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SCENIC IMAGE:
A KEY TO DRAMA AND TO THE EXPERIENCE
OF THE SPECTATORS *

What happens within our minds when we look at a theatre performance? A simple question leading to complicated answers. At the same time, a fundamental question in theatre research, a question we cannot ignore. A simple enough answer might be that we see and hear something; we receive a continuous flow of tiny impulses through our senses, partly through the eyes, partly through the ears. We are not merely listening to literature; our experience in the theatre is different from a reading experience. The sensuous side is strongly present: we see actors, their costumes, movements, facial and gestic expressions, against a colourful and artistically arranged setting, we hear not only words articulated in individual ways but also music and/or sound effects. How to coordinate and organize these impressions within our minds?

It is a scholar's task to find the ways and means to organize them. A beginning for such a process of arranging them might be the observation that the impressions we receive are not equal. Some scenes and sequences are more important than the rest; only a dull and lifeless performance might run its course without any variation in the artistic significance of its consecutive moments. What strikes us as theatrically effective, as "good theatre", is usually a moment of intense acting. It may be a great monologue. Or a mass scene with dynamic movement. These moments may be so effective and conspicuous that they capture the imagination of spectators for centuries. Think about *Hamlet* with Yorick's skull in his hand, with the graveyard as the background of his speech. Is this not a moment remembered by audiences throughout the centuries? Is it not

* The middle section of this paper is based on O'Neill's *Scenic Images*, by Timo Tiusanen, copyright (c) 1968 by Princeton University Press; selection from „Introduction”, pp. 10-18. There are a few references to *Dürrenmatt: A Study in Plays, Prose Theory*, to be published by Princeton University Press, 1977. The quotation from Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *The Visit* is from the translation into English, copyright (c) 1962 by Jonathan Cape, translated by Patrick Bowles, p. 38.

an emblem, a symbol of the entire play? Does it not crystallize the focal themes of death and decay, of the transitory nature of human life? Is it not more essential for our understanding than quite a lot of other moments in many productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?

I have chosen to call such a moment a "scenic image". The adjective "scenic" in all theatre performances take place — and to establish a contrast with the concept of a "verbal" image or metaphor. And the noun "image" is employed to emphasize the sensuous side present in the theatre, and only in the theatre, not on the written page. It is my basic contention that the concept of "scenic image" is a useful key to drama and to the experience of the spectators. It helps us to organize and coordinate the impressions we receive when looking at a theatre performance.

I arrived at the concept of "scenic image" as a scholar in drama. It can perhaps be stated that quite a powerful current in modern drama studies tends to emphasize their connection with the theatre. Scholars in drama are at least vaguely conscious of the fact that they are not analyzing a poem or a novel but a piece of writing intended for the stage. Methods of research established when studying poetry are not directly adaptable for studies in drama. While this has been widely acknowledged and while there has been a certain amount of consciousness of the stage, there has also been a conspicuous lack of studies in which the presence of the stage in every actable play has been taken as a cornerstone, as a starting point for a consistent body of scholarly thinking. "Scenic image" might act as such a cornerstone. This concept may be useful in other fields of theatre research as well; I shall start with an outline for a method analyzing drama with the help of "scenic image".

The discussion can begin with the supposition that there is in a writer's mind a vision. A poet or a novelist transforms his vision into language in a straightforward manner. A playwright's achievement depends not only on language. For him, there are several other phenomena involved, all of which are connected with the idea of the stage:

setting, properties, costumes, sound and lighting effects, music, groupings, the actor's individual expression, his gestures, movements, make-up, vocal and facial expressions.

These are the scenic means of expression of a playwright, of a play.

A poet or novelist uses verbal means of expression; a playwright, verbal and scenic. With the help of these means he constructs a series of scenic images. A scenic image cannot be defined as unequally as a verbal image; yet it is something existing, something real. I am now presenting a more detailed definition of scenic image:

A scenic image is a scene (or, more often, part of a scene) in which several scenic means of expression are used to achieve an effect charged with thematic significance.

