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# theatre & the visual

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## Introduction

Experiences in the theatre are often characterised by memorable situations of looking. Theatre history abounds with plays about the pleasures and pains of picturing a world, and the social dramas of looking and being seen. What we see, in the theatre and elsewhere, is conditioned by the act of looking, where we look from, how we look, and why we look away. If we look askew at the theatre and its events, with a particular focus on visual experience, intriguing questions emerge, which this book investigates. How does the theatrical image – what is revealed or concealed in performance – produce effects? If we are accustomed to looking at bodies, what happens when they look back at us, in affectively charged theatrical encounters? How do images produce pleasure? What happens when an image inflicts pain, or hurts the viewer? Why are performed images seemingly more prone to shocking or upsetting audiences than

the spoken word? These and other questions prompt an analysis of the politics of vision, and suggest that theatre is a promising venue in which to train our gaze.

I argue that the act of looking in the theatre must be accounted for through an understanding of theatricality and visuality, two terms that highlight the contingency of making meaning in the theatre. This emphasis on the volatility of visual experience allows me to explore the intriguing political work facilitated by looking, searching, staring, and averting our gaze. A key argument of *Theatre & the Visual* is that our persistent fascination with looking and being seen – and the trouble these activities cause us – is significant to cultural engagement in general, but is pronounced in our responses to theatrical representation.

In Part One, I suggest that what historical subjects have seen in the theatre has been affected not simply by the events, acts, and identities produced or described by dramatists. Historical conditions of production enabled new ways of seeing and novel ways of making meaning in the theatre. I argue that vision itself has a history, which consists of dominant models for looking, as well as ‘visual subcultures’. The event of visual experience tends to remind viewers that the ways we look can be the basis for political engagement with the theatre and with the world. These arguments set the scene, in Part Two, for a study of the production of wordless spectacles, or events that privilege imagery over spoken texts, to suggest how audiences experience different affects when looking in the theatre. I will suggest that performance artists, especially, have found provocative ways to test

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the relations between theatre and the visual. Performances by Franko B, Annie Sprinkle, and Ron Athey, for example, forcefully challenge the primacy of the pre-written text, in favour of visually powerful live works. By troubling established hierarchies between the visual and the verbal in the theatre, they further muddy the ditch between word and image. Part Three balances this emphasis on the troubled pleasures that theatre offers, arguing that experimental performance explores the pain of looking as a means of staging the politics of the visual. Throughout, I emphasise situations of extremity as instances where the problems of vision are thrown into particular relief. A short epilogue asks how shocked perception is a litmus test for the historicity of any understanding of the relation between theatre and the visual, or between theatricality and visuality.

### **Hide and seek**

‘The visual’ seems to emerge – inevitably – wherever one looks in the theatre. This methodological problem is compounded by the central difficulty of separating out seeing from hearing in performance. Nevertheless, one of the key assumptions of this book is that the privileged status of written texts – and the attendant experience of listening to words – functions at the expense of a theory of visual perception in the theatre. The apparent marginality of visual perception in the theatre is suggested by the English word for theatregoers – ‘audience’ – whose root is the Latin *audire*, meaning ‘to hear’. Yet the theatrical endeavour is rarely (if ever) undertaken solely as an auditory experience.

Attending the theatre, an audience undergoes a jostling of sensory experiences; this tests the supposedly primary function of receiving and deciphering a recited text. The theatre always troubles the relation between the visual and the textual, specifically by asking how the written word – the published script, programme, and other textual remnants of live performance – is usually privileged to the detriment of the sensory experience of visiting and engaging with a theatrical production. Artists and theorists alike have noticed this troublesome potential in the theatre. In his essay ‘Writing Silence’ (2010), the British director and performer Neil Bartlett states that in (primarily visual) forms such as mime, pantomime, puppetry, dance, physical theatre, or performance art – but also, crucially, in ‘straight’ theatre – ‘what we feel and see is happening to those people up there under the lights is just as important as what we can hear them saying’ (p. 5).

