

(I M) M A T E R (I A L I T Y) and the Black-Box Theatre as an 'Empty Space' of Re-production

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Abstract: *This paper examines a paradigmatic interior from the 20th century, the 'black-box theatre', associated with a fundamental rejection of the potential role played by the built-form within the art-form. Material space is denied in order to establish an apparent void-space. This perceived emptiness is reflected in a paucity of architectural and theatrical discourse surrounding the model. However an investigation of its physical and discursive absences suggests its apparent 'lack' veils a surplus of meaning. Such gaps and their associations with theatrical production reveal complicated links to the space of human reproduction and its attendant excesses which, in turn, leads to a distinctive link between the black-box and Plato's notion of 'chora'. This uncovering of material through the im-material, proposes a more embodied and performative approach to theatre space and to readings of the interior.*

Keywords: *theatre architecture; performance space; gender and interior*

Introduction

Each theatrical epoch in western history is defined by its literature and performance styles as well as the architecture that contributed to shaping the event (i.e., the roman amphitheatre, renaissance theatre, Shakespearean globe, restoration playhouse, and horseshoe opera house). The auditorium, a complex room, uniting actors and audience, evolved as an elaborate spatial apparatus for housing performance, heightening the experience, and ordering the collective body of participants. However last century brought with it a crisis in theatre architecture, where the built-form was negated in favour of a more non-representational space. Modernity's theatrical avant-garde called for a reworking of the auditorium, so that the excess of meaning surrounding performance events could be facilitated by a spatial austerity. This resulted in the total eradication of architecture's role in the event and the evolution of the 'black-box' theatre.

Described by Marvin Carlson (1989) as a 'featureless box filled with light and abstract figures...' (pp. 196–197) and also referred to as 'the empty space', the black-box became the major spatial paradigm for twentieth century theatre. Yet very little has been written on it in either theatrical or architectural discourse. Such a paucity of visible features does not necessarily imply an absence of substance. Rather it challenges our ways of discussing phenomena that are not always visually (or indeed perceptually) marked.

This paper takes a step into the absences (visual, aural, textural and discursive) surrounding the black-box... or is it a fall? The body suspended within it is always held in that moment between flying and falling; caught in the act of endlessly dis-appearing. In opening up a dialogue on the notion of the black-box in interior architecture, is not one doomed to be sucked into the vortex of its silence? Is this silence in fact a simple statement of nothing-to-be-said? Or is the empty space neither silent nor vacant but rather replete with an overwhelming amount of matter?

One way of understanding the black-box and its absence of material form is through a collective desire for the modern theatre to embody a primordial space. Edward Gordon Craig most explicitly expressed this in his claim as its procreator, rendering the space a means of theatrical reproduction. Investigating this claim opens up a gendered discourse surrounding the interior of the black-box. It becomes both womb-space and void-space. This vacillation between the material and immaterial suggests that, within the 'empty space' of 20th century theatre production, theatrical re-production is played out as an act of procreation. Each performance becomes an originary act born out of darkness. The space, which eschewed the traditional boundaries between participants, becomes an enveloping stage machine threatening to overwhelm all those implicated within its environs.

A tension therefore arises between the immateriality of the void and the abject materiality of the womb. This tension is, in turn, linked to Plato's complex notion of 'chora', the in-between space, as discussed by Alberto Perez-Gomez (1994) and Elizabeth Grosz (2000, 1999). In reviewing this space of human creation and participation, with its links to both architectural and theatrical theory, perhaps we can find a resolution between the technological abyss and a more embodied spatiality; where the virtual and the visceral can be simultaneously housed.

