

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/77417/>

---

**Paper:**

McKinney, JE (2005) *The Nature of Scenographic Communication: artist, audience and the operation of scenography*. In: International Federation of Theatre Research, Scenography Working Group, University of Amsterdam, 11th-15th May 2005.

---

**The Stage and the Visual Arts: Past, Present and Future**  
**International Federation for Theatre Research, Scenography Working Group**  
International Conference on Scenography  
May 11-15, 2005, University of Amsterdam

**Joslin McKinney**, Lecturer in Scenography, University of Leeds

**The Nature of Scenographic Communication: artist, audience and the operation of scenography.**

In *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*, Alan Read claims that the theatre which is worthwhile is that which enables us to understand the everyday and better live our lives. This is effected through ‘the medium of images to convey feeling and meaning’. Theatre images are not simply constructed from the visual. Although the visual predominates, images are multidimensional and include textual, auditory even olfactory material and they are articulated in space and time. Crucially, it is in the imagination of the audience allows images to properly occur. That is members of an audience not only receive and register images, but assimilate them and develop them through the faculty of their own imagination. Existing theoretical strategies find it difficult to account for the complex relationship of the engagement between performer and audience. The purpose of my own practice-based research is to look at this relationship from the perspective of the scenographer and to investigate the nature of the communication of scenography or the ‘transaction’ of ‘symbolic exchange’ of theatre images which occurs between scenography and its audiences.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of a transaction of symbolic exchange through scenography is not one that is easy to articulate in words. Pamela Howard says:

The scenographer visually liberates the text and the story behind it, by creating a world in which the eye sees what the ears do not hear. Resonances of the text are visualised through fragments and memories that reverberate in the spectator’s subconscious, suggesting rather than illustrating the words.<sup>2</sup>

Read refers to this reverberation as the ‘something more’ of images and the metaphysical nature of theatre. But in order for images to operate in this way, they need a ‘face-to face’ connection to the everyday, a recognition that the ‘local and particular’ context of a performance is the precondition for ‘the criticism of universal values’<sup>3</sup>

Tadeusz Kantor’s theatre can be seen as a metaphysical transformation of the everyday. His theatre images relied on the material nature of the component parts of the performance and their power to evoke different levels of reality. He accorded objects with the same potential to communicate as actors. They were intended to resonate with or compete with the other objects and performers as part of the theatre imagery. He was concerned not only with the type and texture of objects chosen for a space, but the quality and nature of the space itself. Kantor evolved a philosophy of theatre which embraced the most prosaic, useless ‘objects, facts, actions and situations’ as a means of releasing the imagination and transforming the perception of the audience.<sup>4</sup>

His 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseus* was staged not in a theatre, but in a room of a bombed-out building. Kantor’s own description of this room and the performance which took place demonstrates how he conceived the room, and the things within it. The room was most powerful means of connecting the mythological Odysseus with contemporary reality, which for Kantor was imagined as a German soldier in a waiting room at Krakow station:

The room was destroyed. There was war and there were thousands of such rooms. They looked alike: bare bricks stared from behind a coat of paint, plaster was hanging from the ceiling, boards were missing in the floor, abandoned parcels were covered with dust (they would be used as the auditorium), debris was scattered around, plain boards reminiscent of the deck of a sailing ship were discarded at the horizon of this decayed décor, a gun barrel was resting on a heap of iron scrap, a military loudspeaker was hanging from a rusty metal rope. The bent figure of a helmeted soldier wearing a faded

overcoat stood against the wall. On this day, June 6, 1944, he became a part of this room.<sup>5</sup>

The objects in the room were found by Kantor and the cast. They included a wheel smeared with mud, a rotten plank and a kitchen chair. The act of finding, choosing and bringing these 'decrepit and repugnant' chunks of reality to the room was an important part of the process of the production.<sup>6</sup> Things with little obvious value or purpose, things considered as 'trash...almost a void' in everyday life can, in theatre, become the means by which the imagination of the audience is activated and the 'highest values, being, death and love' can be realised.<sup>7</sup> The more despised or contemptible the object, the greater the potential for it to transcend its everyday status and acquire 'its historical, philosophical and artistic function' in reflecting the essence of life rather than a stylised, aestheticised version of reality usually found in the theatre.<sup>8</sup>