The theatrical experience depends on complex relationships between vision and other forms of sensory perception. Upon the scaffold of textual production and delivery, a team of creators often builds a further system of visual signs, including scenography, dramaturgy, set and lighting design, costume and make-up, marketing content, and the blocking or choreography of performers’ movements. Visual signs conspire to produce meaning for the viewer, as they emphasise or undermine the words that may be spoken by performers. Other types of experience, including the material, temporal, social, and environmental conditions of theatrical production and reception, supplement these stimuli.

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Therefore, in even the most traditional theatre productions, the text wrestles – for primacy, or equanimity – with other modes of representation and perception, including what is shown or concealed in the visual world of the theatre.

However, problems arise if we over-determine the visual as the primary experience in the theatre, over and above the perception of words and other non-visual signs. I encourage a more nuanced understanding of the relation between the verbal and the visual, as different models of representation, because the attempt to privilege one system over the other is determined by the political, cultural, and social assumptions of any particular moment. As W. J. T. Mitchell argues in *Iconology* (1987), the relation between image and text is an ideological one: ‘a struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of [a] culture into the heart of theoretical discourse itself’ (p. 44). Rather than simply analyse, organise, or fix the hierarchy between image and text, then, we must historicise the relationship, and examine the wider cultural implications of one order of representation feigning primacy over another (pp. 42–44).

Images in traditional theatre are often crafted from stage directions, or directorial interpretations of play texts. These images can give rise to vivid experiences that leave their mark upon audiences. In this book I analyse a series of instances where the visual is emphasised as an important aspect of the theatrical experience. Later examples include performance art events, which some readers might disregard as unrepresentative of general experiences of theatre’s exploitation of the visual. Experimental practices may depart from the

conventions of traditional theatre, but performance art, dance, puppetry, mime, and other frequently visual forms are nevertheless conditioned by theatrical modes of production and reception. A key theme of this book is that what we see in the theatre is an effect of what is concealed. Similarly, it could be said that in any performance, what we see often depends upon relationships to theatre that are evoked but not explicitly staged or performed.

The visible elements of a theatrical production are therefore ghosted by ideas, identities, and histories that may evade full representation. This is not to say that theatre's inability, reluctance, or refusal to show certain things is a weakness. On the contrary, theatre often plays powerfully with the anomalous visual effects of hiding and revealing. The conclusion to Henrik Ibsen's realist drama *Ghosts* (1881), for example, presents the disease-wracked remnants of Oswald Alving seated in an armchair, facing the audience. In Ibsen's stage directions, a sun rises to frame the aftermaths of Oswald's inheritance of his father's syphilis. Without moving, and blind to the distant glow of a sunrise, Oswald demands, 'Mother, give me the sun.' The statement creates a powerful, enigmatic verbal image, evoking both the gravity of parental inheritances – moral, psychological, physiological – and a lexical obscurity that indexes Oswald's madness. 'Oswald seems to shrink in the chair', reads Ibsen's stage direction; 'all his muscles go slack, his face is without expression, and his eyes stare vacantly.' The image suggests youthful vivacity being sapped from Oswald's body, and gives way to a visual event that exceeds the play's pale

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horror, namely the grim spectacle of Mrs Alving rifling hurriedly through her son's pockets, searching for poison capsules in order to euthanise him. Standing back, hands twisted in her hair, Mrs Alving looks on with dread and terror as her son slumps against a vivid blaze of light. As he utters his final, enigmatic words, 'The sun ... the sun', the curtains fall upon the disastrous scene (pp. 101–2).

Ibsen's horrific denouement gestures to the cultural impact of showing social ills, and dramatises taste and decorum as meagre strategies for concealing them (signified in Pastor Manders' earlier attempts to overwrite the family's historical indiscretions, by preserving their secret status). Family histories are made manifest in the catastrophic image of the son's madness and impending death. When the audience watches Osvald's decline into syphilitic incapacity, we bear witness to the invisible weight of a family's hidden histories: its tales of debauchery, adultery, incest, and duplicity that might otherwise evade visibility. Ibsen's play was a landmark text in modern drama, and established a vogue for realist theatrical representation in the twentieth century. In its final moments, *Ghosts* privileges the audience as a group of individuals caught up in the act of looking, as the narrative of concealment and exposure coheres into a visually charged, scandalous image.

