

Kendrick, Lynne. 2015. 'Scene in the Dark' in 'Sounding out 'the scenographic turn': eight position statements, edited by A. Curtin, & D. Roesner, for *Theatre and Performance Design*, 1:1-2, pp. 115 – 116

Scenography is not without sound. As an 'orchestration' of potentially all that which constitutes theatre (see Butterworth & McKinney), relinquishing the sonic is not the aim of the scenographic. However, the idea of a post-sonic, scenographic turn suggests a move away from sound, an implication that one belies the other. This invites old divisions – of the sonic versus the visual, or ear versus eye – back into the conversation, but perhaps this is for good reason. Sound has recently penetrated theatre-making practices in ways that suggest the opposite turn, a move towards sound, might be the case. The sound designer has, according to Carolyn Downing,¹ recently emerged from the 'tech box' and, taking a position within the rehearsal room, has embedded the sonic in the mix of theatre making. This, in turn, has brought sound designers as theatre artists to the fore, Melanie Wilson and Adrienne Quartly to name but two. This attention to the sonic is not merely a trend, often dismissed as the happenstance of technological advances, or as symptomatic of collaborative practice models. These instances of sonic scenography are emerging because of possibility: theatre makers are drawn to the potential of sound for its ability to generate scenography where visuality falls short.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Theatre-in-the-Dark, as its scenography is almost entirely sonic. This is an emergent form of theatre which is garnering much interest, particularly in the UK, and it is one which takes the 'blackout' of mainstream theatre – the negative space of stage and auditorium convention – as its base material, the ground from which its scenography springs. In the darkness of Rosenberg and Neath's 'sound journeys', the haptic dramaturgies of Extant Theatre and the 'white-out' spaces of Lundahl and Seidl's performance events, the 'scene' is carved out of sound in all its incarnations. The visual space may at points appear – seeded by visual prologues, or glimpses of shapes, contours and shades invented in half-light – but the design is entirely sonic and, as such, the scenographic encounter is primarily an aural experience. Thus Theatre-in-the-Dark places the perceptual emphasis on audience rather than spectatorship, indeed the growing popularity of this form of theatre is predicated on the less certain terrain of listening and the unpredictable experiences this may offer. Any scene can be conjured in the dark. When the first experiments with darkness took place at the Playing in the Dark season (BAC London 1998) some joked it was a neat solution to budget cuts. No need for lights, no need for any material that makes theatre visually evident. Yet the sonic scenography of darkness is more than visual absence. Theatre-in-the-Dark entirely reinvents scenographic spaces, transporting audiences and immersing us within them. This produces an aesthetic of uncertainty which frequently re-casts us as various subjects within its midst, questioning our identity and our processes of identification. However, this is not a case of 'not seeing'; in the darkness we are invited to visualise a myriad of spectacles, but we see through ears. Visuality falls short because it remains the object before us; separated and distinct it can only be gazed upon for all its pomp and expense. Sound, it is often said, moves us and moves through us, and it is this subjective property that can transform a scenographic design from object to an experience.

¹ Downing speaking at the Theatre Sound Colloquium, RCSSD, ASD and RNT June 2013.

My response to the question as to whether a sonic or scenic 'ography' now takes its turn, would be ask: how much is the latter predicated on the former? Not in terms of genealogy, but materially, in the case of Theatre-in-the-Dark – entirely. It is not necessary to seek a position for sound in all this; the sonic *imposition* is that a visual can be entirely cast by sonic means. Moreover this potential is ever present because sound is never *not* present. It stalks scenography, haunts its perimeter, threatening to challenge any residual visual bias. In this way sound is the noise in the scenographic turn, but it is not an annihilation of it. Rather, as sound designers/theatre makers have demonstrated, sound has the capacity to extend the reach of scenography, not only beyond the finite realm of the visual object but beyond what we might understand scenography to be. This development of what constitutes scenography is integral to its emergence. As Patrice Pavis recently stated, 'scenography extends its power just as it loses its specificity' (Pavis 2013, 73).

Perhaps it is sound that signals a scenographic turn?

References

Butterworth, P. & McKinney J. (2009) *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* Cambridge: CUP

Pavis, P. (2013) *Contemporary Mise en Scène* trans. Joel Anderson, London & New York: Routledge

Resources

<http://www.adriennequartly.com/>

<http://extant.org.uk/>

<http://www.fueltheatre.com/projects/ring>

<http://www.lundahl-seitl.com/>

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