Phantom-womb

The black-box theatre was born out of theatrical revolution and perceptual shifts at the end of the nineteenth century. Its genesis was hailed by English scenographer Edward Gordon Craig almost a century ago when he wrote: 'As I write, it is not easy to refrain from singing – the moment is the most lively, the most hallowed in all my life – for in a few minutes I shall have given birth to that which has for a long while been preparing far back before I was born, and all during my life, and now I am the one selected to this honour and am amongst the creators' (Roose-Evans, 1970, p. 33). This excerpt from a letter from Craig to Martin Shaw reads like a post-annunciation song of praise, heralding the arrival of a messiah created through 'immaculate conception'. The writer is positing himself simultaneously as mother, father and messenger, in announcing a progeny, which was strange fruit indeed. Craig's

'moment' could, in fact, be marked as the arrival of the black-box theatre, the vision of which he outlines in his *Theatre of the Future* as follows: 'The place is without form – one vast square of empty space is before us – all is still – no sound is heard – no movement is seen... nothing is before us – And from that nothing shall come life – even as we watch, in the very centre of that void a single atom seems to stir – to rise – it ascends like the awakening of a thought in a dream – ... No light plays around it, no angles are to be seen, no shadows are visible – only the inexorable ascension of a single form – ...' (cited by Roose-Evans, 1970, p.33).

Craig's 'empty space', a dark, silent and formless place where objects and bodies are materialised and suspended, was not only his (co)creation and gift to the world, but constituted a generic place within which events could be endlessly produced and reproduced. This was made possible by advancements in lighting and stage technology. He was issuing forth a product, which also re-produced itself elsewhere, by virtue of black walls or drapes, rendering any space of suitable dimensions a 'black-box'. Edward Gordon Craig, son of an architect and the celebrated actress Ellen Terry, is like Mary Shelley's Dr Frankenstein, constructing his own architectural/theatrical progeny through technology. But what he is in fact creating is the apparatus for its production, the re-productive organ; a cyborgian womb. This is achieved through a space hollowed in the dark, within which is grafted the machinery for its efficient operation. The womb-less creator was manufacturing a theatrical space of reproduction. However this appropriation of maternal space lacked matter, that physical substance out of which things are made.

Materiality, through its etymological roots in 'materia', is associated with the maternal and the matrix (womb), representing an embodiment of substance. Whilst Craig allotted himself the maternal role, his 'empty space', as an apparatus of theatrical reproduction, simultaneously denied a materiality. Its analogical status lacked viscera. However its formlessness links it to matter in Aristotelian terms as 'undifferentiated', achieved by receding the container itself into the shadows where it could not be perceptually apprehended. Its boundaries were concealed suggesting a limitlessness within which performance could be endlessly reproduced.

In denying a purely visual apprehension of built space, and suggesting a profound interiority, the black-box posits a new way of regarding the body in space. The body of this (anti) architecture, rather than the proportioned ideal of classicism, the rational ordering form of modernism, or even the mutilated corpus of post-modernism, could be an uncertain polluted body whose object interior constantly threatens to erupt through an obscured surface. This

abject body is also a performative body that is unclean, untameable and improper. As a body of uncontainable matter it oozes, bleeds, leaks and defecates; natural forms of purification and therefore clarification. Yet the black-box, whilst alluding to an abject interior, withheld qualities of abjection.

The appropriation of the womb as a space of creation has a longstanding tradition in architectural discourse. European architecture, in its constant bid for longevity and sustainability, carries with it an anxiety of ruination and loss. This valorisation of the permanent seeks to create an architectural corpus that not only survives the bodies of its creators but represents them into the future. This notion of progeny is also inherent in the classical marking of architecture as 'mother of the arts' where the architect appropriates the maternal image of creator-of-life.

In the black-box theatre, architects have been denied the role of mother-creator, co-opted instead by 20th century 'theatricsians' who suture theory with practice in this dark and dangerous realm of theatrical re-production. What is laid before us, upon a discursive slab, is the abject body of performance itself, loosened from the confines of a framed stage, slippery as mercury, spilling out matter in the forms of bodies and sounds, held in darkness and isolated in light. The empty space whilst presenting a poverty of matter also represents excess, that evasive, embracing mat(t)er which threatens to consume.