The many notes, essays and manifestos which Kantor produced reflect how he continuously modified and re-shaped his theories. These notes are often written in a form that approaches poetry, but which convey a vivid sense of the intention and realisation of his ideas. It is worth noting, however, that although it was his practice to make notes as he worked, the work itself was often intuitive and open to chance or coincidence. In an interview in 1985 he says that it is only with the passing of time and through receiving meaningful feedback that he understands what he has created.<sup>9</sup> Through his writings, which return again and again to themes of representation and reality, it is possible to detect an implicit sense of dialogue between Kantor and his audiences.

Susan Bennett's examination of theatre audiences emphasises the active way in which performance is received and interpreted. Strategies on the part of the audience are shown to be dynamic and responsive to innovations in performance. Individual response to the same performance can vary considerably. Analytical strategies such as semiotics and theories of the act of reading, such as reader-response theory, which have been applied to theatre spectatorship, reinforce the subjectivity of the experience.<sup>10</sup> But the creation of a performance is normally a group act and requires the articulation and development of common aims. Sometimes these aims are

explicitly communicated to an audience, through for example, programme notes. More often the aims remain implicit. But either way the guiding principles of a performance anticipate a certain level of experience and understanding which is held in common by the audience. In this research, I am examining the kinds of understanding which engagement with scenographic images affords. A simple model of this process might identify the scenographer as the creator of the images and the audience as receptors and interpreters. However, ways in which individuals might find, what are for them, truth and value in the 'something more' of scenographic images allows the possibility that some audience members might engage with scenography in such a way that they become more than observers and take up and extend the process of image creation.

The key questions then are; what kinds of understanding does the scenographer draw on in the creation of images? What kinds of sense do audience members make of scenographic images? And in what ways do audience members extend or re-imagine scenography?

I am using my own scenographic performances as a means of focussing and gathering audience responses. The first of these was called *The General's Daughter* and was performed in Sept 2003 to an invited audience who, following the performance, recorded their thoughts and feelings through discussion and writing.<sup>11</sup>

In creating *The General's Daughter* I was drawing on my professional experience as a scenographer to create an event which had the potential to communicate on different levels. I was aiming to leave room for the contribution of the audience and the possibility of moving beyond purely the obvious meanings. Images were the predominant means of establishing the environment, the atmosphere, the characters and their relationship and the unfolding drama. There was a basic narrative thread which was explored and overlaid with references and resonances beyond the immediate situation and room for intuitive and instinctive leaps of imagination in the development of the imagery. As a scenographer, I consider it to be important to be able to select and develop imagery not only on the basis of what it could stand for in terms of cognitive recognition but also what it could provoke in terms of a more obtuse but penetrating experience. Beyond the core situation there was a penumbra of

images and ideas released by those images which extended and re-focused the central narrative. Alongside the performing bodies, often overwhelming them, the materials and manipulations of scenography are performing.

Another example of Kantor's work serves as an instance of scenography performing. Kantor's production of Witkiewicz's *The Country House* (1961) employed the emotive and eloquent power of figures, objects and the space that holds them. It used a wardrobe in the place of the country house setting that the stage directions suggest. The decrepit wardrobe was surrounded by stools, parcels and desks, chaotically scattered.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of the performance the doors of the wardrobe burst open and actors and more parcels fell out. The wardrobe had a womb-like function. From within its 'suffocating and humid atmosphere, the dreams are unfolded, the nightmares are born'. Kantor describes action from Act III:

The wardrobe is open.

The husband and two lovers, the Steward of the estate and the Poet, of the deceased wife

are hanging in the wardrobe like clothes on hangers.

They are swinging, losing balance,  
and bouncing into one another.

They are reading the diaries of the Deceased.

The revealed information, the most intimate details,  
makes the three rivals

euphoric,  
satisfied, desperate,  
and furious.

These emotions are manifested  
openly

with an increasing excitement.

The lovers, who are imprisoned in the wardrobe,  
hanging on the hangers, are  
spinning around,

bumping into each other,  
and hanging motionless.<sup>13</sup>

I make no claims for my own work in relation to Kantor's other than the premise that in theatre, scenography performs.

