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Scenographic Distance

The Postmodern proliferation of worldwide mass culture has produced an insatiable demand for popular entertainment that has the potential to enhance or subsume traditional theater forms. The elaborate spectacle of film, video, television, the internet, theme parks, and even shopping malls increasingly compete with theatre for audiences all the while even newer diversions are created. Dennis Christilles describes this dilemma as an on-going quest to find "that which makes the live theatrical experience in our electronic-information driven age something more than a quaint artifact for an ever dwindling, elite audience (19).

In our attempt to understand what theatre must do to survive in the new millennium it may be helpful to re-examine theater's appeal as an aesthetic entity and its fundamental relationship to its audience in light of the development of postmodern style. Understanding the aesthetic relationship created between spectator and stage may allow us to glimpse some practices that will help theater compete for the audience's attention in postmodern culture.

Aesthetic Distance

Aristotle was the first to recognize the aesthetic nature of theatre and described in his Poetics the "disinterestedness" of the spectators to the drama. Aristotle did not mean that the audience was uninterested in the drama but instead recognized that the fundamental difference between art and reality is a psychological buffer that allows the spectator to become both psychologically engaged in a work of fiction while remaining emotionally protected from its effects.

This phenomenon of aesthetic "disinterestedness" was examined further by Anthony Ashley Cooper (Lord Shaftsbury) in his Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, Etc.; Samuel Taylor Coleridge who described it as the audience's "willing suspension of disbelief" in his Biographia Literaria; and Immanuel Kant in Critique of Judgment. In his 1912 essay "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle" Edward Bullough expanded this concept of aesthetic engagement to encompass the phenomenon of "distance." Bullough maintained that this was more than a physical or temporal distance and "That all art requires a Distance-limit beyond which, and a Distance within which only, aesthetic appreciation becomes possible" (106). Bullough also states:

One of the best-known examples [of distance] is to be found in our attitude towards the events and characters of drama: they appeal to us like persons and incidents of normal experience, except that that side of their appeal which would usually affect us in a directly personal manner, is held in abeyance. This difference, so well known as to be almost trivial, is generally explained by references to the knowledge that the characters and situations are 'unreal,' imaginary. (97)

And:

Distance, by changing our relation to the characters, renders them seemingly fictitious, not that the fictitiousness of the characters alters our feelings towards them. (98)

Daphna Ben-Chaim in her Distance in the Theatre, The Aesthetics of Audience Response explores Bullough's theories of "psychical distance" and develops them into her concept of aesthetic distance using the following definitions.

----Under normal circumstances the real has no "distance": it is perceived passively unconsciously and real.

----When an actor is seen as a character, this phenomenon is what we might call "normal" aesthetic distance, embracing a wide range of drama, including fantasy as well as naturalistic plays.

----Increased distance is consistent with the perception of an actor as an actor (involving increased awareness of the conventional nature of theatre, awareness of fictionality, and awareness of the conditional mode of belief).

----When the character only is seen, all awareness of fiction is lost, there is a loss of distance, what might be called delusion or hypnosis.

----When the actor is seen as a person (not as an actor), then there is a complete loss of distance; as Sartre says, when the actor seems to be looking at and into the spectator, he becomes a person who threatens the spectator's privacy. (99)

Ben Chaim also notes that:

Decreasing the viewer's awareness of fiction may produce a more intense involvement in the fictional world and engagement with its "reality," a more intense identification with characters and involvement in their "inner lives," greater empathy (projection of one's own emotional life into the character-images), a climax of the emotional experience, or all of these at once. (77)