Crisis and revolt

The black-box theatre arose out of crisis around the turn of last century. The de-centred post-modern subject had already been established at this time and confirmed through the writings of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. The latter particularly, as Elizabeth Grosz (1990) points out, challenged the Cartesian subject's status as the foundation and source of knowledge (p. 2). Neither the earth nor consciousness was considered the centre of the universe, and absolute certainty could no longer be relied upon. Freud's theoretical language suggested a plurality of subject, knowledge and institutions whilst language was posited as only one way to organise the real. This led to a profound fragmentation of the real itself and a terror in the face of 'differences'. This fin-de-siecle dilemma in perception was accompanied by a crisis in vision where people 'no longer believed their eyes'. A rupture had occurred with the ancien scopic regime of Cartesian perspectivalism, heralding a modern, heterogeneous regime of vision. As the century advanced technological warfare allowed mass destruction to occur on a scale that was hitherto unperceivable, furthering the crisis of body, language and visibility.

As Manfredo Tafuri (1980) pointed out, in this new century the theatre became the means for the recovery of a collective catharsis – ‘for the recovery of a portion of unalienated space’ (p. 96). Theatre allowed an ‘entering into’ or a collective ‘projecting into’ a space that had no reference to precise circumstance; ‘the ‘festival of life and art’ finds in the stage not only a point of caesura, but of suspension as well’ (p. 97). The body, isolated against a limit, was itself also considered a limit. Drama was considered possible without words, sounds, sets and costumes, focusing on the primacy of the human body. Tafuri therefore contended; ‘This means that the true drama, the true provocation is the body limit hurling itself against its own boundaries in extreme solitude; in this struggle, in this forced expression, the Seele [the soul] is called upon to reveal itself’ (p. 97). Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig sought such a stage, which married body and spirit, ‘with or without spectators’. As Appia proclaimed ‘no theatre, no stage, only a bare and empty room’ (cited by Carlson, 1989, p. 196). Subsequent 20th century ‘theatricians’, such as Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht, Piscator, Schlemmer, Reinhardt and Grotowski, sought to eradicate the totalising proscenium arch and disrupt the boundaries between actor and spectator, exterior and interior, street and stage, intensifying the experience as an engaging and hallucinatory event. This was achieved through a systematic purging of well-established architectural elements in theatres, such as proscenium arch, box seating, galleries, chandeliers, décor, stage, auditorium and eventually eradicating any definition of the building itself. A systematic emptying of theatre architecture opened up an empty space of limitless potentiality. As Artaud (1958) wrote in his treatise ‘The Theatre of Cruelty’: ‘Our petrified idea of the theatre is connected with our petrified idea of a culture without shadows, where, no matter which way it turns, our mind (esprit) encounters only emptiness, though space is full’ (p. 12).

By 1968 Peter Brook had written his treatise ‘The Empty Space’ which began; ‘I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged’ (p. 11). And, although Brook (1968) was by no means referring to the black-box, it had lodged itself as ‘empty space’ into the status quo of small-scale and experimental theatre environments.

The black-box came to represent the void, an immaterial space out of which performance materialised. Its emptiness as a spatio-temporal phenomenon was the interval, the pause, silence and suspension. Within its shadows emptiness did not represent a lack, but rather the void; an overwhelming excess of meaning.

