

THEATRICALITY: A CRITICAL GENEALOGY

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ABSTRACT

The notion of theatricality has, in recent years, emerged as a key term in the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies. Unlike most writings dealing with theatricality, this thesis presents theatricality as a rubric for a particular discourse. Beginning with a case-study of a theatre review, I read an anti-theatricalist bias in the writer's genre distinctions of "theatre" and "performance". I do not, however, test the truth of these claims; rather, by deploying Foucauldian discourse analysis, I interpret the review as a "statement" and analyse how the reviewer activates notions of "theatricality" and "performance" as objects created by an already existing discourse.

Following this introduction, the body of thesis is divided into two parts. The first, "Mapping the Discursive Field", begins by surveying a body of literature in which a struggle for interpretive dominance between contesting stakeholders in the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies is fought. Using Samuel Weber's reframing of Derrida's analysis of interpretation of interpretation, in Chapter 2, I argue that the discourse of the field is marked by the struggle between "nostalgic" and "affirmative" interpretation, and that in the discourse that emerges, certain inconsistencies arise. The disciplines of Theatre, and later, Performance Studies in the twentieth century are characterised, as Alan Woods (1989) notes, by a fetishisation of avant-gardist practices. It is not surprising, therefore, that the values and concerns of the avant-garde emerge in the discourse of Theatre and Performance Studies. In Chapter 3, I analyse how key avant-gardist themes—theatricality as "essence", loss of faith in language and a valorisation of corporeality, theatricality as personally and politically emancipatory—are themselves imbricated in the wider discourse of modernism.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the single English-language book, published to date, which critically engages with theatricality as a concept: Elizabeth Burns's *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and Social Life* (1972). As I have demonstrated with my analysis of the discursive field and genealogy of avant-gardist thematics, I argue that implicit theories of theatricality inform contemporary discourses; theories that, in fact, deny this genealogy. Approaching her topic through the two instruments of sociology and theatre history, Burns explores how social and theatrical conventions of behaviour, and the interpretations of that behaviour, interact. Burns's key insight is that theatricality is a spectator operation: it depends upon a spectator, who is both culturally competent to interpret and who chooses to do so, thereby deciding (or not) that something in the world is *like* something in the theatre.

Part Two, “The Heritage of Theatricality”, delves further, chronologically, into the genealogy of the term. This part explores Burns’s association of theatricality with an idea of theatre by paraphrasing a question asked by Joseph Roach (after Foucault): what did people in the sixteenth century mean by “theatre” if it did not exist as we define today? This question threads through Chapters 5 to 7 which each explore various interpretations of theatricality not necessarily related to the art form understood by us as theatre. I begin by examining the genealogy of the theatrical metaphor, a key trope of the Renaissance, and one that has been consistently invoked in a range of circumstances ever since. In Chapter 5 explore the structural and thematic elements of the theatrical metaphor, including its foundations, primarily, in Stoic and Satiric philosophies, and this provides the ground for the final two chapters.

In Chapter 6 I examine certain aspects of Renaissance theories of the self and how these, then, related to public magnificence—the spectacular stagings of royal and civic power that reached new heights during the Renaissance. Finally, in Chapter 7, I show how the paradigm shift from a medieval sense of being to a modern sense of being, captured through the metaphor of a world view, manifested in a theatricalised epistemology that emphasised a relationship between knowing and seeing. The human spectator thus came to occupy the dual positions of being on the stage of the world and, through his or her spectatorship, making the world a stage.

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