POSTMODERN AMERICAN DRAMA: AN INTRODUCTION

THEATRE

To start with, I would like to talk about theatre as an art, a cultural practice and a genre. What do you think about the theatre? Do you like it? Do you often go the theatre?

What distinguishes theatre from other arts?

First and crucially, its public nature. This might seem obvious, but the word theatre defines a literary genre and a place. And this leads us to another essential point. The physicality of space and the real body and presence of actors performing, the fact that you are sitting for a couple of hours with other people, as members of an audience, defines and creates the theatrical experience.

The theatrical medium turns the AFFECTIVE CORPOREALITY AS CARRIER OF MEANINGS. We will have to bear in mind the oddly literal way which theatre has of making theory concrete and visible.

Theater is the only place where society collects in order to look upon itself as a third-personal other. Beneath all of the possible explanations of theater's usefulness as an image of man, there is this basic consubstantiality of form between its subject and its process. Theater (theatron, derived from “to see”) is a means of looking objectively at the subjective life of the race as something prepared for the community out of the substance of its own body (States 39).

A theatrical performance never hides that it requires from the audience a "willing suspension of disbelief" and thus an imaginative pact. It brings about a very peculiar synaesthesia between eye and ear: in the theatre you hear with your eyes and look with your ears.

Here is another definition of theatre. Martin Esslin, in an essay published in 1976, An Anatomy of Drama, writes:

The theatre is the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself. [...] Hamlet speaks of the theatre holding a mirror up to nature. I think in fact it is society to which theatre holds up the mirror. The theatre and all drama can be seen as a mirror in which society looks at itself (101-3).
This is a classic and traditional definition of what the theatre is, since it is clearly based on Aristotle’s conception of the theatre as described in his *Poetics* (335 BCE), and more specifically on the notion of MIMESIS, that is, dramatic action as an imitation or ‘mirroring’ of reality/nature. As we will see, the concept of mimesis would be challenged greatly in contemporary American drama. A broader and more contemporary way of thinking about the theatre could be instead as a place where a nation stages its identity, and not merely ‘looks at’ itself, but also, and crucially, imagines and assesses itself.

In the academic realm, theatrical studies are still a minor field of study, I would say even neglected, but there could be obvious reasons for this neglect in our contemporary societies. Theatre is a very old genre and, regardless the technical improvements on the stage (lighting, sound, machinery), it is essentially an art that has not changed over the years; it remains a practice that still needs to cope with its representational limitations. So, for our purposes, to talk about “postmodern drama” seems contradictory, oxymoronic, vexed. Can we really talk about a postmodern drama? What makes a theatre play postmodern? (I don’t want to provide definite, unambiguous answers to this question: our course is more intended as an exploration).

**DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF FEELINGS**

(Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, 1968)

The idea of convention is basic to any understanding of drama as form (12). Convention covers tacit agreement as well as accepted standards (13).

In the actual practice of drama, the convention, in any particular case, is simply the terms upon which author, performer and audience agree to meet, so that the performance may be carried on.

**STRUCTURES OF FEELING:**

First used by Raymond Williams in his A Preface to Film (with Michael Orrom, 1954), developed in *The Long Revolution* (1961), and extended and elaborated throughout his work, in particular Marxism and Literature (1977), Williams first used this concept to characterize the lived experience of the quality of life at a particular time and place. It is, he argued, “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activities.” Later he describes structures of feeling as “social experiences in solution.” Thus a “structure of feeling” is the Culture of a particular historical moment, though in developing the concept, Williams wished to avoid idealist notions of a “spirit of the age.” It suggests a common set of perceptions and values shared by a particular generation, and is most clearly articulated in particular and artistic forms and conventions.
AUDIENCE


The meanings of modern drama cannot be fully seized without considering how these meanings are produced as theatre. For in theatre, drama can only speak through the practices of acting and directing, the construction of the material space of the mise-en-scène, and the arrangement and disposition of the audience. [...] The theatre works to claim a certain kind of meaning for the drama by claiming – even legitimating – a certain experience of the audience as significant. The rhetoric of theatre, that is, frames a relationship between the drama, the stage production, and audience interpretation, and it is within that relationship that our experience as an audience takes place (1).

