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Active shadows : Light, darkness and scenographic atmosphere

This paper explores the critical role that light and its absence plays in the creation of theatrical atmosphere. Drawing on the ideas of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig outlined at the turn of the twentieth-century, I will trace the impact of their radical approach to staging theatre and relate this to the contemporary experience of scenography in immersive environments.

Viebrock and Herzog suggest that in direct contrast to architectural practice, the theatrical stage offers the possibility to construct intense, uncanny and terrifying spaces. (2011:73) Böhme also recognises the importance of ‘the art of the stage set’ (2013:7) and its central role in the creation of atmospheres - which are an “intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object. That makes them intangible [...] they have no secure ontological status.” (ibid :3)

Böhme’s ‘art of the stage set’ (a term better encompassed through the holistic notion of scenography) acknowledges the critical role that designed elements play in the creation and experience of theatrical atmosphere – a relational and ever-changing phenomena that is mediated through an experience of light.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge that atmosphere is created through a variety of forces (Edensor 2015);- light and its absence are equally critical to the creation of atmosphere in the theatrical context – both for performers and for audience experience (Palmer, 2013, 2017.) This was recognised by Renaissance architects who sought to control the role of darkness for theatrical affect – and similar principles, extended through the theoretical writings of Appia and Craig are central to the contemporary experience of performance.

Drawing on Aristotle’s notion of *parousia* – the felt presence of material in space I aim to use Böhme’s thinking in relation to light (and darkness) to analyse the audience experience of affective theatrical atmospheres – in ‘tuned’ spaces – which have become the central tenet of many contemporary environmental or ‘immersive’ performances.

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