Let us deal with some details of this definition. To be striking, a scenic image cannot last very long — not for a whole act, for example. The phenomenon can be connected with fundamental question of rhythm in drama and with a spectator's ability to remain attentive. Rather than giving the scenic image a legitimate length in minutes and seconds, it is sensible to grant it some variable length, some dimension in time. Conceding it the possibility of lasting a whole scene leaves the door open for hectic short scenes, typical of the German or American expressionists. *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill or *Man and the Masses* by Ernst Toller can be taken as rapid successions of scenic images.

The cooperation or fusion of several means of expression is presupposed in the definition in order to emphasize the importance of interaction between these means. They function together, or clash against one another; a sound effect, for instance, may change the tone of an entire scene or act. The setting is always present on the stage, and just placing an actor in front of it already leads to the use of several means. It is not an easy task to get the spectators involved in what they see and hear on the stage. That is why a playwright had better charge his images with the help of several effective scenic means of expression. If he tries too hard, however, he may achieve only melodrama.

The last phrase in the definition tries to connect this formal element with the theme or 'message' of the play. Irrelevant events are apt to bore rather than impress us as members of the audience. This does not mean that the image must be full of violent outer action, however; Anton Chekhov's plays are made up of quietly intensive images. The theme can be present in a scenic image carried by one or several means: the actors, dialogue, property, setting, sound effects, music.

The concept of scenic image grew quite naturally out of the material of my study on O'Neill. The phenomenon referred to preceded its name. A particular part of a total play or production, furnished with extra significance in a reader's or spectator's mind, was given a distinct name for the purpose of making analyses possible. Having studied all of O'Neill's forty-nine plays with the help of this concept, I proceeded to analyze the total literary output of Friedrich Dürrenmatt. I have also attended hundreds of rehearsals and performances of the most varied plays, yet not found anything that would gainsay using the term scenic image to illuminate a play or a performance. I am convinced of the relevance of the concept.

Yet the distinction between scenic images and other elements in a play

needs closer consideration. A stage presentation can be seen as a continuous flow of imagery, partly visual, partly auditive. Every moment of stage action is a composite image consisting of a group of characters or a single individual in front or within a setting, with a fragment of dialogue in the air, together with certain sound and lighting effects. Where, then, should we draw the dividing line between images and "non-images"?

The decisive criterion is the thematic significance of a moment. This can be established by the playwright or stage director in a variety of ways. There is the fourth dimension of time opening up behind the scenic images. What has happened five lines or half an hour or two acts earlier can be brought vividly to the memory of the spectators by means of a scenic image; one of O'Neill's favourite methods was the use of a repetitive sound effect, such as the melancholy noise of a foghorn. Or a scenic image may affect a sudden twist in the plot of a play; in a moment charged with tension a character may suddenly be revealed as something quite different from what we thought him to be. Claire Zachanassian, the old lady, is revealed in this manner in *The Visit* by Dürrenmatt in that great theatrical moment when she presents the condition attached to her generous donation to her native town: "A million for Gullen if someone kills Alfred III".

A scenic image may also convey an impression of completeness: nothing can be added, all has been said. Or an accepted idea can be re-evaluated, by having an actor change his attitude toward it. Or we may, in a moment of enlightenment, receive the 'message' of the play. Or we may recognize ourselves and our own situation in the play: *me a res agit ur*, they are talking about me. A scenic image may also have a kind of after effect: only when safely at home do we see connections between the scenes and conceive the interaction of separate images. Whichever of these possibilities is realized in a particular scenic image it is always charged with thematic significance. When looking for the scenic images of a play it is thus advisable to trace its themes to a moment of crystallization.

Locating the scenic images of a play is necessarily dependent on a critic's individual judgment. As members of a theatre audience, we are sensitive to stage action in varying degrees. I have, as a stage director, experienced this many times at performances of plays I have directed. No two groups of people would react to a performance in exactly the same way. Every actor knows that are "good" and "bad" audiences, and the reasons for this variation are not constant. The quality of the performance, for example, may vary.