The starting point for *The General's Daughter* was *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Euripides. The universal aspects of the drama (sexual and political power) and more contemporary resonances (the impact and aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Centre and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq) were specific points of reference. The immediate situation of the story, the relationship between Iphigenia and her parents, especially her father, interested me in particular. What is intriguing about the central character is the apparent ease with which she changes her mind about being sacrificed for the greater good of the Greek army. She is terrified when she first learns of her father's plans for her, yet within the space of a few pages she is telling her mother 'I dedicate my body as a gift for Greece. Take me. Sacrifice me. And then to Troy, plunder the whole city, when you leave it, leave it a ruin'.<sup>14</sup>

In part, Iphigenia's actions by her coming of age. She has begun to menstruate and is now old enough to be married. This brings with it both new status and power but also a different form of subjugation. Her actions could be seen to be those of a child taking on the responsibilities of an adult, or as a young woman accepting the power and influence of her sexuality, or as a girl submitting to the will of her father. But her position as a princess is also important. At first she begs her father not to go to war, but she quickly comes round to the idea that her position as the daughter of a king means her duty is to her people as well as to her father. She cannot escape the descent into violence and killing anymore than her father can. And furthermore her sacrifice will bring salvation and victory to Greece. Iphigenia's actions appear to make sense in terms of the prevailing moral and spiritual values at the time of the original production. And she is rewarded for her heroism by being transformed at the point of death by the gods.

Scenography was the means by which I could explore my subjective responses to the play. Searching for material to help me connect these ideas to visual images, I looked at Paula Rego's painting of *The Policeman's Daughter*.<sup>15</sup> It seemed to offer an interesting parallel of a father-daughter relationship which is shaped around ideas of

power and duty. The girl in the painting is dressed in white and is polishing her father's heavy, black leather boots. She is absorbed by the task, her arm pushed almost up to her armpit into the boot. I thought about the possible nature of the relationship between the girl and her father and to what extent this girl might be a more contemporary Iphigenia. There are various contrasts suggested by the composition; black and white; strong light and shadow; the perpendicular lines of the room and the sinuous curves of a cat in the foreground; the girl's white skirt, crumpled like an unmade bed and the starched, stiff linen of the table cloth. They seem to point towards the way the girl asserts herself in relation to her father and how that relationship might turn on her nascent sexual maturity. Sitting in her father's heavy studded chair and polishing his boots, she feels herself to be powerful and capable of infiltrating the adult, male world, but she is safe and secure in a high room.

There is not an exact fit between this painted image and the text and the performance that resulted doesn't fully resolve this, either. Rather it explores or suggests possible productive resonances. As I developed the performance, further layer of ideas which I incorporated into the performance: Death, sacrifice and the human consequences of war; becoming a woman, beauty, expectations and roles; women caught up in the machinery of war, often complicit in the justification and prosecution of war through support or co-operation. I drew on common and widely shared images of contemporary events and my own private relationship with an absent father.

The space I created consisted of a 'room' with a blank white wall and a high, square window and bare floorboards. It was both a place of safety and constriction and it sat above a floor of deep sand. A narrow walkway like a pier extended from the room out across the sand. A chair like the one in Rego's painting stood at the end. Two female figures, one an adolescent girl, the other a kind of governess or agent of control marked out rituals of socialisation and preparation for the girl's maturity. A pair of shiny black leather riding boots stood for the girl's father. Other boots, battered, dirty, infantrymen's boots were pulled out of the sand and lined up to assemble an army. The piece builds towards a wedding/sacrifice. Metres of white silk are sewn, stretched across the across the stage and wrapped around the girl like a wedding dress or a shroud. The veil covers everything except her eyes. Red and white confetti falls on her from above. The final image was intended as a parallel for the waste and



destruction of the Trojan wars, the beginning of which is marked by Iphigenia's willing sacrifice. Photographs showing a man jumping from one of the collapsing World Trade Centre tower on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 were published and discussed in the British press days before the second anniversary of the attack and the performance of *The General's Daughter*. The isolated human figure falling from the tower had resonances with Iphigenia's situation and also with the destruction of innocent lives that follows her sacrifice. I identified the Iphigenia character both with the falling man and with the destruction of the towers. I considered that the juxtaposition of the images of the wedding/sacrifice and the slides could provoke a revisioning of the previous scenes and create productive, if uncomfortable, resonances with more contemporary political concerns. But the way in which this image came about was almost accidental. Indeed, part of the working process of any artist is to leave room for accidents or to allow 'unconscious desires to filter into the working methods'.<sup>16</sup>