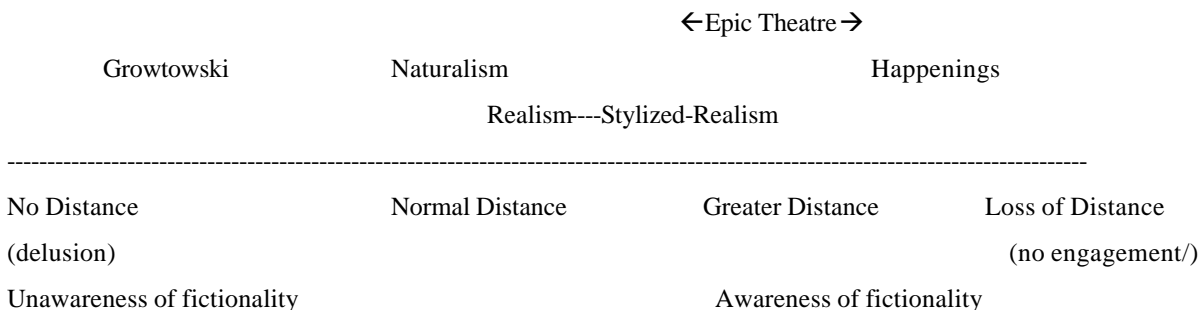
Ben-Chaim explains that the degree of distance may vary from one theatre to another according to the specific strategies of the playwright, director, actors, and designers. Further she maintains that the degree of distance alters from one moment to the next within any individual play and that aesthetic distance is actually a continuum of artistic engagement that is in a constant state of flux throughout the performance (79). To Ben-Chaim the deliberate manipulation of aesthetic distance is, to a great extent, the underlying factor that determines theatrical style in the 20th century. To illustrate her point Ben-Chaim examines the stylistic strategies of leading theatre practitioners and movements including, Grotowski, Artaud, Brecht and Happenings.

Artaud, she reminds us, wanted his Theatre of Cruelty to assault the audience with violent physical images, sounds, pictures, and movement that would pulverize the audience's sensibility (41). Grotowski felt that to compete with the photographic media of film and television the theatre must exploit the physical closeness of the actor and audience. This closeness to the actor would allow the audience to add olfactory and tactile sensations to the theatrical images (41-42). Brecht wished to avoid this carrying away of the audience's emotions and prevent strong emotional and empathetic attachment only using these in controlled ways to shift the audience from empathic modes of engagement to more reflective or critical modes and then back again (27). Happenings constantly shift between the real and

the fictional and so create distance by continually altering the set of theatrical conventions (46-47).

Ben Chaim then attempts to place these practitioners on a continuum according to the degree of distance they strive to create for their audience.

As an example:



This degree of engagement becomes for her the most distinguishing factor in understanding modern theatrical styles. Now if we accept Ben-Chaim's theory that the relative nature of aesthetic distance is a major factor in the art and style of 20th Century theater then how can this help illuminate postmodern drama and postmodern scenographic practices?

Postmodernism

The term postmodernism may have first appeared in Daniel Bell's End of Sociology in 1960. Later in the 1970's art critics actually began to label certain styles of art as "postmodern." Unfortunately the term has ambiguous definitions. Some theorists use it to refer to that which followed modernism; others use it to indicate an active revolt against modernism. Theorists and historians have suggested that the emergence of postmodernism parallels the development of information technology. First came the telegraph, then the telephone, phonograph, radio, film, television, and now the internet. The pace of information dissemination has become nearly instantaneous and what once took weeks or months now takes seconds. The resulting barrage of information has been credited with the effect of tearing down international barriers through the globalization of economies through multinational corporations and for fueling the post-communist (some say "post-capitalist") consumer based society's demand for popular entertainment. Just as modern culture had to

cope with the industrial revolution, so the postmodern generation must contend with the revolution in information and media (Atkins 131).

So what are key stylistic elements or commonalities in postmodernism as it relates to theatre? Steven T. Sartorre in "Toward a Postmodern Scenographic Theory" lists five elements that he has identified in postmodern theory and theatre.

