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Performing Queer Modernism by Penny Farfan (review)

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***Performing Queer Modernism.* By Penny Farfan. Oxford University Press, 2017. 154 pages. Cloth \$125.00, Paper \$40.95. 18 illustrations.**

Modernism as a movement has frequently been relegated to the annals of its historical situatedness, and yet its very existence is a rejection of the linear western forms that preceded its creation. As such, contemporary modernist scholarship has endeavored to decouple the modernist movement from historically specific modalities and embrace the ways in which the movement still continues to be shaped by culturally liberative analysis and iterative and transformative (re)production. This need to re-evaluate modernism on the basis of contemporary thinking is due, in large part, as Farfan suggests, to the sublimated messages of modernism that cultural repression and suppression necessitated during the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By performing and reconsidering modernist texts in ways that shine a light on their queerness, their initial intention and continuing relevance can be brought to the forefront. In *Performing Queer Modernism*, Penny Farfan argues, that this is particularly relevant to queer texts, because, until recently, a level of subterfuge was demanded in order for the works to be extant without persecution, retribution, and defamation. Not only does Farfan highlight a shared aesthetic, narrative, and dialectical approach between queerness and modernism, she elucidates that modernism cannot exist without latent queer narratives, many of which allied themselves with the very rejection of form and formula that is seen more broadly across modernist texts. Farfan's main argument articulates a coevolution between modern queer identity in performance and modernist ideology as inextricable and indeed completely reliant upon one another.

Penny Farfan contends with this critical re-evaluation of modernism in her book by exposing how abstraction and the sublimation of queerness in the modernist period was integral to the creation and the progression of the movement itself. This premise takes shape, predominantly, with a focus on homosocial relationships, androgynous becomings, ghostings, and often a sublimated rejection of heteronormative relationship structures. Organized into five chapters, her analysis spans traditional theatre, ballet, experimental dance, and metatheatrical texts to arrive at a queer modern aesthetic that showcases assimilationist resistance in performance. These broader trends in queer modernism are accompanied by frequent ghostings of the queer body, as demonstrated through dance, photography, and the overlay/overlap of stories with events such as the trial of Oscar Wilde, as well as the ways in which queer identities required a rejection of narrative, form, and popular expectations in order to project their subversive materials.

In the case of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* by Arthur Wing Pinero, which Farfan discusses in her first chapter, the embedded queer relationship is a homosocial one: Mrs. Tanqueray becomes obsessed with her convent-educated step-daughter, Ellean, and when this obsession is not reciprocated, Mrs. Tanqueray takes her life.

According to Farfan, this homosocial relationship serves to decenter the expectations of the society play by refusing to resolve itself into a happy marriage. Additionally, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* draws a correlative between the fallen women and lesbianism, without creating a moral reprehensibility within this narrative. Noël Coward's *Private Lives* provides another example of an obfuscation of the heteronormative ideal by showcasing the unattainable expectations of heterosexual relationships via a ghosting of the protagonist's past relationships. This is to say that rather than following the typical comedic trajectory of resolution through marriage, *Private Lives* begins with two divorces and the subsequent reunification of Amanda and Elyot, flipping expectations of normative relationships in addition to defying typical dramatic structures. While this alone may not offer a deeply queer narrative, Farfan argues, Amanda and Elyot are coded queer by their resistance of gender norms and their refusal to uphold heteronormative moral obligations; the couple seeks immediate happiness over longevity and security.

Farfan threads these diverse and divergent queer texts together by highlighting a collective sense of *failure*. A queer theoretical notion previously articulated by Jack Halberstam, this notion of failure manifests itself not only as resistance to the status quo (a failure to comply) but also through a failure to tell stories in "good" ways that support the Aristotelian dramatic structure. Further, the texts Farfan highlights fail to substantiate heterosexual desire, which, at times, manifests as a failure to engage with desire at all.

While Vaslav Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun* has been widely accepted as a fundamental queer text, Farfan connects Nijinsky's faun's disinterest in the nymphs with a resistance of heterosexual expectations. Farfan aptly quotes Cyril Beaumont in her discussion: "the Chief Nymph's escape is not a consequence of the Faun's failed pursuit but rather his choice to let her elude him" (qtd in Farfan 47). In allowing the nymph to elude him, the faun is also treading another path, one of autoeroticism, coded as queer through the dance's incredible precision (a resistance of normative dance roles and expectations) and Nijinsky's self-love (a desire for men).

Farfan quotes, at length, critical reviews and receptions of each work under consideration to demonstrate not so much the "obscurity" of these queer narratives (though certainly that was top of mind for many of the reviewers), but to highlight the resistance and difference within these works that was interpreted as failure. Djuna Barnes's one acts, for example, have largely been rejected as "not theatrical" and yet, Barnes most certainly chose theatre as her format with intent. This intention disregards expected narrative structures to create "metatheatrical modernist parodies" (75) which laid critical foundations for feminist ideology and which resisted the tidy codification of femininity through "androgynous compilations" (71) and "performance of self through costume assemblages" (72). Assemblages and their ghostings also take on resonance in Farfan's discussion of Loïe Fuller's

Fire Dance, as discussed in chapter 2, which used technological advancements to project an other-than-human ghosting of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.

Farfan sets out to demonstrate an inextricable link between modernism and queerness, but at times, this link is not fully substantiated within her textual analysis; and while Farfan's critical and historical understanding of modernism comport authority, her renderings of queerness do not always interrogate gender performativity as thoroughly as her investigations seem to demand. More effective is how Farfan uses her performance examples to demonstrate an outright rebellion against the type of storytelling that is often required by the dominant paradigm. In almost each performative example, Farfan extensively discusses how critics and artistic contemporaries hated these works for their inability to present propriety, tidy storytelling, and heterosexual ideology as paramount. Considering contemporary queer theory's recognition of the notion of deviance as always already queer, Farfan's assertions take on critical weight in her ability to showcase how the so-called deviant inspired alternate choreographies, multimedia performativities, and alternative heterosexual relationships that were heavily coded as queer in order to be acceptably presented.

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***Theater of State: A Dramaturgy of the United Nations.* By James R. Ball III. Northwestern University Press, 2019. Paper \$34.95, eBook \$34.95, Hardcover \$99.95. 224 pages. 8 illustrations.**

Listen carefully next time a cable news pundit dismisses a politician's speech as "political theatre" or "just a performance": the next sounds will be groans of scholars and the launching of a thousand Twitter threads arguing that theatre and performance achieve real-world effects. This is a tough sell beyond humanities departments. Scholars invest intellectual energy in work by people like J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, and Shoshana Felman, but everyday people groan right back once philosophy enters the discourse.

James R. Ball III's *Theater of State: A Dramaturgy of the United Nations* attempts to span this gap. The book offers an accessible analysis of how the United Nations and International Criminal Court perform theatrically toward diplomatic ends. The volume's primary concern is how the theatrical execution of diplomacy shapes the work of international institutions for their many diverse spectators. Spending four chapters on the UN and two on the ICC, Ball concentrates on particular events where performance proved consequential in diplomatic spaces, and examines how performativity might shape a public reading of the institutions. By