As I worked with these ideas in the form of images, I reflected on the potential for the performance to present a perspective on world beyond the theatre. Decisions about what was to be included were principally concerned with meeting the objectives of the performance but there were other frames of reference to do with my own aesthetic, ethical and professional judgements which were being drawn on. The decisions were not based on simply creating 'a static network of signs' but also on the means to facilitate an active space or an 'energetic vector'. Pavis, in developing his model of integrated semiology refers to Pierre Gaudibert's comments on the artistic creator and their relationship as an individual to the rest of society:

In the work of art is inscribed an energetic charge, which arises from the creator's engagement; it is connected to their personal history, in the face of the society in which they are immersed and of their collective unconscious.

This perspective can be compared to observations above on the social and subjective aspects of spectating. Both scenographer and audience oscillate between the social and subjective spheres as they reconcile perception with signification. Pavis is proposing a model of analysis which takes proper account of the energetic within a vectorial model which 'straddles visual semiology and an energetics'.<sup>17</sup>

Teresa de Lauretis' provides another articulation of the way the perception and signification interact through the 'spheres of subjectivity and sociality',

If, then, subjectivity is engaged in semiosis at all levels, not just in visual pleasure but in all cognitive processes, in turn semiosis (coded expectations, patterns of response, assumptions, interferences, predictions, and, I would add, fantasy) is at work in sensory perception...<sup>18</sup>

This reflection on the complex relationship between what is perceived and what is signified can also be applied to the process of creating scenography in that there is a necessary reverberation between feeling and meaning and between intuition and intention.

In the context of a performance, scenographic images can function in different ways. The function of performance images have been described as narrative, as atmosphere, as metaphor or symbol.<sup>19</sup> Discussing photographs and film imagery, Roland Barthes claims that images can convey three kinds of meaning; informational, symbolic and 'a third meaning' which is more obtuse and 'obstinate' than the first two categories, but which offers the possibility of a more penetrating meaning, a more 'poetic' insight.<sup>20</sup> On the most basic level scenography establishes an environment and tells (or contributes to the telling of) a story. This function generally corresponds to Barthes' informational kind of meaning. It often operates using mimesis, that is, images and objects on stage are 'based upon the contiguity of the presence on stage to the absence it represents'.<sup>21</sup> But images also work on a metaphoric or symbolic level. Barthes claims that images are polysemous and imply a 'floating chain' of signifieds from which the 'reader' is able to choose (and ignore). Images can be seen to be weaker, less precise than language. But their polysemiotic qualities allow more possible meanings. Visual elements appear to be less stable in terms of signification than words, but this opens up the ways in which images may be experienced and interpreted. Barthes' notion of 'studium' and 'punctum', as applied to the viewing or experiencing of photographs, distinguish between a polite interest in and attention to an image (studium) and a more immediate and more idiosyncratic response (punctum). The concept of punctum as 'that accident which pricks me' highlights the visceral potential of an image and further develops the idea of unstable but potent

imagery.<sup>22</sup> The 'third meaning' occurs where an aspect of an image penetrates an individual viewer's consciousness of that image as a whole. The obvious meaning of the image is extended by this third, obtuse meaning. There is an oscillation between the obvious meaning and specific details which penetrate and resonate at a more visceral and subjective level.<sup>23</sup> Initial level of polite interest (*studium*) a kind of contract, an agreement to behave, educated, in harmony with the artist's intentions can be disrupted by the experience of an image which cuts through or punctures the more obvious meaning.

