

## The Theatre Historian in the Mirror: Transformation in the Space of Representation

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During the past few years, a rising chorus of voices have begun to address the new theatre historiography. This historiography, though diversely understood, addresses both what the historian investigates and how s/he examines phenomena. The discourse employs much of the critical thought--especially French<sup>1</sup>--that has swept through language and literature departments since the 1970's and the revisionist thought--especially neo-Marxist (again, diversely understood)<sup>2</sup>--that has repositioned research in history, cultural anthropology, political science, gender and ethnic studies, sociology, psychology, and related disciplines since the 1960's. The "new theatre historiography," whatever that means, is both an invisible and a complex discourse--invisible because much of it has been articulated in terms of specific subject matters (medieval, Renaissance, eighteenth and nineteenth century theatre, for example) and so has escaped notice as a repositioning of theatre research itself, and complex because the theatre historian attempts that repositioning, subverting or at least redirecting the gaze of the received tradition in a substantive research area, while lacking an established language for the discourse.

Elsewhere in this issue, my colleague Michal Kobialka discusses theatre history research as the search for instabilities, a rejection there, as here, of the legacy of cultural Darwinism and its reliance upon ideology reinforced by a seemingly objective and unassailable apparatus of sources, causal sequences, chains of being, effects, modes of distribution, and the like, which has characterized the thinking of theatre historians over the past hundred years. What follows here is an attempt to articulate a spatially oriented theatre historiography, expanding upon French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault's

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"space of representation" and "heterotopia." These ideas were expressed in part orally in August of 1988,<sup>3</sup> and as the expanded essay leaves my hands now to begin its journey through the editorial processes of this journal, time has functioned both to increasingly enjoin the past analytical strategy (cultural Darwinism), whose assumptions are clearly no longer unquestioned among theatre historians, and to advance both the often invisible substantive discourse and the often unheard historiographical one.<sup>4</sup>

While less effort is required to defend the "new historiography" when it achieves the status of 'foremost intellectual undertaking' among American theatre scholars,<sup>5</sup> current concern about the inquiry does not obviate the unfamiliarity of some of the interested parties with both the critical thought and the revisionist historical thought which informs it, creating concomitant problems for essays such as this one in identifying the audience toward which the inquiry is directed. More disconcerting, however, is the necessity, as here, to create or derive a language for historiographical discourse the limits of which have not--and, I will argue, cannot--be set. Accordingly, it is necessary to make clear from the outset that the present essay cannot hope, indeed, does not aspire, to encompass all of even its segment of the historiographical matrix, a limitation which accurately reflects the historiography being discussed, without, hopefully, rendering that discussion itself unnecessarily elusive.

## I

In Greek, the word historiographia breaks into *historios* (the record) and *graphia* (the arrangement and interrelationship of the record). The controversial aspects of the word itself concern what constitutes the record and how it should be/has been arranged. For some two thousand years in the West, the historian's as well as the literary critic's task was to preserve the record, to attempt to determine the "true," the "real" historical artifact or event.<sup>6</sup> There have been many views concerning how historians might best discharge this responsibility. The twentieth century inherited the view of the nineteenth, represented in theatre historiography by a wearing down of scientific theory generally identified as "cultural Darwinism," and here called "modernism."<sup>7</sup>

Cultural Darwinism/modernism posits a linear development of history proceeding from hidden sources through a causal pattern to manifested events. The modernist theatre historian was quite earnest about being "objective" in the pursuit of "truth," to determine what things "mean" free of the prejudice that had colored previous research.<sup>8</sup> In addition, modernism had considerable appeal because it brought rigor (and hence academic and intellectual respectability) to the study of theatre, a field of inquiry legitimized in the United States only in the twentieth century. As American theatre historians began the monumental task of recovering, preserving, and analyzing U.S. and other theatrical and dramatic histories, interpretations of the canon were often

deferred--one could not determine the "truth" if "evidence" was sparse--though the *graphia* of histories nonetheless proposed both relationships and hierarchies of importance. Premiums were placed on the most characteristic or typical example, upon phenomena arranged chronologically and causally, and upon received values concerning art.<sup>9</sup>

While cultural Darwinism continued to determine and shape the field into the 1960's and our own time, theatre practice had already diverged from the path of science and evolutionism. These divergences had been largely ignored in U.S. theatre historiography--symbolism, futurism, Dada, surrealism, expressionism in the first wave of avant garde activity, Artaud and Brecht in the second--though their influence can be found in design and among theatre groups and critics influenced by non-"traditional" theatre. This divergence swelled in the 1960's into a flood of theatrical practices which modernism could neither accommodate nor contain. The counter-culture had arrived, carrying postmodernist criticism and historiography with it.

