A Staging and Choreograhy of Theatrical Play: A Brechtian Aesthetic for Popular Culture

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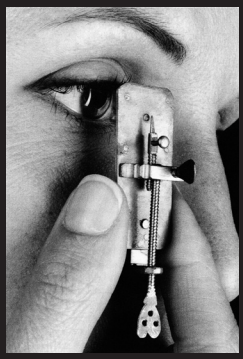

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In Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965), Buster Keaton seeks to escape the relentless, mobile perception of the camera that effortlessly and silently stalks his every move, but to no avail. The camera and Keaton constantly respond to each other's movements, entangled in an endless choreography or dance (figure 1). Based on George Berkeley's famous dictum, *"Esse est percipi"* (that is, "To be is to be perceived"), Beckett's film can be seen to represent the playing out of a theatrical game poised between the perceiving eye and what is being perceived. Neither is independent, both intimately respond to each other's activities in a dance in which the final form of the choreography (the film itself) requires both partners. The theatricality played out between perceiver and perceived underscores many aspects of popular culture, which themselves become a theatrical 'playing out' between perceiver and perceived, the final form of which emerges from a choreography that intimately involves both parties.

As Ernst Gombrich (1964) recognises, the beholder always has a share in visual ephemera – what is read into paintings, etchings and accidental or ambiguous shapes depends on a capacity to recognise in them images stored in the mind. To interpret an inkblot as a bat or a butterfly means, for Gombrich, an act of perceptual classification and projection upon the visual form. Line figures and scenes, such as those in comics, depicted with simple brushstrokes, without fully defined features (figure 2), always have context, personality or feeling when perceived; the beholder's experiences become part of the depicted work itself. On this premise it can be seen that certain types of visual forms – across media such as film and television – that appear ambiguous, minimal and strange, that reduce the recognisable aspects of the object depicted, actively involve the familiarity and expectation of the perceiver-beholder's perceptual experience; they actively involve the beholder.

The experiential share that the beholder has in the visual work reveals one aspect of this choreography between perceiver and perceived: what is not directly, materially presented to perception (not present within the work itself) is always suggested indirectly and is present within the perception of the image. This was so for Rudolf Arnheim (1957, p. 33), who reveals, with regard to the experience of watching a silent film, that no one who went *without prejudice* to see a silent film missed the noises – the sound of walking feet, the rustling of leaves, the ticking of a clock – or the smells, which they experienced as if the depicted events were taking place in real life. For Arnheim, the eye always works in cooperation with the other senses, those of sound, taste, smell and touch, including the feelings of equilibrium and weight. Whilst not materially present, this experience can be perceptually present, as witnessed in a scene in Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), in which a feeling of giddiness is produced when watching the film as the camera travels, turns and pans very rapidly (figure 3).

The indirect presentation of non-visual sense experience within a silent film is exemplified through techniques such as unusual and striking angles, and the delimitation of the visual image, which paraphrases one event through another that is strange to it. Arnheim (p. 78) notes that these techniques result in a positive

Fig. 1: *Film* (Samuel Beckett, 1965)

artistic effect – for example, the scene of a suicide in Josef von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* (1929). Nothing is shown in the shot but the quivering surface of the water in which we see the reflection of the boat, with the woman standing up and then jumping overboard (figure 4). The woman is shown indirectly through her reflection, which both estranges the scene from immediate recognition and delimits the image through its minimal presentation as a silhouette.

This artistic paraphrase – an indirect representation of an event that is strange to it – presents not the action but the consequences of the action, as Arnheim shows with another scene from *The Docks of New York*, in which a gunshot is fired but the pistol remains unseen. The beholder does not simply infer that a gunshot has been fired, they experience something of the quality of the noise in the depiction of the sudden, abrupt flight of disturbed birds (figure 5) that visually paraphrases the exact quality that the shot possesses acoustically. Similarly, when traced across literature, Arnheim finds that when Dante writes of how Francesca da Rimini, describing how she fell in love with the man with whom she has been in the habit of reading, remarks, "We read no more that day", he is indicating indirectly that on that day they kissed. These visual and literary paraphrases can be seen to estrange a scene by complicating the form, which, as literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1916) writes, foregrounds a perceptual knowledge of things – an artistic aesthetic that returns sensation to the limbs, to the body, to perception itself, and away from what he terms an economy of perception through rationality. As it was for Arnheim and Dante, so it was for Tolstoy. Shklovsky remarks that Tolstoy does not call a thing by its name, but describes it as if seen for the first time (or as if an incident was happening for the first time), or he replaces the conventional names for things with the corresponding parts of others that are strange to them. The plot of *Kholstomer*, for instance, is told from the point of view of a horse, estranging the institution of poverty, and revealing, for perception and reflection, any inherent ideology (figure 6).

