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“The emptiness of this stage signifies nothing:” The Material as Sign in Modern Theatre

Cormac Power

Theatre is an art form which has often been defined by its materiality. The things that are represented on the stage are very frequently the objects that are actually used to represent them; the human body, chairs and tables and much else besides may be materially present on the stage. In very general terms, this material basis of stage representation seems to distinguish theatrical experience from reading a novel or watching film. Characters onstage speak from and move around particular points in space, whereas those on film or in novels do not impose themselves on specific spatial points beyond the screen or the page. That said, the audience's relationship to the stage's materiality has been theorised in many different ways. In this paper, I would like to examine some different approaches to theorising materiality on the stage, and to suggest how some modernist theatrical practices have pre-figured a semiotic understanding of the object as sign. While charting the relationship between modernist stagecraft and materiality would be a considerable undertaking, I am setting out to reflect broadly on some conceptions of the material, before turning to my central example, Peter Handke's play *Offending the Audience*.

There has been a long-standing tradition within the theatre that distrusts, or is uncomfortable with the stage's materiality. The playwright Eugene Ionesco, described his uneasiness with theatre's materiality with the admission

it was the presence on the stage of flesh-and-blood people that embarrassed me. Their material presence destroyed the fiction. I was confronted, as it were, by two planes of reality—the concrete, material, impoverished, empty, limited reality of these living, everyday human beings, moving about and talking on the stage, and the reality of the imagination, the two face to face and not coinciding, unable to be brought into relation with each other; two antagonistic worlds incapable of being unified, of merging. (Ionesco cited in Esslin 1980: 137)

Such is Ionesco's apparent disdain for the "material," it may be surprising, given this statement, that Ionesco was to become famed for his plays, part of a tradition to which Martin Esslin has attached the generic term 'Theatre of the Absurd'.¹ This uneasiness with materiality has a long tradition in the theatre. In his treatise on drama, Aristotle clearly prioritises the importance of the poet's text over the physical circumstances of its enactment. In the nineteenth century, a number of English critics held that Shakespeare's plays were experienced more authentically through the act of reading than the act of performance. The relationship between what Ionesco calls 'the reality of the imagination' and the reality of the 'everyday human beings' who move about the stage, has been a source of difficulty in establishing theatre's aesthetic credentials. However, Ionesco's view of theatre's materiality-as-crude helped to shape his stage aesthetic. Far from trying to conceal the stage's materiality, or simply writing novels or directing films instead, Ionesco used the stage's crudity to his advantage. He saw that the stage could create enlarged and exaggerated pictures of the world precisely because of its material ungainliness. In his play *Rhinoceros*, there is no attempt to conceal an element of the ridiculous implicit in actors pretending to be characters onstage; most of the characters in the play turn into rhinoceroses. Theatre seemed perfect to Ionesco for representing the grotesque. His aim was to 'create a theatre of violence—violently comic, violently dramatic' (1980: 142).

In the context of artistic modernism, of which Ionesco could be said to belong, theatre's materiality became an especially important issue for twentieth century theatre-makers. Throughout the arts, modernist artists were investigating the distinctive and 'essential' qualities of their chosen art forms, and many theatre practitioners were doing the same. The development and increasing popularity of film injected a sense of urgency into investigations of theatre's distinctiveness. The material foundation of theatrical representation became a key concern. Polish theatre auteur Jerzy Grotowski theorised and put into practice an aesthetic that posited materiality as the essence of theatre:

¹ Martin Esslin applied the epithet "Theatre of the Absurd" to a number of post-war playwrights in a book of the same title, first published in 1961. Esslin argued that a number of playwrights, including Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter—and Ionesco—shared a belief that the human condition is irrational, their plays reflecting a wider loss of faith in the progression and purposefulness of mankind.

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion. (Grotowski 1991: 19)

Grotowski’s conception of the ‘Poor Theatre’ reflects a wish both to emphasise the direct immediacy implied by the ‘perceptual, direct’ actor-audience relationship, while simultaneously paring away the unnecessarily ‘showy’ aspects of theatrical display. Much of what Grotowski sought to ‘eliminate’ included those elements that were most likely to draw a spectator’s attention *away* from the experience of the actor’s presence. In much conventional drama, make-up, autonomous costume and self-contained stage-space, are among the traditional means for theatre to exhibit or represent characters and narratives, drawing the spectator’s attention to some “other” fictional world and away from the immediacy of the performance event.² By getting rid of what he saw as unnecessary clutter on the stage, the core actor-audience relationship would be revealed as the foundation stone of Grotowski’s theatre.