The initial response to these forces among historians was pluralism and revisionist history. Previously taboo topics became subjects for investigation--frontier melodramas, performance art, circus, theatre viewed as a cultural phenomenon, contemporary theatre groups, gender and race in theatre and plays, and so forth--and traditional historiography was questioned.<sup>10</sup> Pluralism and revisionism often remained modernist in theatre historiography, however, either constituting shifts in what was examined, rather than questioning how or why, or by adopting modernist historiography from other disciplines, a process perceived to be postmodern because interdisciplinary. Gradually, however, a postmodern historiography is emerging in theatre, though often indiscriminately buried among modernist approaches toward both traditional and pluralistic subjects.

## II

Postmodernism is complex and diverse. One postmodern concept, whose range can only be sketched here, Foucault's "space of representation," offers a way of exploring relationships (*graphias*) in the record (*historios*) which we may find useful to consider in theatre history studies. This view of postmodern historiography, hence theatre historiography, rests upon the perception that phenomena are discontinuous rather than continuous. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explains in considerable detail what this perception means to intellectual constructs such as descriptions, concept formation, definition of objects, and the like. Postmodern historiography, he observes,

does not try to repeat what has been said . . . does not claim to efface itself in the ambiguous modesty of a reading that would bring back, in all its purity, the distant, precarious, almost effaced light of the origin. It [historiography] is nothing more than a rewriting, that

is . . . a regulated transformation of what has already been written  
. . . the systematic description of a discourse-object.<sup>11</sup>

In itself, the concept of (re)writing history does not seem new, since every generation of historians has done so: the perception of discontinuity in the record and its arrangements is, however, both recent and essentially postmodern. In this view, one focuses upon practices, here called functions, and the rules that govern all or parts of their operation. The functions of history concern, for example, when and where phenomena occur, how frequently, how fast, in what relationships to other practices, and so on. It is assumed that these functions are discontinuous. For example, the commonplace of American theatre history that theatre building moves steadily uptown in Manhattan views theatre architecture continuously, despite the demonstrable discontinuity of the phenomena, which, perversely for that theory, spread both laterally and downtown.

In what will come to be called here a spatial strategy for theatre historiography, discontinuity operates as both the object and instrument of research. As the instrument, discontinuity determines the level, method, and classification of research: as the object of research, discontinuity establishes the limits of the process and its functional thresholds:

One of the most essential features of the new history is probably this displacement of the discontinuous: its transference from the obstacle to the work itself: its integration into the discourse of the historian, where it no longer plays the role of an external condition that must be reduced, but that of a working concept; and therefore the inversion of signs by which it is no longer the negative of the historical reading (its underside, its failure, the limit of its power), but the positive element that determines its object and validates its analysis.<sup>12</sup>

To see the discontinuous as the essential condition of postmodern historiography--and, as Foucault observes in the above context, how could the historian speak without the discontinuity that allows one to talk of history, and even one's own, as an object?--is to deprivilege, as current jargon expresses it, the modernist view of research as "hypothesis" and "methodology." While ideology, functioning in an historical matrix, whether from within (by the participants) or from without (by investigating historians, politicians, or others), remains an object of study, the perception that phenomena are discontinuous releases history from the long arm of science and the subordination of phenomena to theory testing. Rather, the functions of history and their modes of operation (*graphias*) assume the foreground of attention; more accurately, as shall emerge, they command the space of representation.