Such estrangement, through the reduction of recognisable and previously known visual and literary forms, extends perception and promotes a kind of perceptual theatricality that involves both the work and the beholder's experience in a choreography that results in the form. This theatrical play between beholder and image echoes the sentiment of the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, who used the estrangement of everyday activity to distance the spectator through defamiliarising theatrical effects. Brecht's reflexive dramaturgy aimed to undermine the assumed passivity of the spectator by presenting familiar satiric entities in unfamiliar ways through minimalist stage décor, anonymous or indifferent acting styles, and words, music and settings that worked independently of each other. Brecht's theatrical techniques present to the perception an unrecognisable form, one that actively involves the beholder's multi-sensory experience – a form of theatricality

Fig. 2: Comic depiction of a kitchen scene (Scott McCloud, 1993)

that emerges through the choreography or dance between the perceiver and the perceived, and which extends to the medium of film and other visual ephemera.

As Martin Walsh (1981) recognises, the experimental films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet utilise Brechtian aspects of epic theatre through specific estrangement techniques. In particular, their 1975 film *Moses and Aaron* (a filmic presentation of Schoenberg's original opera of the same name for a televisual audience) was built upon Brechtian estranging theatrical devices. This piece, through the estranging effects of prolonged long shots and unusual camera angles (figure 7), the minimalism of the mise-en-scène, and the destruction of a continuous filmic space within which spectators could find themselves (figure 8), presents the perceivers with an ambiguous and estranged visual form that their perception can play with and respond to, a televisual event that is, aesthetically and perceptually at least, theatrical and playful.

Such theatricality in the televisual event extended into the popular culture of advertising film during the 1960s, which actively engaged the audience perceptually through estranging effects, staging an invitation to join in with the emerging choreography. Viewed in this light, they can be said to be Brechtian. As some examples of advertising film during this period demonstrate, by strongly echoing the estranging forms of Brechtian dramaturgy, such as minimal and almost ambiguous mise-en-scène, drawn-out and contemplative long shots, strange and unusual camera angles, surrealistic visual imagery and an indifferent acting style (figure 9), they address the audience in a way that breaks with any illusionistic filmic space (figure 10).

The presentation of the content of popular culture in this ambiguous, estranged and indirect way can be seen as a constant, open-handed gesture towards the perception of the beholder, inviting them to grasp hold of and partially share in a reciprocal dance that always requires two partners, and in which the beholder and the work take turns in leading the choreography as it emerges. Just as with Buster Keaton's attempts to escape the ever-perceiving camera, no work can ever fully escape perception because it is always made and experienced as emerging from a choreography that involves at least two partners: the work itself and the perception of the beholder.

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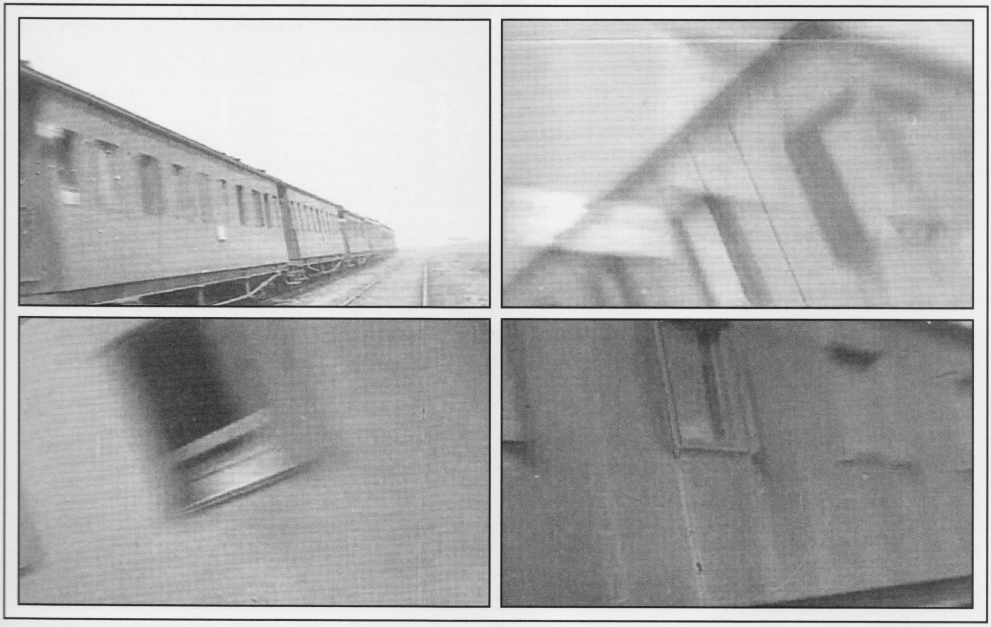