Cyborg-womb

Out of the dark, the black-box emerges as a stage-machine. Technology, rather than architecture, defines its boundaries. Removing the proscenium and fixed stage collapsed the space of audience and actors into a single room that could be technologically manipulated to configure any number of formats. Under the guise of 'flexibility', this space was perceived as infinitely adjustable so as to fit all the requirements of scripts and staging. Considered an economical form, it minimised the initial costs in establishing a performance space, relying on (sometimes costly) equipment and labour to move the space around. It was championed by technologists such as American theatre planner George Izenour, who set up the 'Electro Mechanical Laboratory' at Yale University Drama School in 1939; a research facility devoted to engineering development in theatre technology; switching systems, control consoles, preset panels, seating, grid and lift systems. Izenour (1977) defined the black-box as an 'uncommitted space' that 'rejects architecture entirely in favour of an experimental 'of-the-moment' approach to space by the artist (stage director-designer-producer) and can be variously circumscribed by a combination of kinetic systems including seating, walls, lifts and lighting' (p. 103). He described his Experimental Theater at Yale as 'a very special type of theater – not as architecture, but as a functioning machine in relation to theater production technique' (p. 106). Here we see the fascination with technology take over. Yet this technological allure conjoins the hallucinatory darkness with scientific instrumentation, conjuring up the ghost within the machine. As Peggy Phelan (1997) contended, 'the phantasmatic is always operative within the codes of the rational' (p. 17).

Technology became a means of extending the relationship between the performing body and space, most acutely played out in avant-garde theatre. Maria Luisa Palumbo (2000), in *New Wombs: Electronic Bodies and Architectural Disorders*, wrote that with a newly extensible body '...its extreme possibilities of dislocation in time and space result in the *explosion of the box...*' (p. 22). This is evident in the black-box theatre that, through its blackness, dissolves its walls and corners. The body as a measure of excess, capable of surpassing its physical limitations required a seemingly dislocated space within which to extend.

Often cited as a 'theatre laboratory' the black-box was a machine operating on the collective body it contained. The theatre for the staging of dramatic arts becomes troubled by the phantasmatic presence of two other theatres; the operating theatre and the anatomical theatre. The apparatus, inserted into the phantom-womb, operates like a speculum; revealing the fragmented body collective lost-in-space within its confines. Technology, regulating the space of the phantom womb, grounds it into the cyborg-womb, helping to regulate the abyss.

Machinery forms a prosthetic supplement to the wall-less space of the black-box, containing it within a technological receptacle. This allows the fluid unstable im-matter of dramatic space (Phelan, 1997), once precariously housed behind the proscenium, to spill out and around performers and spectators without annihilating them in its excess. Technology disciplines the empty space. This need for discipline controlled the 'visual nihilism' that arose in the 19th century as a new autonomy and abstraction of vision, under the rubric of 'modernity'. As Jonathan Crary (1999) wrote in *Techniques of the Observer*, the 'real world' was no longer stabilised by the camera obscura, a once judicial model of perception. This gave rise to the 'newly discovered territory of the fully embodied viewer' (pp. 138-145) resulting in a new destabilised vision, now residing in the immediacy of the observer's body, belonging 'to time, to flux, to death' (p. 124).

As the *camera obscura* was cast aside, a rupturing occurred on the surface of vision and, with it, a disturbance in the surface of the theatre's perspectively constructed fourth-wall. The stage was no longer a viewing machine into which the audience gazed. It was a machine within which they were implicated and their vision disrupted.

As a space for representing, the real the black-box becomes a vertiginous hyper-space of the real, where the all-seeing-I is no longer privileged. The all-seeing-eye is literally ruptured, as in Bunuel and Dali's surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), where a woman's eye is slit open, constituting a defining moment in 'the crisis of ocularcentrism'. Martin Jay (1994) pointed out in his essay 'The Disenchantment of the Eye'; that this act has been variously interpreted, amongst other things, as a simulacrum of sexual cruelty against women, a symbol of male castration anxiety, and the conception of an infant' (p. 192). These three interpretations are also bound up in the black-box theatre; a site of cruelty, anxiety and pro-creation.

As the eye is slit, the hole of the vanishing point opens up, gaping into a void. Deeply interior space is penetrated by the eye, which is, in turn, subsumed by a darkness once constituted by a pinpoint of signification.

Black as void

Darkness shrouds the definitive form of the black-box theatre, which developed over the 20th century into a simple rectangular volume, with all technology in view, painted black. Black for absorbing shadows is also the black of the negative, the black of night and nightmares, the black of grief.

