

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Not Taking for Granted What We Do With Drama: Aesthetic Distancing and its Ethical Implications for Alternative and Educational Activities

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What is “aesthetic distancing”? Why should it concern alternative educators, and ethics committees who sanction performative work with vulnerable young people? We might begin by unpacking the term “aesthetic.” Etymologically the term derives from the ancient Greek term *aisthanomai*, which means “I perceive, feel, or sense”; so aesthetics pertain to the way we physically experience the world by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling it. Philosophically the term has come (via Baumgarten and Kant) to describe the way that artists of different “schools” organise the senses in certain, telling ways. For instance the Cubist Aesthetic radicalised the representation of form by making it possible to view different perspectives of an object at the same time.

Stories and bodies

My own research in Performance Philosophy (Katafiasz, 2013) provides a fresh analysis of the way the ancient Greeks choreographed the senses in their extraordinary theatre buildings. To this day traditional theatre aesthetics mean that audiences may address the stage with their eye but not their voice, actors address

audiences with their voice, but not their eye. This is significant because according to Lacanian writer Mladen Dolar (2006) the modalities of being seen and hearing are receptive, while seeing and being heard are active. The theatre arranges bodies in such a way that social and individual power relations are both respected; stage and auditorium each experience states of authority over, and exposure to, the other. These dynamics can help us understand why drama and democracy evolved hand in hand in the fifth century BCE. Indeed they elucidate structural imbalances in power relations in many contexts; for instance in gender relations, where men look and women are looked at (see Butler, 1993); but also in conventional classroom scenarios, where children are habitually subjected to the gaze and voice of their teacher. So when performances come out of theatre buildings as they do in some avant-garde, educational, and applied contexts, alternative practitioners who own their ethical responsibility to the “other” will wish to give serious thought as to whose gaze and whose voice is active. Whose needs does their work actually serve? Practitioners may have unacknowledged

needs of their own which they may be unwittingly using their audiences to fulfil.

Stories in spaces

Ancient theatre architecture then, makes aesthetic distance occur “naturally” for its actors and its audiences by democratically orchestrating the modalities of the gaze and voice. Theatre buildings also establish important spatial boundaries by marking the limits between public and private space. The stage, where fictional events take place in public, is clearly demarcated from the auditorium, where audiences respond in real life, privately. Backstage provides another private space, in this case for actors to rest between entrances and exits.

Ancient tragedies breeched the boundary between the public space of the play and the actors’ private space when the play’s violent events spilled over into the invisible backstage space. These days “immersive theatre” breeches the space between stage and auditorium. For instance Tim Crouch’s play *The Author* (2009) begins with its characters, one of whom turns out to be a paedophile, sitting amongst audience members. Caroline Bird’s *Chamber Piece* (2013) stages a murderer escaping his execution by climbing off the stage and over the seats in the auditorium.

Immersive theatre turns theatre’s fictional cosmos into an illusion which affects us physically, but this is normally only momentary, because we have knowingly and voluntarily entered the performance space and as adults we have experienced and understand its dynamics. Although they make audiences distinctly queasy, these experiences are actually no more dangerous than a roller-coaster ride

we have sought out and strapped ourselves into. But alternative educators and practitioners may be working in situations that children have not chosen and may not be free to leave; and even if they or their parents/carers agree for them to take part, these guardians of their children’s welfare are unlikely to understand what is at stake. One to one performances in intimate settings where children are filmed, stared-at, and their personal space invaded however gently, by people in role, dummies or puppets, can be intimidating. This is *particularly* so for children, and particularly for children whose mobility is compromised.

The coerced imagination

Breeching boundaries between public and private space for theatrical effect at least acknowledges that these boundaries exist, and does not pose an actual physical threat. More serious problems arise when performers ignore or disregard aesthetic distance altogether; and particularly when young people, who are developmentally less well equipped to distinguish between fact and fiction, are involved. Augusto Boal invented his Invisible Theatre in the increasingly repressive regimes of Brazil and Argentina in the 1970s. The idea was to confront the public with the social realities the regimes repressed, but it is a classic case of the theatre unwittingly mirroring the authoritarian practices it claims to subvert. Actors would perform carefully rehearsed scenes in public spaces, deliberately dressing fiction as fact. As we have seen, immersive theatre can make people feel momentarily transported, “carried away,” or just plain frightened by performance; but if the illusory nature of the performance is

hidden, audiences suffer a state of entrapment inside someone else's fantasy.

Technically this happens because the structure of the sign has been reversed without our realising it. What we take for an object is in fact a signifier, and languages and bodies, pattern and sensation change places with each other. In such situations instead of endorsing objects as we suppose, signifiers command them, and people enter a state of ideologically induced delusion philosopher Louis Althusser terms "interpellation" (2001, pp. 32-42).

The strategy would seem to cross an important line from immersive to coercive practice. During Boal's Invisible Theatre performances hapless passers-by, believing the staged situations to be genuine, would compromise their anonymity to get publicly involved in rigged discussions and disputes, like children mesmerised by a ventriloquist's dummy. So when taking performances outside spaces which are clearly set up for that purpose, the ethically aware alternative educator and practitioner needs to be very careful to make it clear to their young audiences before, often during, and after work in role, or with dummies and puppets, where the boundaries between reality and fiction actually lie.

From illusion to delusion

It is curious how blurring the line between fact and fiction coincides with crossing from a state of illusion into a state of delusion to compromise physical and psychological safety. Consider the case of a young woman who suffers panic attacks; she devises a monologue about a young woman who suffers panic attacks; when she performs her piece she suffers a panic

attack and is hospitalised for several days. It does not seem to matter if fiction is dressed as fact as in Invisible Theatre, or fact as fiction in the case of the young woman. The problem lies in the state of confusion we encounter without that all-important aesthetic distancing, when semblance and proximity, pattern and sensation, words and bodies are indistinguishable from each other. Alenka Zupančič likens this unbounded state of affairs to the experiences of Freud's delusional patient President Schreber, to whom "symbolic relations appear as real—like 'nerves' and 'cosmic rays'" (Zupančič, 2008, p. 161).

The creative imagination

This short article aims to highlight the need for everybody who sanctions or uses the power of performance in educational and community settings to understand the importance of aesthetic distancing, or "protection into role." Without it, well-intentioned practitioners can stumble into practice that is not only bad, but dangerous for the psychological well-being of audiences and participants. Drama in Education, Play Therapy, or Drama Therapy courses, all take training in aesthetic distancing *extremely* seriously. Dorothy Heathcote's finely nuanced strategies for aesthetic distancing can be used to generate the embodied cognition hotly sought-after by educationalists and performance researchers alike (1991, pp. 166-167). Heathcote's Conventions for Dramatic Action could form the basis of an ethical practice, but they are the subject of another article.

The point to make here is that it may be naïve to think that all dramatic practices are harmless, fun and entertaining, *per se*.

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In the right hands drama can be powerful and therapeutic, but in the hands of someone without the appropriate training it can be psychologically destructive. Ethics committees dealing with academic research and practices using drama need to articulate a rationale for ethical practice which includes strategies for aesthetic distancing or protection into role such as those provided by Heathcote, or they may unwittingly sanction activities that do harm. It is worth mentioning again that this is especially so in the case of children who cannot run away from what may frighten or trouble them and whose parents, although consenting, may be unaware of the problems involved in allowing their children to be exposed to drama without distance.

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