

Theatre Research International, Summer 1995 v20 n2 p114(5)

The surveying of hell. On theatricality and styles of thinking. Schramm, Helmar.

Abstract: The correlation between the history of theatre and the history of science in the Western culture is examined. Indications of the theatre model were scientifically determined from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The structure which conceptualizes perception, movement and language as the three cultural elements in scientific and theatrical analyses is examined. A new approach to theatre history is proposed.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1995 Oxford University Press

In 1529 Agrippa von Nettesheim criticized the 'futility and uncertainty' of science. Indeed, the triumphant rise of European culture and science has always been accompanied by shadows of dissent. While, on the one hand, the rhapsodic shattering of reason was heavily criticized, on the other hand, equally sharp criticism was raised against the hermetic spirit of universal systems. The accepted authority of scientific knowledge was continually served a Lenten repast, and mighty edifices built on theory have bowed to the weight of doubt, crumbling into ruins of truths. The path which we call 'progress' is overlaid with traces of our own actions in the image of Sisyphus in Hades, who is condemned to push a huge boulder uphill. He is forever forced back to the beginning of his task, because of the perfidious nature of the stone.

Voices questioning the idea that the institution of organized knowledge represents the only true values have become more insistent in the dynamic, experiential space (Zeitspielraume) of the contemporary world. Bound to a high speed culture of heterogeneous systems of language, movement and perception, and equally bound to the fractal realities of appearances cultivated by the media, the provisional determination of one's position has become a natural precondition of the search for knowledge. Science, according to Roland Barthes's succinct formulation, must justify the place from which it speaks in a radically new way.(1) This refers not only to a specific presence of mind in the current labyrinth of temporal and spatial interplay; it also hints at the traumatic, repressed layers of the past. But how can the texture of history be decoded, read and re-read from a contemporary perspective? This is the background against which I should like to elaborate some thoughts that revolve around a single question: How can the place from which one speaks - both within contemporary epistemology and the criticism of it - be determined in theatre studies?

1.

In 1588 Galileo Galilei gave a lecture at the Florentine Academy on the form, location and scope of Dante's hell.

However difficult and worthy of admiration [. . .] endless star gazing and dangerous sea voyages have enabled man to determine the distances between the heavens, their quick and slow movements and their relation to each other, the size of the stars, distant ones as well as near, the position of the earth and the seas - things which entirely, or in large part, can be perceived by our senses - how much more wonderful must we judge the exploration and description of the location and nature of Hell which, hidden in the innermost depths of the earth, is beyond the purview of our senses and known to none from experience.(2)

Referring to Dante's *Comedia*, Galileo gives an exact location for the setting of Hell which, with its sequence of concentric circles diminishing in diameter as they approach the centre of the earth 'resembles an enormous amphitheatre'.(3) In Galileo's description of the terrifying regions of Hell, we discern a palpable delight in the power of the art of geometric surveying.

Galileo's lecture merits attention insofar as it documents a time of transition. Dante's conception of a huge *theatrum mundi* (a condensation of a multiplicity of philosophical, theological, geographical and astronomical knowledge that existed at the end of the Middle Ages) signalled the approach of a new cultural epoch. But Galileo's geometrical interpretation of the great Dantean model at the end of the Renaissance announces a fundamental re-ordering of the sciences and arts. Where is the decisive difference between the two texts to be found?

Dante moves through the cosmos of knowledge condensed into a heaven and a hell as an active, participating player. His is a wanderer's description. But Galileo observed the geometric, spatial structure of Hell from a well calculated distance. His

representation of it is the record of an observer who has a clear, overall view of the object from a fixed vantage point.

This is the basic motif of the dream of the total overview to which science has oriented itself increasingly since the seventeenth century. After Descartes's *Discours de la methode* (1637), the idea of a universe composed of unquestionable certainties or truths became programmatic. The precondition of this concept was the methodological drawing of a sharp distinction between the random (physical) world of experience and a calculable (rational) world of systematic representation. The structure of representation was based on the principles of exclusion and repression. The unpredictable, paradoxical or spontaneous must be kept at a distance from generalizations derived from theoretical frameworks. The heterogeneous had no place in the system of Reason which was held to be all-powerful. Accordingly, the formalization of thought was bound to the stylization of three cultural factors: perception, movement and language - and these were conceptualized according to the extent to which they could be conceived and proved useful. To a certain extent, they were artificially synchronized into one theoretical whole which transcended their spontaneous interaction.

Herein lies a hint as to the analogical, structural correlation between the history of theatre and the history of science. The consequences of such a correlation for the discipline which we now call 'theatre studies' have yet to be worked out. No other traditional, cultural phenomenon contains the artificial, stylized interaction between perception, movement and language to the same extent as theatre. Significant analogies exist between the determination of the location of the ideal observer in the representation of science and the spatio-temporal organization of seeing, speaking and acting in the canon of European theatre forms.⁽⁴⁾ This is why the trauma of repression and the pathology of exclusion inherent in the European history of science can be described in an original fashion from the perspective of the medium of theatre. In other words, theatre studies would be able to intensify its search for the place from which it speaks by uncovering traces of its structure in the history of science as well. Theatre studies could thus make discoveries that would not be possible from a reading obtained from within the restricted orientation of one discipline.