This connection between black and mourning forces us to consider the relationship between theatre and mourning. As Phelan (1997) contended, in *Mourning Sex*, 'it may well be that

theatre and performance respond to a psychic need to rehearse loss, and especially for death' (p. 3). The black-box therefore constitutes a living memorial, a 'mausoleum, a space designed to summon the phantasmatical charge of the immaterial' (p. 2), negotiating between the gathered community and their deepest held fears.

Modern architecture denies the presence of black, which obliterates its forms exiling them to the shadows. It is therefore no surprise that architecture plays no official part in the black-box theatre. White, in all its crispness, is the defining 'colour' of the modern movement, representing cleanliness, neutrality and an attempt to keep the nightmare of decay and mortality returning to its surfaces. Mark Wigley (1995) in *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, discussed this at length. Whereas the white wall brackets the body against its surface, the black-ness of theatre space threatens to devour the body it envelops, materialising and dematerialising it with light. Unlike the white wall's 'sophisticated use of the representational system of the surface...used to announce the absence of representation' (Wigley, 1995, p. 361), the black-box signifies an excess of representation, conjuring up the nightmares the white wall seeks to cover over. The walls of the black-box are phantasmatic borders, denying surface and suggesting infinite depth. They are veils of the widow, evoking mystery, mourning and the charge of an erotic allure. Pronouncing a melancholic foreclosure, they renounce the possibilities of a lived/bodily space. Unlike the skin of the white wall they attempt to be impenetrable, like the 'mystery of femininity – that black-box, strong box, earth abyss ...' (Irigaray, 1990, p. 20).

Chora

As a representational womb-space and void-space, the black-box can be linked, in both architectural and theatrical discourse, to Plato's concept of *chora*; as set out in *Timaeus* and taken up by Elizabeth Grosz (2002) in her essay 'Woman, Chora, Dwelling' and by Alberto Perez-Gomez (1994) in his essay *Chora: 'The Space of Architectural Representation'*. *Timaeus* constituted the philosopher's systemisation of the universe within which *chora* is an essential form yet 'difficult and obscure to talk about in general terms' (Plato, 1997 p. 66). Plato described it as the 'receptacle... the nurse of all becoming and change', using the metaphor of birth. As an 'imprint bearer' he compared it to a mass of neutral and endlessly mouldable plastic material (Plato, 1997 p. 66). Here, as *prima materia*, the maternal is collapsed onto the material, reinforced by Grosz's reading of it as 'a kind of womb for material existence' (2000, p. 212). Yet the receptacle is also invisible and formless, an impossible space, which lies beyond the realm of the senses and is apprehended in a kind of dream. It is also defined as a space of chaos, interpreted by Perez-Gomez (1994) as a primordial gap, opening or abyss.

Perez-Gomez (1994) formed connections between Plato's *chora* and the chorus in ancient Greek Theatre, which Vitruvius considered the paradigmatic cosmic place. As a dance platform bridging audience and actors, the chorus formed a liminal space within the field of performance; 'both a space of contemplation and a space of participation... a place for poetic mobility' (Perez-Gomez, 1994, p. 10). In the ritual origins of this circular space, defined by a central altar, no distinction was made between performer and spectators, all were included as participants within its domain.

Like the generic black-box theatre, *chora* is quality-less, permeable and infinitely transformable, functioning as 'an incubator to insure the transmission or rather the copying of forms to produce matter that resembles them' (Grosz, 2000, p. 212). For Perez-Gomez (the architect) *chora*, used as a metaphor of birth and compared to the receptacle of the mother, is interpreted as 'androgynous space'. It is 'both cosmic place and abstract space' (Perez-Gomez, 1994, p. 9), linked historically to the *theatron*: a place in Ancient Greek theatre for seeing through distant contemplation, as well as participation. Grosz (the philosopher) is not so enthusiastic. She maintains that *chora* is yet another space, gendered feminine and appropriated by the masculine dominant, which actively engenders forms within the passive receptacle. It lacks self-possession and self-identity, rendered always the same 'because it never alters its characteristics' (Grosz, 2000, p. 69). Like a *tabula rasa* it remains in service to the active creator/producer merely as passive storer/incubator. This recalls the ubiquitous black-box, rendered the same and denied both surface and identity by a negative architecture.

