

*Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism* by  
Tobin Nellhaus

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 236 pp,  
ISBN 9780230623637 (hardback)

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While the philosophy of critical realism has been applied to the social sciences for some time, Tobin Nellhaus's book is the first comprehensive study to view theatre through it as a lens. In so doing, Nellhaus also reviews critical realism through the lens of theatre. 'Because society is an emergent totality produced through agential reflexivity,' he writes, 'social ontology parallels philosophical ontology itself (identified in critical realism as the domains of the real, the actual, and the semiotic), which makes theatrical performance a model of critical realist philosophy' (p. 162). The reflexivity of the theatre thus doubles the reflexivity of critical realism, as it does everything else, and a philosophy of theatre also becomes a theatre of philosophy. It is a mark of the quality of Nellhaus's writing, scholarship, and thought that he is able to so clearly and vividly explain and explore these complex issues of ontology, epistemology and agency. Nellhaus first combines philosophy with the economics and sociology of a given period, all the while weaving both within the theatre history of that period until a comprehensive model is achieved. Consistent with the tenets of critical realism, these factors are seen as 'causal powers' forming the '[s]tratifed nature of reality' (p. 13) where the higher strata may be described or explained in terms of lower levels, but is never reducible to them. The density and complexity of history and lived experience is such that it may only be understood as a unitary whole, he suggests, and theatre and the theatrical event function in much the same way, not as metaphor but as model. However, as ambitious as this may be, Nellhaus proposes not simply to describe the past to uncover a 'viable theory of historical change' (p. 1). This possibility for change emerges from the motility of the various strata of reality but is never reducible to any one element or combination of elements.

The philosophy of critical realism is founded upon a few basic precepts, which may appear superficially obvious at first blush, but which have bedevilled philosophy when examined in detail. First, critical realism posits the presence of a material world that exists independently of any perception or subjective experience. Second, critical realism relies on theories of reality having a

high degree of certainty as opposed to absolute certainty, and views all theories as fallible and subject to later disproof. In fact, the critical realist would go so far as to say that '[e]rror demonstrates that reality exists independently of our own thoughts' (p. 31). The critical realist also maintains that there are underlying logical structures which justify the choice of one theory over another, and that all knowledge is socially produced. Therefore, critical realism has a fundamental materiality to it; we are able to know not only our experience of things but also the things themselves, even if that knowledge is never perfect or infallible. This avoids the radically anthropocentric perspectives of both positivism and social constructionism, which, divergent as they are, share the same tendency to collapse the nature of reality into the primacy of knowledge. It is this 'epistemological fallacy' (p. 25) that Nellhaus poses as the source of both positivism and social constructionism's inability to adequately explain historical change.

As interesting and pervasive as the philosophy is in Nellhaus's book, the majority of it concerns three pivotal periods of theatre history, and how and why each period came to differ from the era before it, as well as the one that followed. Nellhaus argues that the critical factor for change is communication, which 'connects technology, social relations and semiosis' (p. 52). Furthermore, '[m]odes of communication are comparable to modes of production, and they can be analyzed through similar concepts [...] For example, communication has a "cycle" akin to the economic cycle, which progresses from production through distribution and exchange to consumption' (p. 52). This historical cycle of communication moves from oral tradition to the development of writing, then on to the development of printing and the mass production of printed documents, and finally to the creation of electronic media. Even though Nellhaus seems primarily concerned with the transition from oral tradition to the written word, and then from writing to the printed page, his focus is not really upon the changes in technology but on how and why any culture should ever want or feel compelled to change from one dominant mode of communication to another.

From the critical realist point of view, historical change is precipitated by the interplay of social, political, economic and cultural contexts. For example, Nellhaus cites recent classicist research which is unable to support the origin of theatre being in either ritual or religion, and instead posits a plausible and compelling explanation of his own. Greek tragedy came about due to the eighth-century B.C. development of the Greek alphabet

as well as the economic growth of Athens in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., the political need to project Athenian excellence via the City Dionysia, and the desire to inculcate democratic values in the polis. In short, '[t]heatre emerged from literacy' (p. 61), then further evolved with the development of printing, solitary reading, mass-produced print capitalism, the rise of electronic media and current issues of reproduction and liveness.

Nellhaus's book is a clear-headed, compelling and important addition to our understanding of the causes of historical change and the intersection of philosophy, theatre and communication theory. It offers a unique and productive perspective on a complex and difficult topic and renders it in a provocative and readable form.

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*The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre*  
by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett

London and New York: Routledge, 2009,  
xi + 224 pp, ISBN 9780415467605 (paperback)

*Walking, Writing & Performance: Autobiographical Texts* by Deirdre Heddon, Carl Lavery and Phil Smith, edited by Roberta Mock

Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009, 184 pp,  
ISBN 9781841501550 (paperback)

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After fourteen years of performing and teaching, Frantic Assembly's directors Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett have written a detailed account of their devising processes. Often billed as one of Britain's foremost physical theatre companies, the company moves between dramatic dialogue and movement, and is as likely to collaborate with a playwright as with a choreographer. Here, Graham and Hoggett resist any conclusive categorization of their work, emphasising a commitment to using movement to locate unexpected ways of expressing dramatic 'truth'. The book's strength is its clearly contextualized advice and exercises within an account of process in particular productions. Additionally, the book offers an account of how the company formed, a production history, and reflection on the ideas that inform its approach to everything from collaboration to characterization. While its detailed accounts of the company will be a resource for theatre scholars, the guide will be of most interest to those who want to explore making

theatre that takes popular music and film – rather than drama – as its lifeblood.

Graham and Hoggett's articulation of their company's ideas form a great resource for those interested in devising performance using digital and mass media. They situate themselves as outsiders whose ignorance of theatre and dance has fostered an unorthodox approach to devising. In their account of the company's founding, they appear as undergraduates whose only experience was a few productions with the Swansea University Drama Society and a workshop with the Welsh company Volcano. After graduation, a youth employment scheme helped them commit themselves to the Frantic Theatre Company (as it was then called) and make their first show – a 'radical' overhaul of John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* mixed with Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. In many ways the fifteen shows that have followed contain the themes of this first one: 'angry young men' and women in claustrophobic environments with bitterness close at hand. Their innovation is in the harnessing of the affective intensity of the music video, the techno deejay, and film for audiences raised on MTV. They often try to restrict their shows to an hour and each scene to the length of a pop song in order to reproduce the rhythms of watching an hour of MTV. Since their second production *Klub* (1995), they have treated narrative structure like a deejay's set, varying the beats per minute across a section in order to build the audience's adrenalin to the climax of the show and then bring it back down again for the resolution. Other shows have drawn on storytelling techniques from a range of both Hollywood and art house films. This playing with forms has been an important way for the company to use the art that it loved most – be it a techno track or a Paul Thomas Anderson film – as a source for its own poetics.

Graham and Hoggett's book seems to reflect not only their work for their stage but also their work in the classroom. Teaching and workshop delivery has been a bread-and-butter part of the company's work over the last decades. The authors write as they might speak to an audience of young people: the book is rich with anecdote, humble, frank, and full of vivid detail. Perhaps the greatest challenge for the new deviser is finding ways to explore ideas in performance without simply illustrating them. Throughout the book – and its discussion of particular scenes and exercises – Graham and Hoggett reiterate the importance of physical exploration as a means of discovering some 'truth' of experience and avoid clichés of acting and dance performance. This is achieved