Would this not lead to an 'overloading' of the concept of theatre? Would it not entail a distancing from the 'real' object, the theatre as art? Not at all.

(a) Etymological studies have shown that the presently accepted notion of theatre as art is the outcome of a gradual strategy of inclusion. "The word *theatrum*, or "showplace" was still in use at the beginning of the seventeenth century to describe any grand or magnificent place where something worthy of attention occurred.'⁽⁵⁾ Thus, for example, during the Renaissance, the concept of the *theatrum anatomicum* developed on a parallel with the theatre. Almost simultaneously with Galileo's 'The Geometrical Surveying of Hell', Abraham Ortelius published a pioneering work, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, in 1584. Other works on the most widely varying scientific subjects were published under the title *Theatrum* until well into the eighteenth century. It was, however, principally in philosophy and the sciences that methodological reference to the theatre continued to be made. Such references cannot be interpreted simply as superficial metaphors, for it should be noted that there is an etymological link between 'theory' and 'theatre'. Both concepts originate in the idea of an observer who actively watches.

(b) Initially, science and art formed an ambivalent unity (one only has to think of Leonardo da Vinci). The classical system of art is a historical construct which was only established in the eighteenth century and promptly challenged in a radical way by the *avant-garde* at the end of the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, the attack against the contemporary order of knowledge gained in influence - culminating in proposals to found science anew as art.

2.

Artaud's *Fragments d'un journal d'enfer* (1927) intimates an idea that, in his manifestos on theatre, intensifies into a vision which celebrates the destruction of the traditional borderlines of theatre. Artaud proposes a world of experience whose dynamic is strongly opposed to the principles of mimetic representation,

Je sens sous ma pensee le terrain qui s'effrite, et j'en suis amene a envisager les termes que j'emploie sans l'appui de leur sens intime, de leur substratum personnel. Et meme mieux que cela, le point par ou ce substratum semble se relier a ma vie me devient tout a coup etrangement sensible, et virtuel. J'ai l'idee d'un espace imprevu et fixe, la ou en temps normal tout est mouvements, communication, interference, trajet.⁽⁶⁾

Jacques Derrida drew on his subtle readings of Artaud to radicalize his own philosophical essays. In *Le Theatre et son double*, Derrida sees 'un systeme de critique ebranlant le tout de l'histoire de l'Occident plus qu'un traite de la pratique theatrale'.⁽⁷⁾ Derrida focused on Artaud's intense consideration of the 'limites sillonnant la theatrale classique (represente/representant, signifie/signifiant, auteur/metteur en scene/acteurs/spectateurs, scene/salle, texte/interpretation,

etc.)(8) The structuring principles of such boundaries can be found not only in the arts but also in all areas of Western culture - its religions, its philosophies and its political systems. Jean-Francois Lyotard, following similar lines, has shown the significance of the totalizing boundaries inherent in the classical model of the theatre of representation.(9)

In terms of the orientation of theatre studies within the present framework of science and culture, there are, in my opinion, three directions:

- i) As an Arts Discipline, it must take up Artaud's idea and radically question the traditional boundaries in theatre arts. If the discipline defines its institutionalized destination solely by referring to institutionalized theatre it is, in effect, an act of self-betrayal.
- ii) As Cultural Studies, it can make an original contribution to the opening up of areas of history which have so far been systematically 'overlooked'. In such a case, it is also naturally linked to the idea of transgressing institutionalized borders. However, it is essential to expose the function of the organization of the theatre model beyond the theatre itself. Theatre historiography must, to a certain extent, determine its position by means of the spatio-temporal constellation sketched out by Feuerbach when he distanced himself from the Hegelian approach which: 'is a conception of exclusive time, rather than one of simultaneous, heterogeneous space. The system knows only subordination and succession; it knows nothing of co-ordination or coexistence.'(10) Incidentally, similar considerations are to be found in Jacques Le Goff's essay, 'L'Histoire nouvelle', wherein he emphasizes that there are significant methodological parallels between geography and history with regard to the connection between spatial and temporal dimensions.(11) The comparative trait applied here can also be projected onto the historical space of the present, the virulent simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. In this way, the circle that binds together cultural-historical and intercultural research methods is completed.

- iii) As Media Studies it can compare the technical projection of 'reality' by the media (medialer Schein) to the archive of cultural techniques involving the interplay of perception, movement and speech which are bound together in traditional theatre. This, too, suggests an epistemological shift the entire extent of which can only be hinted at here. Exactly two hundred years after Galileo's 'Geometric Surveying of Hell', Immanuel Kant praised the philosophical art of surveying as follows:

We have now not only journeyed through the land of Pure Reason, carefully observing every part of it, but also measured it and determined the proper location of each item. But this land is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unchangeable borders. It is the land of truth (an exciting name), surrounded by a wide, stormy ocean, which is the real seat of appearances.(12)

Research into the 'reality' presented by the media (medialer Schein) must take into account the enormous impulse Nietzsche's 'programme of philosophical embarkation on the high seas' provides in the quest for knowledge.