Gay McAuley claims that objects on stage can evoke 'highly poetic images'. This poetic object has clear dramaturgical connections to the rest of the performance but can also move beyond the metonymic and draw on symbolism and the imagination of the viewer. She also identifies the capability of objects which work in a similar way to Barthes theory of *punctum*. She calls them 'arbitrary' objects. They are objects which are apparently disconnected from the real, creating a break or rupture with the real world (outside) and reinforcing, instead, the reality of the theatre, remaining in the memory of the audience, troubling and provoking.<sup>24</sup>

Many concentrated on the constituent parts of images, looking closely at contrasts of colour and texture, the way objects were used and the external references which these pointed to. Several people recorded similar responses to the boots as signifiers, for example the black riding boots 'signed power and authority and a certain class'<sup>25</sup> or 'the father'<sup>26</sup> whilst the battered soldiers' boots were 'masculine, warlike, workmanlike, utilitarian'.<sup>27</sup> These signs accrue meaning over time particularly when considered alongside other signs. Boots were also read as absent men and boots unearthed from the sand provoked thoughts about death, burial, 'the disappeared' or an earlier civilisation that had been destroyed.

Many responses drew on individual background and experience. A sequence where the girl is dressed for her wedding/sacrifice evoked a childhood memory of 'standing on a chair, presumably having my trousers pinned up for sewing'<sup>28</sup> and 'a statue in Volgograd'.<sup>29</sup> It is at these points of individual insight that the possibility for a more meaningful impact seems to occur.

Barthes implies a hierarchy of levels of meaning, where mimetic and simple metaphoric are less resonant and of less value than the more poetic images, which are harder to account for or describe and are often highly subjective. There are two points to be made here. Firstly the experience of an actual performance demonstrates that images are capable of operating in different ways during the course of a performance and often simultaneously. Secondly, the nature of theatre and its necessary connection to the everyday means that notions of value are ethically informed, that is they reflect not only the individual experience but the communal, the political. The relationship between the imagination and theatre needs to consider ‘a poetics of the image in theatre which does not wish to exclude the political context of its creation nor the ethical dimension of its relations with an ‘other’ in the audience’.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that both images which are held in common and images which provoke highly subjective responses are important in the transaction of theatre, intertwined in the same way that de Lauretis describes perception and signification.

Pavis uses the Freudian terms of ‘displacement’ and ‘condensation’ to construct the two main axes of the processes of theatrical representation. Displacement is akin to metonymy in that it deals in references to the real world through connection and iconic referents, whilst condensation operates like metaphor, accumulating, juxtaposing and stylising elements which create their own logic or a new reality that holds true within the performance space.<sup>31</sup> The important point about such a framework is that it is dynamic and does not tie the operation of an image down to one mode or another. Within these axes dominant tendencies of the mode of scenographic communication can be traced. Objects and images can operate both through displacement and through condensation, and often simultaneously.

In *The General’s Daughter*, certain images were read as metaphors by some and not others, for example the sand was seen by some as an iconic indication of a specific geographical location, while others made connections between the sand and time passing. One person made a link between the military images of the boots, the sand as desert and the destruction of the World Trade Centre. It is also apparent that the audience members bring with them unique capacities for viewing, contemplating and accounting for the action of images. The social sphere of the performance, the community of the audience is tempered by the subjective individual. The core of the

performance, its essential narrative and compositional thrust which is held in common by those who saw it is extended and elaborated by individual insights.

There were, though, many references to other kinds of impact and the making of sense. These drew on the kinesic and material qualities of the performance and their potential to evoke a similar response in the viewer. Eugenio Barba's term 'thought-in-action' applies to an aesthetic, embodied appreciation of action on stage and this has been applied to the viewing of actor's movements.<sup>32</sup> But here it appears that viewers are also capable of feeling and understanding sensations evoked by objects and scenography. There was for several participants an impact made on the immediate, physical level through the materials themselves; the colours, the composition of elements, the physical characteristics of sand, silk and paper, the smell of the wood and the sand. Several responses reflect a vivid sense of connection with the materiality of the performance, for example; 'I felt absorbed into the colour'<sup>33</sup>; 'the beautiful unsullied red of the inside of the handbag...the fall of the silk ...I could just watch and admire its beauty'<sup>34</sup>; another 'enjoyed being transported by the aural, visual, spatial and performative elements'<sup>35</sup>. Several participants talked about the way they prioritised the materiality of the visual as a viewing strategy rather than trying to make conscious sense of the images. They are apparently content to remain immersed in the phenomena of the performance.