What and how many scenic means of expression are to be employed

in constructing a scenic image? This is a problem intimately bound up with the totality of the play and the performance. Without doubt, scenic images will be found at different places in different productions of the same play, simply because the stage director has used his individual judgment. If I should give you all the criteria needed to distinguish a scenic image from a "non-image", I certainly would not. I cannot. There are too many variables, there are too many things depending on our artistic sensibilities. Two words delivered by a great actor may have a more stunning effect than the crescendo of a chorus of fifty. A scenic image may be found where the outer action of a play reaches its high point — or it may mean a thematic "inner" climax. And we cannot expect our results to be as exact as in some branches of science; as scholars dealing with human beings we attain approximate results, not precise formulas or figures.

Keeping these reservations in mind I shall give you just one example of a scenic image. In the last act of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill's posthumous masterpiece, there is a long scene between James Tyrone, the actor, and Edmund, the would-be playwright, O'Neill's alter ego. O'Neill helps us to concentrate all our attention on this scene. James Tyrone tells us about his miserable youth, thus opening up a new perspective on his character. He grew up over-estimating the value of money. Then we have a scenic image: he tells about the disappointment of his life, his failure as a good Shakespearean actor and to make his tragedy and tragicomedy complete, he stands up and turns off some of the lights. What he has just said about his niggardliness is both confirmed and touched with irony by this action. He cannot help being what he is. Edmund senses both the tragedy and the irony, the foghorn, an ominous sound effect, can be heard in the distance, and the lights are dimmed as a foreboding of Tyrone's approaching death. Everything we learn about James Tyrone during this long day's journey is embodied here. The image is charged with focal thematic significance. We also see that there is interaction between different ideas and fusion between different scenic means of expression within a scenic image; within a whole play there is interaction between several images. A scenic image is not indivisible — or, it is breakable like the atom.

What are, in essence, the contents of such a scenic image? How does this concept help us as scholars in drama and the theatre? Scenic image brings the total impact of the theatre into our analysis of a play. James Tyrone standing up and turning off some of the lights: a telling moment with its action, movement, with its craft of acting. A moment reaching its aim with these elements, not merely with its dialogue. If we ignore these elements, we are apt to miss important words in a playwright's

language of the stage. As scholars of the theatre we know that the theatre is for ever present in drama; consequently, we should recognize its presence in our methods, too. Scenic image helps us to grasp the continuous flow of sensory images filling up the minds of theatregoers while they are sitting in the audience. It gives shape to that stream of impulses. It organizes our observations. It crystallizes the essential elements in a play and in a production. It is a key to drama and to the experience of the spectators, it is a bridge from drama to the theatre. And it is something existing, something real. Is it not so that we tend to remember scenic images, that is, great moments of the theatre, from performances we have seen long ago? These images are so focal, so conspicuous that they have control even over our memory.

I see scenic images as emphatic words in a playwright's language of the stage. This is, of course, what we are doing: studying the language of the stage, its signs and symbols. Not only the language of a playwright but also the language of a stage director, or of an entire period in theatre history. Could not scenic image be a useful scholarly concept in these fields, too? How does a stage director construct his most characteristic scenic images? Is it not likely that documents from far-away periods in theatre history tend to record scenic images rather than irrelevant elements in a production or in a style of the theatre? These are working hypotheses that might be interesting to turn into practice. Scenic image does not claim that any particular artistic style or current, any — ism, were better than others. It might help us to analyze both classic and modern, both expressionistic, absurd and realistic plays.