Artistic Indeterminacy

Order in Chaos

Historical Reference (Pastiche & Parody)

Populism or Popular Culture

Aesthetic Flexibility

Artistic Indeterminacy

Postmodern theatre does not acknowledge that there is a single definitive interpretation of a given text. Neither does it seek to enforce a specific meaning on a text, but instead actively encourages the audience to perceive a multitude of meanings and attain a variety of levels of understanding. This multiplicity of perception is accomplished by combining disparate elements and contrasting styles without attempting to apologize, hide, or unify them into single artistic whole.

Order in Chaos

Indeterminacy in methodology suggests a similar indeterminate result--or chaos. Postmodern indeterminacy makes it impossible to absolutely dictate the audience's aesthetic involvement at any given moment in a performance. While the moderns acknowledged that no two theatrical performances are identical and each member of the audience has a unique experience, postmoderns such as Robert Wilson and Peter Sellers celebrate this indeterminacy and revel in the uniqueness of chaos.

Historical Reference (Pastiche & Parody)

Many postmoderns feel that there are no new themes or ideas to be explored and so look toward recycling past works. But these recycled works are viewed as innovative because they are a pastiche or parody of the former work created by fusing contemporary

images and issues into the performance creating a hybrid of the original work. They are often created by appropriating images from media, history and fine art and re-presenting them as new hybrid art objects with diverse levels of meaning inherent in their structure.

Populism or Popular Culture

This hybridization of past works is in many ways accomplished through the use of the contemporary media and technology to re-present the old as new. The influence of information technology tends to dissolve the boundaries between traditional art forms, popular culture and even mass media. This tearing down of boundaries between traditional art forms and popular entertainment renders them all equally valuable. The assault of the information age technology into our lives is also reflected in the mirror of theatrical performance.

Aesthetic Flexibility

Ultimately the elements listed above are predicated on the postmodern desire to break from the unified stylization of the modern period. While modernism explored a variety of different styles (surrealism, realism, Epic Theatre, etc.) it chose to unify these individual styles through a system of harmonious stage conventions. Postmodern theatre chooses instead to juxtapose different styles and conventions to create multiple levels of meaning and understanding. However, these chaotic elements tend to be bound or unified through a thematic treatment and/or use of metaphor. The postmoderns are less interested in the strong emphatic relationship of the naturalist and realist styles, not because they eschew it, but more importantly because they understand the wealth of expression permitted by an acceptance of all theatrical styles.

These elements are inextricably intertwined and impossible to separate into discrete concepts. However, each of these elements acknowledges the relative nature of aesthetic distance in engaging the audience's attention in the attempt to provide a multiplicity of meanings and a juxtaposition of style and practice. It is how the postmodern scenographer explores these commonalities in light of the affect on aesthetic distance that will allow us understand postmodern scenographic possibilities.

Postmodern Scenographic Distance

Ben-Chaim maintained that the deliberate creation of specific aesthetic distances was a significant factor in determining 20th century dramatic styles. Sartorre's elements of postmodern style show that postmodernism's eclectic layering of different styles, popular culture, and technology serve to create not one uniform aesthetic distance, but a swinging pendulum of distances all within one evening of theater. In addition, a postmodern aesthetic distance does not attempt to unify the audience's aesthetic appreciation but allows it to vary according to different levels of understanding, and artistic indeterminacy. These differences become the significant distinction between the modern and postmodern styles.

The postmodern style due to its synthesis of mass media technology, popular culture and historical reference consequently tends to emphasize the spectacle in the drama making our understanding of the aesthetic distance of postmodern spectacle essential to understanding where theater may be heading. (For simplicity I will reduce this lengthy phrase "aesthetic distance of postmodern spectacle" to "scenographic distance.") The incorporation of these influences also diminishes the boundaries between the various theatrical art forms. The older film and televised entertainments were easily differentiated from theater because they lacked the third dimension of depth and couldn't facilitate interaction between actor and audience. However, the new theme parks combine live actors with filmed, robotic and even holographic characters, chemical sprays to enhance smell, pressured air jets to stimulate the tactile senses, motion controlled seating offering kinesthetic experiences, and interactive controls that allow the spectator to participate in and control, to a limited extent, the action of the ride.