Viewed discontinuously, historical operations are not reduced to "origins" or "sources," but, rather, are viewed as existing processes. The theatre historian's task, then, is not to seek for obscured origins--the authoritative playtext, the source of a movement, the reductive physical evidence, etc.--but to deal with phenomena as they manifest themselves and according to the rules that seem to govern all or parts of their operation. Is a Manhattan theatre built at X place, for example, because, the land is cheap, or expensive but already owned; are other theatres also built in that district; are they architecturally similar or different; how many theatres are built; how fast; how are they financed; what kind of people live where they are built; and so on? These functions are discontinuous, even though sometimes related, as are phenomena like architecture, demography, banking practices, and so forth. Moreover, these functions and their rules of operation will recur in different times and places in what we shall now explore: the space of representation.

### III

The space of representation takes in every operation embedded in the historical matrix which also contains the theatre historical phenomenon being examined. Studying these operations does not yield a "meaning," but rather the operations'/phenomena's relationships to each other. Accordingly, while the rules that govern historical operations remain observable from matrix to matrix, these are not linked linearly to form grand theories, such as that underlying an assumption like "historical phenomena evolve from simple to complex."

While postmodernist theatre historiography is certainly reflexive, it is not without strategy--ways of determining functions (the *historios*) and their rules of operation (the *graphias*). "Space of representation" may be understood as the timespace when the historical function/relationship is bodied forth, timepresent as well as timepast, and, as shall be seen, timefuture. A dramatic analogue to the phrase "space of representation" would be the line "I was Hamlet" from Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*,<sup>13</sup> wherein the living actor/character Hamlet who is Shakespeare's Hamlet breaking the surface of historical discourse in 1601, plus every real and imagined Hamlet since then to Müller's own Hamlet and through that actor/character into all potential Hamlets, will one day say, "I was Hamlet."

Theatre history studies functions in relationship with the space of representation, for example--to continue our analogy --how the "idea" of Hamlet operates in Elizabethan England, eighteenth century Germany, twentieth century Poland. Each time "Hamlet" breaks the surface of human discourse it does so in a specific space of representation characterized by identifiable relationships. These relationships are governed by rules of operation. Those that pertain to shifts Foucault calls "epistemological acts" and "thresholds." As discontinuous phenomena, epistemological acts are

viewed as searches for new types of rationality characterized by ruptures or breaks, rather than as a quest for origins. Those rules concerning utilization are "displacement" and "transformation" and chart a successive rather than progressive usage. The rules of operation affecting the ordering of events explore how phenomena are disposed in terms of lesser or greater--"microscopic" and "macroscopic" scales--not as a search for consequences. Multiple pasts and connections are explored in terms of a phenomenon's "recurrent redistribution" in history. Finally, while Foucault's rules of operation do not seek to establish causal or progressive relationships between phenomena, there are internal coherences, connections, cohesions, and compatibilities among them, the operations of which Foucault calls "architectonic unities."<sup>14</sup> These rules of operation, rather than constituting the linear, modernist "methodology," are ways of examining the modalities through which phenomena function--discontinuous modes and discontinuous phenomena. Such a historiography transforms our sense of the record (*historios*) from discrete things (documents, *ouvre*, ruins, etc.) into overlapping relationships whose arrangements (*graphias*) are discernable via movements not unlike those governing physics.

Of all the transformations history studies, theoretical transformation is the most radical discontinuity because it represents an ideological break. Theoretical transformations threaten existing socio-political doctrines and their cultural agendas and empower impertinent questions: what is a theory, a text/document, a concept: what is the level of discourse--formal, interpretative, structural, causal? These questions force the abandonment of certainties and traditional points of view, for there are no longer sources or origins in history, no characteristics of phenomena that are impervious to time, no continuous "meanings." Each historical phenomenon assumes a different relationship to other occupying phenomena as the space of representation changes, while transformations occur at different rates and in different directions both within and among those spaces.