Playwrights have toyed persistently with the drama of hiding and revealing, and the peculiar pleasures this tactic invokes. While the tactic of hiding and revealing has been central to theatrical representation at least since classical Greek drama, its significance in terms of sexuality

has become very clear since the development of modern theatrical realism. Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) is a classic play that also relishes the visual possibilities that emerge from dramatising the attempt to keep secrets hidden. In two initial pages of notes to the designer, Williams painstakingly describes the room in which the play's action takes place, creating a visual tension between important architectural signifiers and the secret lives that reside within the scenery. The setting is a bed-sitting-room in a plantation house in the Mississippi Delta, decorated with ornate balustrades and Orientalist kitsch, which reflects the tastes of the room's previous occupants, 'a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together' (p. 5). Some of the notes describe things the audience is instructed to see, such as a double bed, suggesting the forbidden romances the room has housed. This suggested history contrasts with the relationship between the main characters, Brick and Maggie, whose overwrought but sexless marriage drives much of the play's dramatic conflict.

The playwright's notes also describe elements that cannot be seen directly: 'the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon', a haunting that Williams compares quixotically to 'a quality of tender light on weathered wood' (p. 5). If Williams deploys games of hide and seek towards a politically invested strategy of show and tell, he does so in order to make his audience 'see' what is hidden, namely Brick's fraught concealment of his apparent homosexuality. Like *Ghosts*, the play's dramatic

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effect depends on the intense emotional charge of the phenomenon of the open secret.

Maggie is a harridan. Her husband Brick is conservative and uptight, and has descended into alcoholism since the death of Skipper, a friend he was unable to address as a lover. ‘When something is festering in your memory or your imagination,’ Maggie tells him after the first mention of Skipper, ‘laws of silence don’t work, it’s just like shutting a door and locking it on a house on fire in hope of forgetting that the house is burning’ (p. 18). Maggie gestures to the ‘ghosts’ that Brick cannot allow to be made manifest, and the seemingly paradoxical theatrical effects of ostentatious acts of hiding. The audience hears more than it sees, but a secret image looms large upon the scene. ‘Silence about a thing just magnifies it,’ Maggie says, highlighting the way that events the audience doesn’t quite see are nevertheless subject to signification in the dark recesses of the play (p. 18).

These two canonical plays suggest there are political dimensions to what is shown and what remains hidden in the theatre. As Mrs Alving states, ‘it’s not only the things that we’ve inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs’ – the ‘ghosts’ that wreak havoc with the doomed characters when secrets are disclosed – ‘outed’ – in the play (p. 61). In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, however, what we never see raises political questions, by gesturing enigmatically to conditions of experience that resist full representation: covertly, yet with powerful dramatic effects. Specifically, while the spectacle of homosexuality is never seen in *Cat on a Hot Tin*

*Roof*, the play dramatises the space of the closet – and the differing yet related ways in which the character (Brick) and the playwright (Williams) inhabited it.

Seeing homosexuality in mid-century drama might have invited the censor's red pen, so sexuality – like the 'closet' – is shown to the extent it remains hidden (secret, that is, but showily so). Similarly, although *Ghosts* appalled early critics, we never quite see the 'degenerate' practices or the most 'dissolute' characters that fuel the play's ignominious sequence of events. Ibsen and Williams highlight the particularity of an audience's responses to performance. They gesture to the contingency of vision as a crucial influence upon the meanings produced by reception. Our practices of seeing are thoroughly and irremediably conditioned by the places from which we look, and by our constitution as historical subjects.

### **The contingency of vision**

As these preliminary examples suggest, *Theatre & the Visual* considers the political implications of the visual in the scopic regime governing theatrical culture. 'Scopic regime' is a term used by Martin Jay and other theorists to discuss the historical breaks between successive ways of looking. Scopic regimes govern what we look at, how we look, and why. The notion of a 'regime' of the 'scopic' – the latter from *skopein*, a Greek word meaning 'to look at' or 'to view' – signals the understanding that vision is governed by political logics. The term suggests that the ways we view the world are never neutral, but can be examined according to the ideologies that underpin the specific place and time from which



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