*The modern theater’s history of innovation is directly concerned with producing a certain kind of experience for the audience, and so with producing the audience itself.* As Austin E. Quigley suggests, this history describes a movement “away from a nineteenth-century tradition that gave priority to entertaining and instructing audiences” and toward “a modern tradition”

that gives priority to offering audience members the opportunity to participate in a particular mode of social enquiry. Such participation requires audience members to respond to the challenge of reconsidering their role as audience as a first step in reconsidering the nature of the theatre and the nature of the larger worlds in which they and it participate.
EXCERPTS:

Aristotle, *Poetics*. Section 2, Part viii. The Internet Classic Archive
<http://classics.mit.edu/index.html>

A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes— that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous— a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.

*DEATH OF A SALESMAN* (1949)

Arthur Miller and Tennesse Williams drama was a PSYCHOLOGICAL THEATRE IN WHICH SOCIAL ISSUES WERE RECONSTITUTED AS PRIVATE DRAMAS. The play explores the connection between personal fallibility and public betrayal.


“The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best.
Now, if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. The discovery of the moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity”.

[...] Seen in this light, our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological. If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our minds, then all action, let alone the heroic action, is obviously impossible.

And if society alone is responsible for the cramping of our lives, then the protagonist must need be so pure and faultless as to force us to deny his validity as a character. From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither represents a balanced concept of life. Above all else, tragedy requires the finest appreciation by the writer of cause and effect.

**THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO THE ARISTOTELIAN WESTERN LITERARY IMAGINATION**

“In the familiar language of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, then, the postmodern strategy of de-composition exists to generate rather than to purge pity and terror; to disintegrate, to atomize rather than to create a community. In the more immediate language of existentialism, it exists to generate anxiety or dread: to dislodge the tranquillized individual from the “at-home of publicness”, from the domesticated, the scientifically charted and organized familiarity of the totalized world.”


**THE MIGRATION OF POSTMODERN NARRATIVES TO THE THEATRE**

Postmodernism is a very unstable and tricky concept: few terms have been used and abused as much as this one in the last decades.

Whether or not one there has been a wholesale paradigm shift in the cultural, social and economic orders, there is still a noticeable shift in sensibility,
practices, and discourse formations which distinguishes a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences, propositions from that of a preceding period.

Two core concepts are:

- Ontological uncertainty, that arises from an “awareness of the absence of centers, of privileged languages, higher discourses”.

- A Postmodern Self as no longer a coherent entity that has the power to impose admittedly subjective order upon its environment. It has become decentered.

CHARACTER

1. The Shepardian character could might be understood to belong to the “dark helplessness” of the tragicomic tradition as described by John Orr in his influential volume *Tragicomedy and contemporary Culture: Play and performance from Beckett to Shepard* (1991), a theatrical tradition where the *dramatis personae*, from Beckett on, have no resources, [...] little wealth, few possessions and no cultural capital. Their lives are lived in a state of bewilderment as if they are playing out a game whose rules they did not invent and do not understand, a game that none of them can win. It is not their character or their personality that betrays them. It is their status and their predicament. They are largely nobodies in an unknowable world (Orr 1991, 2).

The common features to be found in the theatrical work of Pirandello, Genet, Pinter, Beckett and Shepard reveal a complex transformation in structures of feeling, to use Raymond Williams term, and, in Orr’s words, they disclose “above all, a movement away from a sense of social experience anchored in tangible issues of moral right, of the good and the just and their betrayal” (1991, 1).

2. Shepard’s ‘Note to the Actors’ as published in the Preface of *Angel City* (1976):

   Instead of the idea of ‘whole character’ with logical motives behind his behaviour which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation. This is not the same thing as one actor playing many different roles, each one distinct from the other (or “doubling up” as they call it), but more that he’s mixing many different underlying elements and connecting them through his intuition and senses to make a kind of music or painting in space without having to feel the need to
completely answer intellectually for the character’s behavior. If there needs to be a “motivation” for some of the abrupt changes which occur in the play they can be taken as full-blown manifestations of a passing thought or fantasy, having as much significance or “meaning” as they do in our ordinary lives. The only difference is that here the actor makes note of it and brings it to life in three dimensions (1984, 61-62).