The liberation of history from ideology is a dangerous positioning of the historiographical enterprise in two regards. First, a historiography based upon discontinuity (postmodern) rather than continuity (modern) can be seen as threatening because it denies a view of history as the treasury of a culture. Richard Schechner associates rationality and humanism themselves with modernism, the traditional jewels in the crown of Western thought.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, postmodern historiography displaces the intellectual security of modernism and offers no comforting substitute, for we are doomed, as one scholar recently observed, to be post-Heisenberg whether we like it or not,<sup>16</sup> and in that universe chaos is natural. Second, tradition accustoms us to equate the historical enterprise with the search for "meaning" and, indeed, we perceive that, viewed discontinuously, phenomena and analytical strategies are not value-free. To operate as both the object and instrument of research, however, neither removes value from historiography nor does it convey the status of

"meaning" to it, for while continuity may exist as one of the architectonic functions of an historical matrix, that continuity, as is the case with grand theory, is not progressive. To devalorize historiography while exploiting it, then, as some have seen with subversive intent and effect in both deconstruction and other manifestations of postmodern criticism,<sup>17</sup> is not inevitable in the discontinuous universe, as the analogy with physics suggests.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV

As in a mirror, the historian stands poised reflexively between the present image and the virtual point that is through the glass and represents all the "pasts" of the phenomena being studied. It is a collective yet discontinuous vision not unlike Diego Velasquez's painting "Las Meninas," in which the artist is depicted in the act of painting not the scene we see, but a scene reflected in a mirror at the back of Velásquez's canvas. On one level, the scene we see is incidental to the "real" scene being painted, which is the reflected subject "outside" the frame of the canvas. On another level, the scene we see is the "real" painting, for we, like the images reflected in the mirror are eternally "outside" the frame of reference. The theatre historian sees mirrored in history both "self"--our times, our interests, our strategies--and multiple "others" --the matrix of the phenomenon being studied (e.g., Elizabethan theatre) and the matrices in which all the discourses concerning that phenomenon have been embedded (e.g., all the views of Elizabethan theatre advanced through the ages by scholars).

While it is the historian's intriguing if unfamiliar fate to meet him or her self coming and going, as it were, the phenomena of history are likewise doubled. As Foucault observes, "The linear sequence of thoughts" is transformed into a view of history in forms of multiple functional operations which, "like the folding of representation back upon itself," continuously overlap.<sup>19</sup> As in a mirror, the historian/perceptor sees both same and opposite, here and there, "that which introduces into his experience contents and forms older than him, which he cannot master: it is that which by binding him to multiple, intersecting, often mutually irreducible chronologies, scatters him through time and pinions him at the center of the duration of things."<sup>20</sup>

The metaphor of the mirror, into which I suggest theatre historiography, and hence, the theatre historian, have been propelled, is not, in practice, a still image, like a painting, but a process or function, a rippled mirror, like acting in the theatre. Foucault speaks of the relationship we trace here between *historios* and *graphia* and between history and historian in terms of continual doubling:

the subject and object are bound together in a reciprocal questioning of one another . . . [which] takes place on the outer limits of the

object and subject; [the questioning] designates the erosion to which both are subjected, the dispersion that creates a hiatus between them, wrenching them loose from a calm, rooted, and definitive positivity. By unveiling the unconscious as their most fundamental object, the human sciences showed that there was always something still to be thought in what had already been thought on a manifest level: by revealing the law of time as the external boundary of the human sciences, History shows that everything that has been thought will be thought again by a new thought that does not yet exist.<sup>21</sup>

Schechner has also expressed the idea of doubling as a sequence of multiples: "For the self to see itself and become involved with that reflection or doubling as if it were another is a postmodern experience. To become conscious of this doubling--to posit a third self aware of the mutuality of the other two selves, this geometrically progressive 'reflexivity' is postmodern."<sup>22</sup>

With the assumption of virtual space, forms of doubling multiply--self and other, presence and absence, being and becoming, mind and body, time and space, eros and thanatos. In this space, relationships are endlessly subverted, to such an extent and so constantly that power, for example, is only a moment in timespace about to transform into another form of energy. Binary systems collapse into multiples and oppositions change places or forms. The relevance of this view to theatre history should be evident, in that we have posited so much of our sense of "periods" or "movements," for example, upon charts of binary opposition. Perceiving of history as discontinuous erases the need for strategies of negation and frees phenomena to be "other" rather than "opposite." So conceived, the grand theories of theatre history fall and the phenomena they have concealed are revealed in all their ambiguity.