Are these new forms of theater? Has Disney brought to virtual life Edward Gordon Craig's "ubermarionette"? How much of this new technology can theatre absorb before it stops being theatre and becomes a new hybrid art form entirely? The answer can best be determined by addressing the relative aesthetic distance created by any such hybrid form. Currently these themed events tend to engage us physically and emotionally not intellectually and aesthetically. As the technical sophistication continues to develop these entertainments may well come closer to creating an aesthetic experience in the sense of true theater. However, if the technical sophistication increases to the point where the action takes on a life of its own it may lose its audience totally within the fiction becoming the "Holodeck"

adventures of the Star Trek series. Then like Grotowski's ritual drama it may cease to be theatre.

So it seems that a true theater must exist between the two extremes of no distance and too little distance. It must suspend the audience between a perception of fictionality and non-fictionality of the unreal and real. Postmodern theater can embrace these rich technologies but not to the extent that it is the spectacle that the audiences dwell on. Spectacle can become a more active and vital component in theater without overshadowing text and performer. Spectacle can become more active and vital to the drama commenting and reinforcing the action and the actors. This is one of the ideas behind postmodern "Action Design" as Delbert Unruh explains:

Maybe this paradox is what lies at the heart of what we call theatre and everything we recognize as "Theatrical." When we know what we see on stage is both real and not real-- is both happening and not happening--in the same instant we have the essential element of the theatrical experience; and maybe the clearer the paradox is presented to us--the more contrast and tension there is-- the more satisfied we are with the experience. We perceive that it is 'theatrical' and we enjoy it. (26)

Julie Taymor's recurrent use of masks and puppets in her productions, particularly The Lion King, is one example of this postmodern paradox. Taymor often designs the actor's face and body to be visible under their articulated masks and puppets confronting the audience with both the real and the unreal juxtaposed to each other. Audiences must blend reality with fantasy to create a heightened theatricality and appreciation of this fiction. Unruh sees this tension as an inherent quality of theater practice.

Production style does not have to be unified; it can be built up synthetically out of contrasting elements. The idea, paradoxically, is not new. It is as old as drama itself. Action Design simply calls to our attention the fact that the root of drama is conflict-- not harmony. Therefore, when the visual equivalents of conflict--contrast and tension-- are used to build up the visual environment the resulting experience is far more powerful and is truly theatrical. Action Design rediscovers and reuses this theatrical truth. (25)

In this statement Unruh illustrates that Action Design exemplifies the nature of scenographic distance as a fundamental element of postmodern theatre describing it as the conflict or tension in recognizing both the real and the not real in theatrical performances. This heightened theatricality may be an effective means of keeping theatre alive and viable in the age of mass media. By understanding the desired scenographic distance for a given theatrical performance we can use this to create the most appropriate scenographic environment for our respective audiences.

The architectural environment in which the theatre and stage is housed cannot be removed from the aesthetic experience and contextualizes the scenographic distance of a performance. Bullough maintained that the artificiality of the picture frame and the size of a painting help to keep the viewer at proper aesthetic distance. Theatrical arts (including opera and dance), unlike painting and sculpture, are inextricably identified with the dimensional human form and therefore more apt to empathetically and sympathetically engage their audiences, reducing the awareness of the unreal. However, theatre has its own "framing" devices, which help its audience to recognize the fictional life and therefore help create a variety of aesthetic distances.

For some the ornate proscenium frame with its origins in two-dimensional scenic representation helps to reinforce the fictionality of theatre. The trend of mid 20th century American theatres (particularly university theaters) of painting these "picture frame" prosceniums dark colored or building theatres with unadorned prosceniums reveals an attempt to reduce the aesthetic distance. This attempt to mitigate the fictionality of the proscenium stage mirrors the rise of actor-centered psychologically realistic texts in the mid-century, which still predominates in America today. For a recent Tony Award show the designer, Roy Christopher, created two movable proscenium arches: one an ornately gilded baroque arch and the other a simple unadorned black arch to frame the various scenes of the ceremony. His referential treatment of these two philosophical approaches to theater served to comment on the proceedings and provide a richer context for the ceremony.