As Grosz (2000) contended, *chora* is constructed on a phallogentric logic, replete with features culturally bestowed on women, particularly the biological function of gestation: 'Though she brings being into becoming she has neither being nor the possibility of becoming; both of mother of all things and yet without ontological status, she designates less a positivity than an abyss, a crease, perhaps a pure difference, between being and becoming, the space which produces their separation and thus enables their co-existence and interchange' (p. 214).

Both *chora* and the black-box are troubled by an ancient connection between the material place of reproduction and the vertiginous space of the void. This enduring association between the maternal body and the abyss is inescapably gendered. Woman, associated with interiority, underground, darkness and death, presents a distinct threat to the phallic signifier through her conspicuous loss and the supplemental space created by that loss. She is linked to both fertility and decay, simultaneously fecund and fetid she braces herself against the tyranny of time and physical collapse.

Chora as chorus, the ancient space-place for performance, was in existence well before the architectural apparatus of the *theatron* with its *cavea*, *skene* and *deus ex machina*. It was the original site within which all participated in the spectacle, a material place for the participatory event, where dancing feet defined space through attrition, it was the ground for the dance and the space of the leap in the ancient dithyramb, where a bodily participation within a prescribed landscape allowed for a contemplation of life and death. This is the in-between, the interval, the aerated form. Permeable and transformable, it is still corporeal, visceral and abject.

The black-box, like chora, needs radical revision if it is to be re-configured as an essential and active space of theatrical production. It need not be Plato's 'eternal and indestructible' no-place and every place, but rather a place of substance. A space that breathes, swells, sweats, bleeds and breaks; garnering traces from past inhabitation; a material place in motion. Achieving this may be as simple as refusing to paint it black.

Conclusion

Architecture has always been perceived as an object to be looked at, inhabited by the eye of a detached viewer. Held within a scopic regime that privileges the stability of matter, it is often feminised beneath the spectatorial gaze. In disturbing the black veil that shrouds the black-box theatre we move into an interior realm that is no less feminised, yet resists an ocular overview. This paper has attempted to reveal a more fleshy and visceral phenomenon present in the shadows of its denied walls. Presencing a more embodied spatiality, allows us to re-see the black-box, not for what it reveals but for what it conceals.

The black-box theatre, conventionally considered a passive receptacle for the ever-changing parade of productions it nurtures, has been examined here to reveal complex elements that encapsulate the perceptual body and social psyche in crisis, denying a relationship between the fabric of the existing building and the fictional world created in performance. No material resistance is offered to the theatre artist and no common ground is given to the spectator.

Maria Luisa Palumbo (2000) has referred to the 'womb' as a 20th century architectural paradigm, which as 'formless matter' opposed the aesthetics of the cool modernist box 'with the sensual, protective and dark visceral nature of the cave' (p. 19). She then realigned it as paradigmatic of our contemporary postorganic condition, 'characterised by an unprecedented continuity between exterior and interior' (p. 5). Facilitated by artificial sight it allows us to navigate the organic universe of our body and the mechanical universe of technology. This suggests that the black-box theatre was a precursor to a contemporary alignment of virtual

space with the visceral, mediating between the codes of both the body and technology. However a return to the very matter of built form allows architecture to play a role within this mediation.

Whilst theatrical re-production continues to be played out as an act of procreation in the black and empty space of modern theatre, bound up within this remains the masculine fear of the female pro-creator, evinced not only through silencing and shadowing but through a terror of the abyss; in the words of Luce Irigaray (1990)'As obscure, as black, perhaps, as the dark continent of femininity?' (p. 19).

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