Grotowski and Ionesco represent two contrasting attitudes to the materiality of the stage. Ionesco confesses to having been embarrassed by “the presence on stage of flesh-and-blood people,” yet for this very reason he sought to accentuate it. Grotowski, however, saw in materiality a path to theatre’s salvation in the face of what he saw as film and television’s vulgarity. Yet Grotowski preferred to pare theatrical representation down to the minimum, to create what he described as a “holy” exchange between actor and audience. However, while Ionesco and Grotowski disagreed about what theatre should be for and what theatre should be like, they seem to have shared a view that the perceptual relationship between an audience and the actors and materials on the stage, is direct and unmediated. Theatre’s distinctiveness, by this account, is founded on the material reality of the medium; being so much more than words on a page, or images on a screen.

² While the Polish Laboratory Theatre did stage productions in which the actors wore specially selected “costume”, Grotowski’s aversion towards “autonomous costume” relates more to the use of costumes as an external indicator of character. Thus, in the production of *Akropolis* (1966), all the actors were dressed in simple sack-cloth, allowing greater focus on the internal processes of actorly revelation as opposed to the outward illustration of “character”.

Running parallel to those aspects of modernist theatre which prioritised materiality and presence, was a developing set of ideas and practices that would challenge the notion of a direct and unmediated stage-audience relationship. In the 1970's and 1980's, semiotics, or the study of signs, was increasingly being explored as a way of analysing theatrical performance. Keir Elam's book *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* became the first comprehensive text on the subject to be published in English in 1980. However, as far back as the 1930's and 1940's, a group known as The Prague School Structuralists was already applying semiotic principles to theatre analysis. Their first principle theorised the semioticisation of everything on the stage. An object, or an actor's body onstage, when analysed semiotically is not, as Ionesco described, "impoverished" and "empty," but charged with meaning. Semiotic discourse would propose that, when watching a piece of theatre, the audience do not merely see objects and actors, but an array of theatrical *signs* which are constantly conveying meaning(s). The semiotic approach to performance analysis tends to highlight "textuality" over materiality; in reading the theatrical sign, the spectator's attention will be drawn towards conditions and references *external* to the theatre event itself. As Colin Counsell offers a general explanation of reading the "cultural text":

When reading any cultural text—a play, painting or poster—we do not spontaneously create a means of interpreting it but employ the instruments our culture makes available. We call on our experience of other texts; not only simply other plays, paintings and posters, but discourses and sign systems, iconographies and ideologies, using their logics to weave the work's parts into a single whole. (Counsell 1996: 14)

Such an approach to theatre analysis seems to direct our attention away from the direct materiality of the performance event. While Grotowski's conception of theatre was predicated on revealing "the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (Grotowski 1991: 19), the focus of semiotics leans towards the "discourses" and "sign systems" which surround the theatrical experience.

By no means all modernist theatre practitioners worked against the grain of semiotic theory, however. For the later French structuralist Roland Barthes, no-one understood the stage as a semiotic structure better than the Marxist playwright Bertolt

Brecht. Barthes noted Brecht's contribution in the following terms: "what Brechtian dramaturgy postulates is that today at least, the responsibility of a dramatic art is not so much to express reality as to signify it" (Barthes 1972: 74). While Brecht was not directly influenced by semiotics, his approach to staging involved bringing to light the processes of representation. Brecht's Epic Theatre, with the stylistic employment of placards, open lighting, minimal stage décor and the half curtain, lent the stage, in Bert States' phrase, a "provisional quality" (States 1985: 93). Like the actors whose task was to reveal a range of choices faced by the character rather than pre-determined action, the stage would explore constructions of reality and their ideological subtexts. While Grotowski and Ionesco saw the stage-audience relationship as founded on a direct materiality, Brecht's theatre tended to see that relationship as ideologically charged. At the heart of Brecht's conception of theatre is that the relationship between stage and auditorium is inherently politicised. Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* (or "estrangement" devices), sought to emphasise the importance of spectatorial consciousness and control over theatre's potential to construct illusions, referring to the construction of the "partial illusion":

Too much heightening of the illusion in the setting, together with a "magnetic" way of acting that gives the spectator the illusion of being present at a fleeting, accidental, "real" event, create such an impression of naturalness that one can no longer impose one's judgement, imagination or reactions, and must simply conform by sharing in the experience and becoming one of "nature's" objects. The illusion created by theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognised as an illusion. Reality, however complete, has to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and be treated as such. (Brecht 1964: 219)

By envisaging the "partial illusion," which would allow the audience to experience not only a fictional stage scenario but also notice its construction *as* theatre, Brecht hoped to empower his audience to "interpose [their] judgement, imagination or reactions." Recognising the spectator's reason and capacity for rational judgement could be undermined by the fictional-making potentials of the stage and thus into irrelevant emotional attachments to the fortunes of stage characters, Brecht affirmed the materiality of the theatre-making process. Rather than being swept-away into an unfolding story, Brechtian stagecraft aimed to keep its audience alert to each moment in performance, and the political implications of the action onstage.