The postmodern theatre historian has followed his/her subject of inquiry "into the mirror," that is, has entered into a professional relationship with discontinuity wherein nothing is unthinkable though (in theatre history, at least) much is unthought. In so doing, the historian has entered the space of representation. We have been postmodern long enough not to fear that egocentric idiosyncrasy will be the sole inhabitant of the newly occupied territory, but not long enough to often have passed through the mirror, into what Foucault calls heterotopia. A heterotopia is all the real sites in a culture "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted,"<sup>23</sup> but it is also "a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, heterotopia can be likened to that aspect of a mirror allowing us to identify the other, the place where we are not, making "this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there."<sup>25</sup> When theatre historiography consistently passes through the mirror, past will become present, for to conceive of the



discontinuous yet persistent flow of time is to recognize that "we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things . . . we live inside a set of relations."<sup>26</sup> Postmodern theatre history reminds us that we live in time, but also that, like theatre itself, we live in the space of representation.

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## Notes

1. See Michèle Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 93, no. 3 (Nov. 1987) 584-622.

2. See, for example, Dominick LaCapra's *History and Criticism* and *Rethinking Intellectual History*.

3. The shorter, and a different, version of this topic was presented at the Current Research in Theatre History panel, one of the competitive panels hosted by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education at its annual convention in San Diego.

4. Much historiographical work has been expressed thus far at scholarly meetings, such as the annual gathering of the American Society for Theatre Research, but is finding its way into print, both here, in a forthcoming anthology of readings about "the new historiography," and in the rediscovery of theatre history by journals such as *TJ*. Meanwhile, substantive research on many fronts reveals the imprint of current analytical strategies.

5. A special committee of ASTR recently articulated the conjoining of history and theory (historiography) as the subject most suitable for field-wide investigation via a sequence of proposed NEH-sponsored Summer Institutes for theatre historians.

6. D.C. Greetham discusses this tradition in textual analysis in his "A Suspicion of Texts," *Thesis*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Fall 1987) 18-25.

7. There is no accepted definition of modern and postmodern among theatre historians. I am using the terms casually here to distinguish one kind of theatre historiography from another.

8. Chambers, in his *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), provides an excellent example of this tradition. Indeed, he says in his introduction to vol. I (vi) that his purpose in writing the work is "to state and explain the preexisting conditions which, by the latter half of the XVIth century made the great Shakespearean stage possible. The story is one of a sudden dissolution and a slow upbuilding."

9. Book titles illustrate modernism in theatre history: *Representative American Plays*, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, *A Source Book in Theatrical History*, *The Nature of Drama*.

10. See, for example, Hardison's analysis of Chambers' work (indeed, the title of an early essay of his is "Darwin, Mutations, and the Origin of Medieval Drama"). My thanks to Prof. Kobialka for bringing this example and Chambers' introduction to my attention.

11. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) 139-140.

12. 9.

13. Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage* (New York: PAJ Books, 1984) 53-58.

14. See especially the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The text elaborates upon the concepts sketched here.

15. Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism* (New York: PAJ Books, 1982) 106.

16. Marvin Carlson made the remark in his address for a "Status of Theatre Research" panel at the 1985 annual meeting of the American Society for Theatre Research in New York.

17. The case of Paul deMan and the relationship of his view of literary theory to his wartime activities might be cited here, though feminists have repeatedly observed that the postmodern critical gaze is as much fixed on the white, male canon as was the modernist gaze, what Sue-Ellen Case has described as the "deprivileged but not dethroned" patriarchy (see "The Personal is [Not the] Political," *Art and Cinema* [Fall 1987] 4-5).

18. The question of ideology in historiography will remain largely unengaged in this essay. A recent study appropriately reminds us, however, that the language of theory does not simply report experience, "but constructs that experience as well as the limits of its analysis" (Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 [Dec. 1988] 531).

19. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 310.

20. 331.

21. 372.

22. Schechner 99.

23. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics*. 16 (Spring 1986) 24.

24. 27.

25. 24.

26. 23.