Some of the more arresting insights revolve around pivotal moments of perception which break through polite interest and diligent attention; a scenographic punctum. Some express a sense of surprise, which leads to extended insights. One writes of the wedding dress sequence that they 'loved the cleverness of its making and enjoyed the surprise' it 'made me think about beauty and vulnerability'.<sup>36</sup> However, some of these moments are uncomfortable and disturbing. Another writes that the woman in black standing in the shadows holding the boots made her feel sick.<sup>37</sup> In this case the respondent is unable to account for this strong feeling, but it remains as a key moment of recognition in the rest of their account of the relationship between the two female characters.

The slides are of a man jumping from the World Trade Centre, shown first over the bridal figure and then alone and they are felt by several participants to be shocking,

brutal and unsettling. Some are uncomfortable about the way they upset or seem to impose a meaning on what has gone before. Others, however, find some significance in the juxtaposition of projected images and the live performance. The drop of red and white paper is seen to link the wedding image to the destruction of the Twin Towers. The paper is seen first as confetti or as a tickertape celebration and then later, after the slides of the falling man, as debris from an explosion. Aware of their impulses and visceral responses and of the ethical implications of those reactions, some in the audience were clearly unsettled by their own thoughts and feelings.

...the sense of height and confinement, combined with the pristine white and the reduction of the human presence to eyes alone was disturbing. The inclusion of the 9/11 photographs enhanced this sense – they had a specific nature which I wanted to resist, but what had gone before also altered the way I looked at them – they have a kind of visual beauty at odds with their nature, & this was enhanced by the sensitisation to movement, shape, composition & colour that had preceded it. Yet to respond in that way to that material gives a sense of guilt.<sup>38</sup>

This respondent is simultaneously attracted and repelled by the images, acutely aware of their position as viewer, watching themselves watching the performance. Jacques Lacan's theories on the psychology of the gaze emphasise how seeing always means being seen and that 'we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world'.<sup>39</sup> This challenges the traditional account of the subject as master of the object being viewed as exemplified through the development of theories of perspective, familiar in Renaissance painting and playhouses. Lacan describes this privileging of the subject as an 'illusion of consciousness'.<sup>40</sup> The gaze is the 'underside of consciousness' and disrupts, questions or threatens the (illusory) sense of self. Hal Foster takes up Lacan's notion that a picture is a trap for the gaze. He explores the 'atavistic tropes of preying and tampering, battling and negotiating' that Lacan uses to describe the relationship of the subject to the gaze and claims that picture making and viewing are the means by which we can tame, pacify, 'manipulate and moderate the gaze'. The picture is a screen between the subject and the gaze and allows the subject to view the object without being 'blinded by the gaze'.<sup>41</sup> The scenographic image provides a screen which enables the scenography to articulate a tamed view of the world. For the

spectator the screen (the scenography) can be an object of contemplation and also a means of speculation about the world and all the fears and desires in it which lay beyond the performance. Like the viewer, the scenographer draws on what they know and understand about the world but also on intuitive responses and feelings. The extent to which audiences respond to the complexity of scenographic images seems to depend on their own experiences, imagination and fears as much as the intended content of the scenographic composition.

Michal Kobialka uses psychoanalytical terms to frame investigate Kantor's development as a theatre artist. He expresses the work as a journey of discovery of the self and of the 'quest for the other'. Kobialka claims that Kantor's early work amounts to a series of explorations in capturing the individual artist's response to the world and to contemporary events leading to theatre which produces 'its own space within the space of the world'.<sup>42</sup> From 1975 (the year of the first production of *The Dead Class*) Kantor was engaged in a further exploration of the layers of spaces and realities and the presentation of memory and multiple reflections of past events. The figure of Kantor as the instigator of the work was made clear through his being on stage, observing and sometimes intervening in the action. The content of the images was drawn from his own experience and memory. In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, images and events from his childhood are presented and re-presented in 'an attempt to visualize memory in a three-dimensional theatrical space. Kantor as the holder of the discourse/memory, watched the process of materialization of the most intimate aspects of the Self in the form of the Other(s)'.<sup>43</sup> The stage space, a simple room, became the site of a necessary but irresolvable quest to reconcile the here and now with the past and the illusion of the self in the face of images of the other. Kobialka uses the image of the mirror, reflecting multidimensional memory. Kantor himself talks about crossing from the other side of life to our own life. The performance space is referred to as 'The Inn of Memory' and is the place where characters and events from the past meet.<sup>44</sup> Images assembled, disassembled and reassembled on the stage are attempts to grasp at the ungraspable and that which lies beyond the doors which lead on to the stage, on 'the other side'.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses experience and objective thought and describes how our perception of an object is not simply that of viewing a flat surface as in a

picture, but is informed by our knowledge of the object and how it appears from different view points or perspectives and furthermore by our appreciation of the action of time and memory on that object.