Brecht recognised theatre's materiality as a constituent of the stage's signification process. However, there is a potential danger in thinking that the employment of Brechtian techniques *inherently* politicises the stage-auditorium relationship in a way that remains fixed and pre-determined. After a time, the audience may experience less the materiality of the stage and the processes of representation, and more a pre-established idea of "classic" Brechtian stagecraft. Theatre theorist Jon Erickson notes a potential difficulty with the systematic use of Brechtian "alienation effects;" alienation is "a difficult task in the theatre, where image always becomes the dominant factor, and where...alienation effects in time become conventionalised images" (Erickson 1994: 61). In other words, theatrical signs do not merely point towards an external referent, but also to their own production. On one level at least, theatrical conventions signify themselves; even the most naturalistically detailed set can intrigue the eye since it may represent not only a nineteenth century living room, but also its own painstaking meticulous staging.

If Brechtian techniques do lead to "conventionalised images" as Erickson suggests, then we might say that the half curtain and placards are serving excellently at "playing" a Brecht set. There is a danger that Brecht's "defamiliarisation" techniques can start to look all too familiar and clichéd. As Bert States observed, at a Brecht production "I can still say to myself: 'That actor is doing a good job. He has the Brecht style down to a pat.' In other words, theatre is theatre" (States 1985: 94).³ The materiality of the stage is not experienced in the direct way that Grotowski or Ionesco envisaged, nor does the predetermined conception and deployment of *verfremdungseffekt* necessarily provoke a more reasoned, rational judgement from its audiences than other styles of presentation. The stage's materiality is not a transparent medium through which ideas are communicated to an audience; the medium itself becomes part of the signification process. A question arises from this. If the stage and its objects are already encoded as signs, then does that mean that materiality can no longer be seen as a defining theatrical attribute?

³ For an examination of attempts to reconfigure Brechtian stagecraft on the British stage in the 1990s, see Margaret Eddershaw's *Performing Brecht: Forty Years of British Performances* (1996), pp. 151-157.

To pursue this question, I would like to introduce by way of example, Peter Handke's 1966 play *Offending the Audience*. In this play, a relationship between materiality and the sign is a source of constant tension. Handke specifies that the "usual theatre atmosphere should prevail" as the audience enter the auditorium, but that the ushers should be "more assiduous than usual, even more formal and ceremonious." From behind the curtain, Handke further suggests that the audience should hear noises that make them believe that scenery is being moved into position. When the curtain slowly rises however, the "four speakers," dressed casually, step forward onto an empty stage. Much of the play consists of these four speakers issuing a series of denials and negations of the theatrical situation:

This room does not make-believe it is a room. The side that is open to you is not the fourth wall of a house. The world does not have to be cut open here...This is no drama. No action that has occurred elsewhere is represented here. Only a now and a now and a now exist here. This is no make-believe which re-enacts an action that really happened once upon a time. Time plays no role here. We are not acting out a plot. Therefore we are not playing time. Time is for real here, it expires from one word to the next. (Handke 1971: 19, 21)

The dialogue seems to have two simultaneous effects on the audience's experience of materiality. On one level, the dialogue dematerialises the stage by relentlessly telling the audience that there is nothing in particular to see. However, the dialogue also seems to affirm the basic materiality of the theatrical situation. There may be no drama, no props, no plot, but there is—or seems to be—a clear and immediate relationship between the stage and the auditorium. Both possibilities are implicit within the following piece of dialogue:

The emptiness of the stage is no picture of another emptiness. The emptiness of this stage signifies nothing. This stage is empty because objects would be in our way. It is empty because we don't need objects. This stage represents nothing. It represents no other emptiness. This stage *is* empty. (1971: 16)

Even as the dialogue posits nothingness and the apparent unmediated immediacy of the stage, this emptiness is communicating information to the audience. An audience's temptation is to "fill in the blanks" when confronted by minimal stage

décor. If a chair is placed on a bare stage, in the imaginations of the audience, it can signify an office or a throne room. If an actor walks onto a bare stage, his costume and manner of walking will give clues as to the fictional environment within which the character is operating. By telling us that there is *no* such fictional environment, Handke's *Speakers* focus attention directly on themselves and the theatrical situation in which they address the audience.

However, the apparently direct material relationship is also undercut by the play's design. The emptiness stage is pointedly signifying the *absence* of props, just as the play as a whole signifies the absence of narrative. While there is no "world" to imagine, the *Speakers*' explicit repudiation of representation can in itself be seen as a fiction established by the play. Even as they lay claim to an existence in "a now," they are already speaking from within a script and almost certainly within a pre-rehearsed routine. The four speakers are already negating their own "immediacy" by entering the representational frame of the stage. The irony is that as soon as the curtain is raised and the "four speakers" walk out to address the audience, they enter into a zone of repetition that fictionalises their immediate material presence.

