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Immersion through light and darkness: Appia, Wagner and the evolution of modern scenographic practice.

This paper explores the evolution of a dramaturgy of light in the staging of Wagnerian opera in Germany in the 1880s and '90s. It argues that the discovery of a new lighting technology and a subsequent appreciation of the importance of shadow had a profound influence on the development of scenography, modern performance practice and notions of audience immersion.

As a fundamental scenographic material light raises key issues about not only what is seen on stage, but how we look and feel. It directs our attention and determines what is perceived by an audience - emphasising shape and volume, yet it is also able to create 'ambiguities of depth and scale' (Tufnell & Crickmay, 1990:170). These were the possibilities sought by Adolphe Appia in his response to notions of the 'gesamtkunstwerk' but which were ultimately frustrated by Wagner's scenographic practice at Bayreuth.

Adolphe Appia's notion of 'active light' ('lumière actif' or 'Gestaltendes Licht') envisaged light as not simply an illuminating agent but as an expressive force that should be modulated like music. When choreographed, light is a poetic and active agent, animating the stage space and becoming a co-player in the drama.

Appia's articulation of the importance and function of shadow and its manipulation through light represents a paradigmatic shift in staging practice. In previous eras shadows on the stage were a necessary by-product of light that needed to be accommodated. Appia's vision placed light and shadow and its movement over time, as central to the dramatic experience and the audience's immersion in the world on stage. This new vision of a 'chorégraphie' of scenographic elements heralded a new genealogy of performance practice. This paper reflects on the development of a dramaturgy of light and darkness inspired by Wagner's music that was to revolutionise staging practices across Europe and beyond.

Welton argues that "the visual experience of light is one of proximity. It is right there in front of you, and the pleasures and terrors of the dark surely rest on the collapse of distance as a result. (2013: 5) Layers of light and shadow in

performance stimulate sensorial perception which Machon argues demands 'a new taxonomy for holistic appreciation in immersive theatres.' (2013: 80)

From Wagner's 'mystical gulf' to Appia's 'chorégraphie', light and darkness are fundamental aspects of 'immersive' audience experiences. This paper attempts to explore 'the curious hold which light and shadow can exercise over the imagination of the audience' (Jones, 1941:123). It seeks to investigate the 'descent into endless night' (ibid) through the layering of darkness and shadow as a fundamental scenographic strategy in creating a sense of audience 'immersion'.

References

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