My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams around things whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved with it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary”<sup>45</sup>

He could here be talking about scenography; about both its creation and its consumption. The viewing of scenography multiplies and extends that knowledge of objects

Clearly in theatre an audience is a necessary part of theatre actually occurring. They are the final arbiters of the performance, but they are also held within its frame. The viewer is caught within the image and is therefore, part of its construction. So whilst the scenographic image can be construed as a screen, it should also be noted that the audience can be arrested, caught, enchanted and even threatened by the scenographic image. They are enchanted by the theatrical pleasure. Anne Ubersfeld defines this as ‘the pleasure of the sign’<sup>46</sup> and suggests that the ephemerality of the performance event places an urgency on the process of selecting and interpreting elements of the performance as it unfolds. There are also limits on the extent to which the spectator can possess or know the object under scrutiny, the object of desire, which further contribute to the tension and expectation of spectating. Bert O. States focuses on the intimacy at the heart of theatrical pleasure. He claims that theatrical metaphors which are shared and understood during the course of a performance ‘unite the body of the actor and the soul of the audience in an act of discovery’.<sup>47</sup> Here the pleasure is more metaphysical than psychological. But the audience can be threatened both by the incompleteness of the experience, a frustration of theatrical pleasure and also by what appears to be behind the image, the real desires and fears which have been temporarily held in abeyance for the purposes of the performance.



The imagination of the viewer is one of the means a theatre audience member can negotiate their experience of the theatre. The faculty of creative imagination which is capable of producing images which are original (as opposed to the sense of imagination which is mainly concerned with reproducing images of an existing reality) is discussed by Alan Read. It is a crucial quality in theatre

... for theatre the phenomenological image in its isolation is insufficient. Indeed theatre rests precisely on the relations between the materiality of images and the mental capacities of audience and performer. Theatre is after all a process of dialectical relations between images and other images...<sup>48</sup>

Merleau-Ponty points out that the phenomenology has a similarly interactive and socially engaged aspect:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears.<sup>49</sup>

The audience for *The General's Daughter* were potentially able to engage with the work on a phenomenological level and sense the intersecting paths of my imagination and their own. When a participant chooses to notice and then remember some things and not others they are re-imagining the experience and constructing a new experience. In the following passage the selection of images begins the process of recomposing the performance through the filter of the individual viewer's imagination:

...the falling man: a real man (?) in the sky who might have fallen: a woman balanced precariously on a chair: falling confetti and the photos of towers about to fall, and the last 8 seconds of a man's life caught on film, seen across the globe and again in this theatre space...<sup>50</sup>

The imagination, Read claims is directed by our ethical allegiances, our beliefs and values. In this way he sees the efficacy of theatre images directly related to the wider context of our lives. Images are 'tentative transformation of everyday existing

realities'.<sup>51</sup> In the first instance the scenographic image is the scenographer's tentative transformation of the everyday. It is a transformation because it seeks to condense reality and reveal new insights. It is tentative because it is not easily or completely accounted for. The image works at the phenomenological level, reverberating with our experience of the world, the everyday.

