Mignatti explores the vision behind these projects by way of an analysis of archival sources and comparison of festive events from 1801 and 1803 focusing on the audience's sensory perception, along with the symbolism of the celebration itself. The article aims to fully comprehend the events and explore the political inclination to create consensus and its new suggested identity. Her analysis will allow reflection on the dichotomy between the ephemeral vs. the permanent and the historian's responsibility to perpetuate the latter through time.

With the article by Petra Zeller Dotlačilová we engage the challenge of researching ephemerality via one of the most tangible performance requirements: costumes. Her paper focuses on the theory and methodology of historical costume research, which starts with the garment in the archive. Using a comparative, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and international approach, she provides examples from a Franco-Swedish context that educates on costume's relation to movement in the past, its relation to theatrical lighting, and the overall effect on the audience. In Dotlačilová's article, it is shown that leaving aside the materiality of costume reveals more about long-lost performances.

The final two papers deal with what is by definition, the most 'transient' and 'ephemeral' of all the arts: dance. Olivia Sabee addresses Jean-Georges

Noverre's who defined pantomime ballet, or *ballet d'action*, as an ephemeral art. In his written work, Noverre argued that to describe on paper a ballet's movement was both inadequate – since pantomime ballet could not be expressed in language – and inappropriate – given the core feature of pantomime ballet, its passion, could not be recorded as discrete, repeatable steps. Yet, Sabe's article examines the values of ephemerality and posterity in the writings of Noverre, reconciling the contradictions inherent in Noverre's views on what he considers appropriate means of documentation even as he speaks to his future readers and dancers.

We close the volume with Cornelis Vanistendael, who approaches the end of the long eighteenth-century with the end of the Napoleonic Empire. He explores the ephemeral ballrooms constructed in Brussels for the official celebrations between 1814 and 1816 for the House of Orange-Nassau. As Vanistendael argues, in Brussels, balls represented not only moments of sociability, but also tools of propaganda that the monarchy used to support and reinforce their weak holds on new thrones.

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