The stage curtain is another traditional theater convention that helps to create scenographic distance in the theater. The ornately swaged grand drape was one of the first things the audience saw when entering the theater and signaled the start of the performance when it rose, opened or fell (for the Roman audiences). Due to economic necessities and the

growth of apron, thrust, arena, and found stages the curtain has all but disappeared. Where the stage curtain still exists it may not be used for specific shows or is often a simple dark colored unobtrusive velour. Where it was once perceived as a common theatrical convention, it is now often used today as a novel scenic device to remind audiences of the theatricality of the event they are about to see. The 1984 production of Frankenstein on Broadway used an elaborately swaged curtain, which was made of shiny black plastic, partially as an economic exigency, but also to take a traditional form and make it strange or new to the audience keying them into this modern retelling of the myth.

Physical distance and audience/stage spatial relationships are major factors in manipulating scenographic distance. Extending scenery through the proscenium arch--in effect breaking the fictional boundary-- and decreasing the proximity to the audience, can decrease aesthetic distance. William Condee surveyed a number of American designers comparing proscenium stages to open stages in an attempt to discover how architectural space dictates theatrical style or if style can be made to work in any architectural space. He discovered that "The differences in approach between the open stage and the proscenium stage come down to a matter of taste of the theatre artists involved and the practical necessities of the architectural form" (15). Ultimately, the aesthetic flexibility of arena and thrust stages can serve to either increase or decrease distance. Bringing actors closer to their audience, providing them with contemporary furniture and clothing serves to decrease distance. At the same time the scenery must often be fragmentary or suggested and the audience itself becomes part of the *mise-en-scene*, which tends to increase distance. The flexibility of these scenographic elements along with performance and text will ultimately determine the aesthetic distance at any given time in these alternate spaces.

The many different attempts to conceive the "perfect" theatre from the Appia's Hellerau to Gropius' Total Theatre indicate that theatre practitioners have been aware of the role of architecture in creating the appropriate scenographic distance. In the 1960's the high cost of theatre rental and a shift in social and political climate sent many young theatre artists in search of new performance spaces including coffee shops, warehouses and city streets. The use of found spaces and non-theatrical performance places also tended to reinforce for the audiences the fictive or virtual world before them by throwing out the traditional theatrical architecture and stage conventions and juxtaposing fictive performances in real

places and rendering the performance "strange." Theatre groups like El Teatro Campesino left the physical theatre altogether traveling to rural towns and fields to promote political awareness of the plight of migrant workers. Here in Poland we find Gardzienice (a collective partially inspired by Grotowski) who travel to rural villages exchanging food for collectively inspired performances. These are ritually charged performances using strong emotion, screams, nudity, and extremely close proximity to the audience to decrease the scenographic distance.

Another postmodern scenographic direction is a simplification of stage spectacle as evidenced by the work of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby and Jaraslov Malina. Nick Kaye describes this minimalism as a "retreat from 'content' . . . an increasingly self-absorbed focus upon form and structure in its own right." and ". . . as an attempt to throw the viewer's efforts to read the performance sharply back upon itself" (46). Delbert Unruh describes the work of Action designer Jaraslov Malina as "more interested in the delineation of human motivation and action than in elements of spectacle" (23-24) and at the center of Action Design theory is the "a concentration of emphasis on the work of the actor" (25). This is evidenced by Malina's design for Tennessee Williams' Orpheus Descending at Ohio State University. Malina, in direct contradiction to the playwright's realistic description of the store's architecture, conceived the setting as a metaphor for the Orpheus legend. He located the confectionary shop with its twinkling lights at the top of a simple spiraling staircase to represent redemption and heaven. Death, in the persona of the cancerous husband, enters from below. This staging parallels the dramatic action of the heroine's attempt to reach happiness and salvation before being dragged into hell.