The scenographer's process of creating work has similarities to the audience's process of consuming and responding to the work. Both draw on conscious and unconscious understanding. Both draw on what they know about the social, objective world and a more private subjective experience of that world. This prompts further questions about the relationship between the scenographer and the audience through the medium of the scenography. A key objective of this research is to investigate the extent to which audiences can be said to complete or contribute to the creation of theatrical imagery. It seems clear that audience members bring considerable additional insights to their viewing and appreciation of scenography and that the scenographer's contribution to this process of communication may be better expressed as initiating work rather than creating it. A Lacanian interpretation of the subjective response of the audience opens up the possibility of seeing the scenography as a screen which traps or pacifies the threat of the gaze of the world. The process of scenography involves representing (or taming) the truth of the world in ways which make it bearable and knowable. The response of the audience represents the continuation or extension of that process. Reading, listening and analysing audience responses was informed by my being the instigator of the work they were responding to. I have to acknowledge that this stage of the research was informed by me being the instigator of the scenography. What I deem significant in the response of others cannot help but be informed by my own preferences and perspectives. Stephen di Benedetto reminds us of the lasting 'associations that remain after the performance in the form of fragmented images and feelings that are the basis for the assessment and contemplation of the experience'.<sup>52</sup> This works for the scenographer as much as it does for the audience. Like Kantor, it is the response of others that helps me understand what it is I have made and these responses inevitably feed into subsequent scenographies. Identifying a point of completion seems unlikely.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 5-15 and 63-66

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Howard, *What is Scenography?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 33

<sup>3</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 96

<sup>4</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990*, trans. and ed. Michal Kobialka, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 30

<sup>5</sup> Kantor, 147

<sup>6</sup> Jan Klossowicz, "Tadeusz Kantor's Journey," *The Drama Review*, 30: 3 Fall (1986): 100

<sup>7</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990*, trans. and ed. Michal Kobialka, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 30

<sup>8</sup> Kantor, 212

<sup>9</sup> Michal Kobialka, "Let the Artists Die? An Interview with Tadeusz Kantor," *The Drama Review*, 30: 3 Fall (1986), 180

<sup>10</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>11</sup> *The General's Daughter* was performed on September 17<sup>th</sup> 2003 to an invited audience of theatre and design practitioners and academics. Immediately after the performance they were asked to record what they had seen, thought and felt in writing and to discuss their responses in small groups.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Klossowicz, "Tadeusz Kantor's Journey," *The Drama Review*, 30:3 Fall (1986): 103

<sup>13</sup> Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990*, trans. and ed. Michal Kobialka, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 286-287

<sup>14</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis* trans. Don Taylor (London: Methuen, 1991), 167

<sup>15</sup> John McEwen, *Paula Rego* (London: Phaidon Press, 1992), 169

- 
- <sup>16</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*, trans. David Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 247
- <sup>17</sup> Pavis, 313
- <sup>18</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, "Imaging," *Reading Images* ed. Julia Thomas (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), 106
- <sup>19</sup> see for example Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4-16 and Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 141-161
- <sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath ( London: Fontana Press, 1977), 52-68
- <sup>21</sup> Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13
- <sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 27
- <sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath ( London: Fontana Press, 1977), 57
- <sup>24</sup> Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999), 199
- <sup>25</sup> Participant 6d written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>26</sup> Participant 3d written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>27</sup> Participant 1c written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>28</sup> Participant 2c written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>29</sup> Participant 5b written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>30</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 133
- <sup>31</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*, trans. David Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 314
- <sup>32</sup> Pavis, 24
- <sup>33</sup> Participant 2c written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>34</sup> Participant 5b written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003

- 
- <sup>35</sup> Participant 7c written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>36</sup> Participant 2a written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>37</sup> Participant 6b written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>38</sup> Participant 1c written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 79
- <sup>40</sup> Lacan, J. 2000. "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," trans. Alan Harmondsworth, *Reading Images* ed. by Julia Thomas (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), 141
- <sup>41</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), 140
- <sup>42</sup> Michal Kobialka, "The Quest for the Self/Other: A Critical Study of Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre," Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944- 1990*, trans. and ed. Michal Kobialka, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 310-313
- <sup>43</sup> Kobialka, 331-332
- <sup>44</sup> Kobialka, 341
- <sup>45</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962 ), x
- <sup>46</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 73
- <sup>47</sup> Bert O.States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the phenomenology of theatre* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), 115
- <sup>48</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 82
- <sup>49</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962 ), xx
- <sup>50</sup> Participant 5c written notes, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003
- <sup>51</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An ethics of performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 101
- <sup>52</sup> Stephen di Benedetto, "Sensing Bodies: A Phenomenological Approach to the Performance Sensorium," *Performance Research* 8: 2 (2003): 102