Fig. 3: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929)

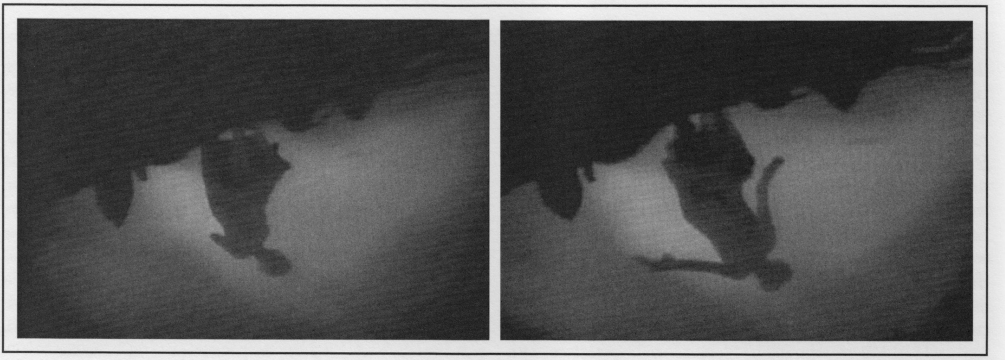

Fig. 4: Suicide scene from *The Docks of New York* (Josef von Sternberg, 1929)

Fig. 5: Gunshot scene from *The Docks of New York* (Josef von Sternberg, 1929)

What they were saying about flogging and about Christianity I understood very well. But I was completely mystified by the meaning of the phrase "*my* colt" or "*his* colt." I could see that humans presupposed a special relationship between me and the stable. What the nature of that relationship was I could not fathom at the time. Only much later, when I was separated from the other horses, did I understand what all this meant. At that time, however, I couldn't possibly understand what it meant when I heard myself called by people as the property of a human being. The words "*my* horse" referred to me, a living horse, and this seemed to me just as strange as the words "my land," "my air" or "my water."

And yet, these words had an enormous impact on me. I thought about this night and day, and it was only after many diverse contacts with humans that I learned at

Fig. 6: Citation from Tolstoy's *Kholstomer* (cited in Viktor Shklovsky, 1916: 2009, p. 7)

Fig. 7: Opening scene from *Moses and Aaron* (Straub and Huillet, 1975)

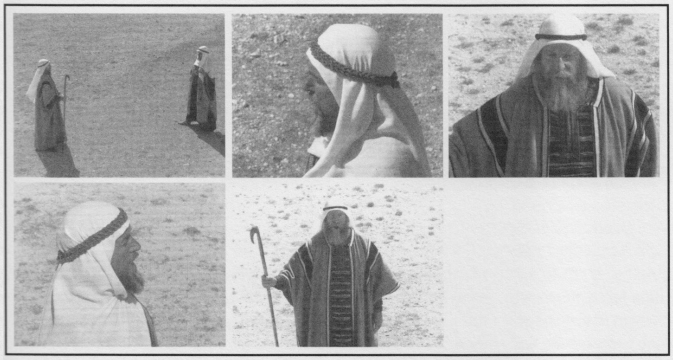

Fig. 8: The destruction of filmic space in *Moses and Aaron* (Straub and Huillet, 1975)

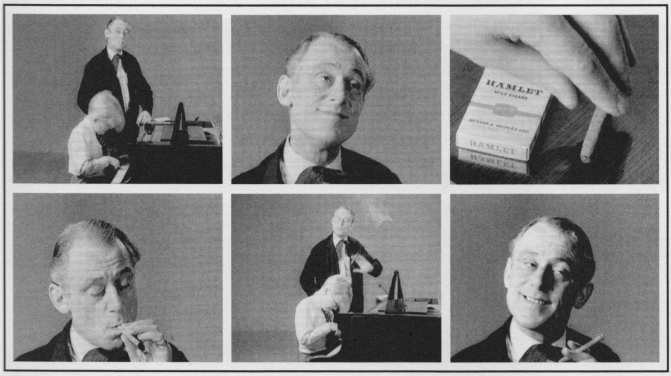

Fig. 9: Hamlet cigars' Music Teacher (Collet, Dickinson and Pearce, 1968)

Fig. 10: Addressing the audience in advertising films. Left: Philips' Light (NL c. 1960); centre: Hamlet cigars' Launderette (UK 1968); right: Philips' Knife Thrower (NL c. 1960)

About the Authors:

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