3.

It thus follows that the epistemic place of speaking cannot be clarified solely by the determination of the fields of objects. The conclusions that must be drawn from the relation between theatre history and the history of science simultaneously affect most profoundly the manner of conducting theoretical reflection in every possible sense. In a way, it is a question of establishing a new 'style of thinking' in the practical processes of research. Ludwik Fleck introduced this concept in 1935 with his book *The Constitution and Development of a Scientific Fact*.(14) The work was forgotten, and its significance for the history of sciences was only discovered in 1962 with the publication of Thomas S. Kuhn's influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.(15)

Fleck's idea was to examine examples of medical records of syphilis cases in different historical eras. In doing so, he exposed deep contradictions between the acquired knowledge of the time and the actual variety of differing observations. He demonstrated the extraordinary persistence of these systems of opinion and proved how established theories and language systems are linked together in a 'harmony of deceptions'.(16) In this respect, his understanding does not go beyond that which can be found in Wittgenstein. However it is significant that Fleck brought a sociological component into the epistemological problematic with his concept of social patterns of thinking, or the 'thought collective' (Denkkollektive).

An individual belongs to a number of thought collectives. As a researcher, the individual belongs to the community in which that individual works and often unconsciously conjures up ideas and developments which soon become self-evident and not infrequently turned against their originator. As a member of a party, race, class or nation, and so on, the individual simultaneously belongs to other collectives. Should an individual find himself by chance into any society, he will soon

become a member of it and bow to the pressure it exerts.(17)

The pressure exerted by society upon academic and scientific activity does not remain without consequence in terms of the content of such activity. Words, formerly simple designations, become slogans; sentences, formerly simple observations, become battle cries. This completely changes their conceptual and social value: they acquire magical powers, for they no longer function by way of their logical meaning - or even, as often, against it - they rather function by mere presence.(18)

From Ludwik Fleck's work, one can observe the extent to which the sociological aspect of the business of science contains theatrical elements, and how so-called factual knowledge reasserts itself in acts of 'orchestrated learning by rote'(19) achieving recognition. It is clear that any attempt to establish a new style of thinking will meet with great resistance. Theatre studies might have an advantage in this respect, in that it can derive certain conclusions concerning the situation of the organization of the discipline itself from its contact with a theatre praxis which is distant and yet familiar to it. In conclusion, perhaps crucial methodological impulses can be obtained from those experimental artistic projects whose entire creativity springs forth in the assault against method.

(translated by Fiona Greenwood)

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *L'Aventure semiologique* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).
2. Galileo Galilei, 'Erste Lektion vor der florentinischen Akademie uber die Gestalt, Lage und Grosse von Dantes Holle' (Due Lezione all'Accademia Fiorentina circa la Figura, Sito e Grandezza dell'Inferno di Dante. Lezione prima), Galileo Galilei, *Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Anna Mudry (Berlin, 1987), p. 50.
3. *Ibid.* p. 54.
4. A more elaborate description of this concept of theatricality can be found in Helmar Schramm, *Carneval des Denkens. Studien zur Entfaltung theatralischer Perspektiven in philosophischen Texten des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*. Forthcoming.
5. Peter Rusterholz, *Theatrum vitae humanae* (Berlin, 1970), p. 15.
6. Antonin Artaud, 'Fragments d'un journal d'enfer', (*Oeuvres completes. Tome 1. Nouvelle edition revue et augmentee* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 133-44.
7. Jacques Derrida, 'Le Theatre de la cruauté et la cloture de la representation', *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 341-68.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
9. Jean Francois Lyotard, 'La peinture comme dispositif libidinal', J. F. Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, (Paris, 1973), pp. 227-68. See also, in the same collection of essays, 'La dent, la paume', pp. 89-98, and 'Plusieurs silences', pp. 269-90.
10. Ludwig Feuerbach, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelischen Philosophie' (first published in *Hallesche Jahrbucher fur deutsche Wissenschaft und Kunst*, 1839), ed. W. Harich, W. Schufenhauer, *Gesammelte Werke. Vol. 9, Kleinere Schriften II*, (Berlin, 1970), p. 18.
11. Jacques Le Goff, 'L'Histoire nouvelle', in *La Nouvelle Histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff (Paris: Editions complexes, 1988), pp. 35-76.
12. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Leipzig 1930), p. 24.
13. As Norbert Bolz put it in *Die Welt als Chaos und Simulation*. Munich 1992, p. 29. See also Bolz, *Eine Kurze Geschichte des Scheins* (Munich 1991).
14. Ludwik Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache. Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv*. (1935) eds. Lothar Schafer and Thomas Schnelle (Frankfurt a.M., 1980).
15. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. (Chicago, 1962).

16. Ludwick Fleck, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Helmar Schramm is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Leipzig.