

Performance Paradigm 5.1 (May 2009)

Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking, Maaïke Bleeker (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008)

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Maaïke Bleeker's stimulating exploration of visuality in theatre is a welcome addition to performance studies theory. Bleeker provides a comprehensive summary of conceptual approaches to looking and seeing (or not) furthering these with her own thoughtful analysis. 'Visuality' is a slippery concept to encapsulate but Bleeker manages to make it accessible without losing the complexity. This is a book relevant to scholars and others and advanced students who wish to grapple with how to think about what is seen.

The book builds carefully from the claim that "visuality happens" and as a process that defies simple objectification. The fundamental starting point of the theatrical event is how to navigate gaps in reception. So too with theoretical investigations of how to bridge "the one seeing and what is seen" (2), and the discussion of these key issues is expressly philosophical. Since this extends to questioning assumptions about the positioning of the subject in theatrical (cultural) spaces, it does seem that once again the intricacies of thinking in performance studies are usefully productive for other disciplines.

From the outset one of the most interesting threads in *Visuality in the Theatre* for this reviewer is Bleeker's approach to the senses. She finds the idea of perspective in the visual arts useful in understanding how senses are conditioned to interpret representation as real-like or at least like real (12). Perspective provides a symbolic mode for aligning how the senses perceive and receive the world including theatre but are orientated to do so within culture.

It is important not to reduce visuality to what happens verbally in performance, and this can instead become a process of translation. Accordingly Bleeker approaches theory in relation to contemporary performances in Europe. These allow Bleeker to explain theoretical ideas through art works and to explain how art produces theory. The interchange between theory and practice is approached in a dialogue with the meanings of the art works and this is a great strength of this book. While some works may be unfamiliar to Australasians, their style is recognisable through the oeuvre of Australian contemporary performance groups and imported festival shows. Bleeker's examples of productions of classics like *Antigone* pose no obstacle. Rijnder's staging of *Antigona* is deemed by Bleeker to make visible the connection between normative values that arise from a point of view and an "ethics of vision" proposing alternative values (56). Kunzmann's installation *Picture Description/Explosion of a Memory* facilitates an exploration of Lacanian ideas of spectatorship and the psyche. Alternatively, the analysis appreciates that an absence of a fixed viewing position afforded by the flattened-out visual text as landscape, may allow a spectator to embrace its inherent freedoms and not seek to impose a structure of meaning. A production called *Double Track* provides Bleeker with a way into exploring the viewing subject's absent body in the phenomenology of perception (172 (Leder)). Bleeker explains that

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“sensory systems” all intersect to produce the visible world and interconnect with perceptual processes in the subject as the unifying site (176).

Bleeker draws on Peggy Phelan’s seminal ideas on seeing and disappearance, and how “We always see less than is there” (18) to ponder blind spots in the scopic field. The dominance and pre-eminence of psychoanalytical approaches within studies of seeing is evident in the space accorded these within the book. Nonetheless the threads linking seeing and sensing responses to performance that underpin some early discussion are drawn together in the last chapter. Although not explicitly considering bodies and embodiment, these are tantalisingly in and out of frame throughout. My own explorations of how bodies see bodies in action, however, find that what is bodily received, like other subjective experience, only becomes unambiguously accessible to someone else through language of and about physical reactions.

Those interested in contemporary performance generally recognise that it has the potential to reinvigorate aesthetic experiences and perception more broadly. Bleeker remains respectful of claims by others that it can develop “a process of undoing predetermined points of view” (23) although these might seem to reaffirm the twentieth-century idealistic notion that art can bring about change in the world. Similarly she acknowledges theory that argues for (feeling) presence in contemporary performance arising from a belief that art heightens experience. In Bleeker’s framework, however, the “presence-effect” might be more about focus in looking (21).

In chapter 10, Bleeker proposes a method for analysing visuality in theatre and via the contrasting possibilities of four productions of the same text, Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Meanings emerge from the differences in design and staging but also from their similarities. Music can generate the impression that “a ‘you’ who can hear what an ‘I’ on stage feels” although an enacted character at least provides clues in the staging that are integral to its visual language (193). But contemplation of the experience of feeling raises again the difficulty of establishing what or if the other feels. The instability of bodily expression and thus the need for interpretation is exposed in the contrast between embodied identities in different productions. This reveals the potential richness of thinking about the relationship between hearing and feeling. Spectators see expressive bodies in performance and this implies that they feel in relation to what they see. Claims for general experience among spectators have long been eroded in the politics of what spectators bring to their engagement with a performance. It remains open-ended whether a spectator responds to a performer’s display of what can be taken to be feelings or, more feasibly, he or she becomes caught within a larger whole of visuality created by the elements in a production. What is crucial is the capacity to engage with what is seen in performance in meaningful ways to enrich understanding of the visual experience. I really enjoyed reading this assured book not least for its respectful and thorough consideration of the scholarship of others. This book provides a major reference source on the topic of visuality in performance scholarship and pedagogy.

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