Dennis Christilles goes so far as to describe Action Design as the "other actor" in a play. "It can be both protagonist or antagonist depending upon the moment. It may narrate, converse, object, ridicule or champion the stream of information that the audience experiences on other levels" (20). In either case we see several of the key elements of postmodernism being used to alter the degree of aesthetic distance in the mind of the spectator. Both Unruh and Christilles go on to describe Action Design as intensely collaborative in practice. But what is the nature of collaboration in postmodern scenography?

The 20th century witnessed a trend toward specialization in playwriting, acting, directing and design while fostering collaboration to create a harmony of style through a unity in stage conventions. The trend in postmodern production is against these traditional unifying directions and possibly the specialization of theater artists. When the term postmodernism is applied to theatre; names such as Robert Wilson, Jo Anne Akalaitis, Andre Serban, Peter Sellars and Julie Taymor inevitably come to mind. If we examine their productions it becomes clear that each of these artists has a highly developed and refined visual sensibility. These author/director/designers often create their own scripts or appropriate other scripts significantly reworking them to fulfill their own ideas. Some of these theatricians act as their own designers while others work intensively with the same designers over many years to realize their particular vision. In all cases their productions are imbued with a strong visual style and aesthetic presence. This allows for uncompromised and deeply personal visions to be realized on stage much like the rich iconographic canvases of the Cubist and Abstract Expressionists. Will a postmodern 21st century reverse the specialization of the previous century creating the author/director/ designer as "auteur" in charge of creating highly personal fictive worlds?

It would be an interesting experiment to place the new postmodern theatre artists on Ben-Chaim's continuum. The difficulty would be to pin these artists to any one position as their widely swinging pendulum uses the entirety of aesthetic distance rather than one harmonious position.

In terms of scenographic distance, increasing the audience's awareness of the conventions of theatre--the mechanics--won't always create a greater awareness of fictionality. Contemporary audiences become accustomed to these framing devices quickly and they become accepted an even expected conventions. The eclectic use of theatrical style: Epic, surrealist, realistic, etc. can foster a wide variety of aesthetic distances. Postmoderns revel in taking the strange and making it familiar or taking the familiar and making it strange to our respective audiences. I say "respective," for the theatrical sophistication of a given culture greatly affect the scenographic strategy. What might appear novel and strange to an American audience might seem common and mundane to the German. To enhance the awareness of the fictive process we often borrow staging practices from other countries. For example, Brecht's appropriation of Asian stage conventions was novel in Germany and then

later in America. As this practice was disseminated it became commonplace and even expected in certain theatrical companies and styles of performance. Likewise Brecht's use of exposed lighting instruments and stage equipment was once unique until many theatres adopted the practice making it less effective in creating the awareness of fiction.

The constant use of new and novel styles, practices and technologies, often in seeming contradiction to each other, is an effective means of jolting the audience into recognizing the virtual reality of theatre. The introduction of these new conventions will for a time render theatrical performances novel and engaging, but in the postmodern culture this becomes an ever-increasing search for the new and unfamiliar, which must eventually take the scenographer beyond theater and art forms for inspiration. This insatiable desire for the new and novel is a hallmark of postmodern culture and potentially it's curse. This is a never-ending search and with the increasing speed of mass media and information how can the scenographer keep up?

Ultimately the postmodern audiences will be exhausted by the assault on their postmodern senses and a new style of theater will emerge to supplant it. This is the lesson of history, but perhaps now we are in a position to be aware of a theatrical style while we are still in the midst of its creation. The speed and proliferation of information may be making history not what happened 20 years ago, but rather 20 minutes ago. With instantaneous mass marketing flooding our homes, the next artistic trend and movement may be decided created and packaged with the promise of delivery before we even know we need it.

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