You may have found this lecture deficient at least in one respect. I have not connected my personal way of thinking with any school of thought, any scholarly — ism or — ology. This has been a deliberate omission. I hope it gives us a starting point for our discussion. I am eager to know what the experts in semiotics present at this symposium, for instance, might say about the entire concept of scenic image. To me, a good scholarly theory or method grows from reality and from artistic practice, and when it has been formulated, it interprets practice on a wide basis. Scenic image is a concept that has been structured with these aims in mind. Using it means completing other methods available to a scholar; it does not mean throwing them overboard or minimizing their value. The themes or 'message' of a play must be connected with its scenic images; we need a careful analysis of these themes. And we also need history of the theatre and of cultural life in general, we need wide social backgrounds and psychological analyses of playwrights and artists of the theatre. Yet our most fundamental concern should be with theatre itself.

OBRAZ SCENICZNY:
KLUCZ DO DRAMATU I PRZEŻYĆ WIDZÓW

Streszczenie

Obraz sceniczny to scena (lub częściej element sceny), gdzie jest użytych kilka środków ekspresji teatralnej celem osiągnięcia efektu o rozstrzygającej doniosłości tematycznej.

Trzeba przy tym podkreślić, że aby „obraz sceniczny” okazał się uderzający, nie może on trwać długo — w grę wchodzi tu minuty, a czasem nawet tylko sekundy. Należy także zaakcentować w podanej definicji wagę interakcji między różnymi środkami ekspresji scenicznej. Wypada jednak przestrzec przed niebezpieczeństwem melodramatu jeśli reżyser będzie zbyt wyraźnie używał pewnych sposobów ekspresji. Centralny temat dramatu może znaleźć pełną realizację w obrazie scenicznym, który jest prezentowany przez jeden lub kilka środków ekspresji takich jak: aktorzy, dialog, rekwizyty, inscenizacja, efekty dźwiękowe, muzyka.

Koncepcja obrazu scenicznego zrodziła się jako naturalna konsekwencja studiów autora (i jego pracy jako reżysera) nad dramatami O’Neilla. Na pytanie, jak odróżnić obrazy sceniczne od innych obrazów dramatu, autor odpowiada, że nie sposób tu podać ścisłych kryteriów, gdyż tematyczna doniosłość danego momentu może być ustalona przez dramaturga lub reżysera w różny sposób. Autor wskazuje przy tym wyraźny, jego zdaniem, przykład obrazu scenicznego, który pochodzi z ostatniego aktu sztuki O’Neilla pt.: *Zmierzch długiego dnia* (*Long Day’s Journey into Night*). Przywołana zostaje scena z Jamesem Tyronem, aktorem i Edmundem. James Tyrone opowiada o swojej nieszczęśliwej młodości, ukazując siebie jako kogoś, kto rozwijał się w kręgu przeświadczenia o wielkiej wartości pieniędzy. Potem następuje obraz sceniczny; bohater mówi o rozczarowaniu jakie go spotkało w życiu, osobistym niepowodzeniu jako aktora szekspirowskiego i żeby dopełnić tragedii a zarazem tragikomendii, wstaje i wylacza kilka świateł. Tym samym to, co właśnie powiedział o swoim skąpstwie zostaje potwierdzone przez ironię powstałej sytuacji. Nie może się oprzeć temu, kim jest. Edmund spostrzega tragedię i ironię, słyszy odgłos syreny mgłowej, która dochodzi z oddali, a przymglone światła jakby zapowiadały zbliżającą się śmierć Tyrone’a. Obraz jest naładowany najistotniejszym znaczeniem tematycznym. Innym przykładem, jaki zostaje tu okazjonalnie przywołany, jest m.in. Hamlet trzymający w ręku czaszkę Yoricka. Tłem dla słów Hamleta jest cmentarz.

W konkluzji autor stwierdza, że koncepcja obrazu scenicznego pomaga uchwycić ciągle przepływ sensorycznych obrazów napełniających umysły widzów teatralnych. Nadaje ona kształt temu strumieniowi różnych impulsów i organizuje nasze obserwacje. Ma ona także krystalizować istotne elementy sztuki i przedstawienia. W ten sposób, będąc kluczem do dramatu i przeżyć widzów, koncepcja obrazu scenicznego może stworzyć pomost między dramatem a teatrem.