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Das Drama des Sehens: Auge, Blick und Bühnenform (review)

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(Review)

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these essays unquestionably challenge and advance our understanding of late medieval and early modern performance.

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Ulrike Haß. *Das Drama des Sehens: Auge, Blick und Bühnenform*.

Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005. 406 pp. illus. bibl. €48.90. ISBN: 3-7705-3978-8.

In her dense and often suggestive study, *Das Drama des Sehens: Auge, Blick und Bühnenform*, Ulrike Haß traces a connection between historically variable structures of perception and the physical structures of theaters in Europe from classical antiquity to the eighteenth century. Her methodological approach is to begin with a detailed theoretical account of historical changes in visual perception and then to use this account to bring to light a *Bühnenform*, or structure of theater, that she calls the “unknown variable” of her study. In the first half of her book, therefore, Haß develops a sophisticated and idiosyncratic theoretical account of structures of visual perception and in the second half she applies that account to a series of architectural case studies of planned, and actually existing, theaters. Haß’s broadest theoretical claim is that a culture’s most basic modes of perceiving and understanding the world on the one hand, and the structures of a culture’s theater on the other, are so intimately linked that they in fact constitute two sides of the same coin. Haß’s goal in this book is to document the history of the interconnection of visual perception and theater history in Europe.

Haß develops her theoretical account of a historically variable structure of perception by means of two, somewhat difficult, terms of art that appear in her title, *Blick* (view) and *Auge* (eye), which she uses to refer to basic styles or modes of seeing. While Haß says that she cannot offer any straightforward definitions of these terms, she associates the notion of *Blick* with a subjective point-of-view that defines a background and a foreground, and focuses on a small number of highly individualized objects in the foreground. By contrast, Haß associates the notion of *Auge* with a free-floating perception of a whole world of objects that are all equally engaging and simultaneously present to the observer. Haß suggests that the mode of *Blick* is recognized and theorized in Italian Renaissance investigations of perspective and the illusion of depth in paintings, notably including the famous discussions of this issue by Alberti and Brunelleschi. According to Haß, the theoretical recognition of the more free-floating perceptual mode of the *Auge* is a byproduct of the discovery of the human retina, which early modern anatomists thought of as a kind of passive mirror reflecting all objects in the field of vision without privileging any.

Having defined these two modes or styles of perception, Haß does not posit any simple historical transition from one to the other. Rather, she insists on a complex and subtle dialectic in which these two modes of perception support and complicate each other. For Haß, it is this dialectic that accounts for much of the

history of perception that she tries to bring to light. Though Hass's account is sometimes difficult to follow, it is immensely suggestive in inviting us to imagine historical change in basic patterns of visual perception that typically feel spontaneous, natural, and universally human.

In the second half of the book Haß offers a survey of the theory and practice of theater-construction from Vitruvius in the first century BCE to Pozzo at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In these chapters, Haß reconstructs the vital role that commitments to theories of perception and sight played in the design of theaters and stages. One of the real pleasures of Haß's book are the sixty-eight beautifully reproduced images of theater and stage designs that provide telling evidence of the ways in which theater architects aimed to harness the geometries of perception and perspective as they understood them. Though Haß's account of theater history is characterized by a proliferation of historical narratives, it is nevertheless possible to detect a central argument. Drawing on some speculative reconstructions of ancient Greek and Roman theater, Haß suggests that the aural or vocal dimension was still central to this ritualistic theater since it treated the human voice more as a rhythmic instrument for forging collective community than as a mode of communication. Haß argues that in late antiquity this aural dimension in theater was gradually lost as more and more emphasis was placed on visual spectacle. (Haß makes the interesting side argument that the rise of opera is a late byproduct of this transition, and that it preserves the centrality of the aural dimension.) Within the ensuing visual era of the theater — essentially the era of theatrical modernity — Haß sees a gradual shift from an emphasis on fully-situated spectacles that integrate drama with the specific place in which a theater is located (for example, a town square) to an emphasis on the theater as a relatively autonomous space that can reflect a whole world from nowhere.

Since her book is focused on theater architecture and design, Haß does not examine the implications of her account for literary interpretation of early modern drama. But her effort to place theater history within the context of a history of visual perception fits well with recent important attempts to develop a phenomenological approach to early modern theater, as Bruce Smith does, for example, in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*. In essence, Haß's book invites us to imagine the theater not merely as a literary and narrative phenomenon but as a complex visual phenomenon. Haß suggests that this complex visual phenomenon is characterized by a dynamic interplay between, on the one hand, a perspective that focuses on the characters who occupy the foreground of our perception and who demand our attention as individuals and, on the other hand, a very different perspective that luxuriates in the world of objects, including the objects that are human bodies, that the theater, in its visual generosity as a medium, places before our eyes.

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