Even the audience's material presence and active participation in the theatre event is challenged. Near the beginning, the *Speakers* tell the audience:

You expected something. You expected something else perhaps. You expected objects. You expected no objects. You expected an atmosphere. You expected a different world. You expected no different world. In any case, you expected something. It may be the case that you expected what you are hearing now. But even in that case you expected something different. (Handke 1971: 13)

Handke, by drawing attention to the audience's expectations, shows that the audience is already inscribed within the event. The words are not being addressed to the specific individuals present in the auditorium on a given night, any more than the *Speaker*'s utterances are identified as the actor's "own" words. Speech, action and spectatorship have already begun before the theatre event begins; the actors and audience have gone to the theatre to take on pre-designated roles. Even as the play ends on the lines "You are welcome here. We thank you. Goodnight," the audience is not allowed to assume active individual agency. As the *Speakers* stand and stare into

the auditorium, the stage directions indicate that “*Roaring applause and wild whistling is piped in through the loudspeakers*” including “*taped audience reactions to pop-music concerts*” which lasts until the audience begin to leave. The ending exposes the illusion of a spontaneous show of appreciation, when actors and audience recognise their mutual presence and collaboration in the event. Even as the play seems to strip the theatrical situation down to a basic actor-audience foundation, it is as though neither actors nor audience are really “there,” but are just passing through. The title of the play has therefore a double meaning. Those who have come to watch the show are not really being “offended” since the “audience” is of the same fictional status as the four speakers. However, if there is an offence in Handke’s theatrical conceit, it is in telling the audience that their responses are not entirely their own, that they are pre-conditioned by recognised conventions and attitudes. What offence there may be in the play is perhaps founded on its paradoxical proposition; that one pre-condition for causing offence—actors and audience being directly responsive to one another—is denied in the first place.

Offending the Audience sets out to demonstrate that theatre is, on one level at least, a representation of theatre. A given performance coincides with or subverts a set of expectations and assumptions about what theatre is like. In this respect, Handke seems to go further in demonstrating the dominance of signs on the stage than Brecht. While Brechtian staging is used to investigate social questions outside the theatre, *Offending the Audience* seems to support Elam’s understanding of “theatrical semiosis” which “invariably, and above all, connotes *itself*” (Elam 1980: 12). The material facticity of the theatre event—the arrangement of actors and props onstage and the relationship between stage and auditorium—already encodes the theatre *as* theatre.

I opened this paper by suggesting that many conceptions of theatre’s distinctiveness as an art form are tied up with notions of materiality. The direct actor-to-audience relationship that Grotowski spoke of is already encoded and mediated by the stage, and by the horizon of expectation an audience brings to the event. *Offending the Audience* is a play which seems to acknowledge the many ways in which signs mediate an apparently direct stage-auditorium relationship. Far from showing that the search for theatre’s distinctiveness is a red herring however, the play appears to

suggest an alternative; namely that theatre's distinctiveness may lie in how different levels of materiality are encoded. While questioning the whole idea of theatre, it is clear that *Offending the Audience*—as a metatheatrical play—relies specifically on its theatrical context to realise the full impact of its potential. It is, on some level, *about* what makes theatrical communication distinctive, even as it feigns to repudiate everything associated with traditional theatrical performance. “Theatrical pleasure,” as Anne Ubersfeld has suggested, “is the pleasure of the sign; it is the most semiotic of all pleasures” (Ubersfeld 1982: 129). If everything onstage has a semiotic function, then reading the stage event will involve decoding a plethora of visual and aural information, possibly occurring at different points on a playing space, at any given moment.

One of the peculiarities of theatrical signification is the close material relationship that often prevails between sign and signifier. To read theatrical signs will typically involve looking at real objects on a stage. A chair onstage is both perceived as an object, while it may also be “standing-in-for” an object in a fictional universe. Understanding the materiality of the theatrical sign is important to our appreciation of certain theatrical effects, especially in relation to the body of the actor. As semiotician Umberto Eco explains:

[In theatre] on perceiving a human body, we participate in the semiotic process by applying all that we know about the body and all we expect from it: hence the sense of wonder (pleasant or irritating, according to our disposition) if, by chance, in a theatrical fiction the human body is raised up into the air by some hidden contraption, or if a mime makes it move as if it were a marionette. (Eco 2000: 376)

The notion of a material sign, itself a kind of paradox, is exemplified by theatrical representation. Materials such as props, actor's bodies and even the auditorium itself form overlapping combinations of meaning. While an audience may or may not take pleasure in being “offended” by Peter Handke, his play does point to theatre as a place which offers audiences the opportunity to participate in a process of embodied signification.

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