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*Feeling the Gaze. Image and Affect in Contemporary Argentine and Chilean Performance* by Gail A. Bulman (review)

May Summer Farnsworth

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Bulman, Gail A. *Feeling the Gaze. Image and Affect in Contemporary Argentine and Chilean Performance*. U of North Carolina P., 2022. 350 pp. ISBN: 978-1469667430.

*Feeling the Gaze* documents and analyzes developing theatre/performance trends in Chile and Argentina, focusing on the strategic use of objects, spaces, screen projections, and other layers of visual language that carry ideological messages and elicit affective/emotional responses from spectators. Bulman offers a comprehensive critical discussion of Tryo Teatro Banda's *O'Higgins: un hombre en pedazos*, Teatro Niño Proletario's *Fulgor*, Mario, Luiggi y sus Fantasma's *Manual de carroña*, Agustín León Pruzzo's *En la sombra de la cúpula*, Teatro la María's *Los millonarios*, Claudio Tolcachir's *Próximo*, Sergio Blanco's *Tebas Land*, and Lola Arias's *Doble de riesgo*. The ephemerality of theatre performance presents a challenge for theatre scholars, especially for scholars wishing to understand non-textual theatrical languages (gestures, imagery, props, space, affect). Theatre researchers, myself included, who do not reside in Latin America depend on the accounts of others to capture the sense of what Jorge Dubatti calls "convivio," which, according to Bulman, describes the shared emotions and collective contemplation in the theatrical event: "performance's inherently convivial dimensions" (42). Bulman often positions herself within this framework as she recalls the staged events that are the subject of her analysis. Her engagement as a bilingual scholar, attentive spectator, and dedicated follower of Latin American theatre enriches her investigation every step of the way. Bulman's book engages with other scholarly works focused on Latin American performance in particular, and on visuality and affect in general. In addition to Dubatti's study of *convivio*, Bulman builds on ideas about social justice and affect on the Latin American stage put forth by Diana Taylor, Jacqueline Bixler, Debra Castillo, Jean Graham-Jones, Cecilia Sosa, and Sarah Misemer, among others. Bulman considers theories of visual culture by a variety of scholars, including Roland Barthes, Jaques Rancière, John Berger, Walter Benjamin. She also consults authors engaging in affect theory, such as Teresa Brennan, Brian Massumi, James Thompson, Doris Sommer, and Gilles Deleuze.

Readers of *Feeling the Gaze* will be introduced to some of the most prominent theatre practitioners working in the Southern Cone today and become familiar with emerging trends in Latin American theatre and performance. The book is divided into two sections. The first part, "Embodied Images" examines how various elements of theatre—facial expressions, body language, props, and stage space—collectively command the attention of the spectator and guide their gaze. The second part of the book, "Seeing Through Screens," discusses the ways in which a newer trend of tech-rich performances uses multimedia effects to capture the attention of spectators in new and innovative ways. The first analysis in Chapter One focuses on Tryo Teatro Banda's 2016 performance of *O'Higgins: un hombre en pedazos*, a historical play by Ricardo Larrían and Andrés Kalawaski. As Bulman points out, the playwrights offer a nuanced portrayal of a complicated and controversial independence-era historical figure in Chile. Bulman takes interest in the key visual props most

representative of authority, power, and national prominence: O'Higgins's military costume, his official portrait, and a recurring, mysterious white light. While the props, clothing and lighting effects offer an "aura" of respectability, Bulman argues, Tryo Banda's performance strategically manipulates them to reveal their "deceptive potential," and to "highlight the tensions within the paradox of heroism, the contradiction between the hero and extraordinary or ordinary citizen in a severely flawed society" (90).

The following analysis, "All that Glitters is not Golden," centers on another 2016 production in Chile: Teatro Niño Proletario's performance of *Fulgor*, collectively created by Pía Gutierrez, Valentina Cortinez, and Katherina Eitner. Bulman's discussion of the use of space begins with the theatrical venue itself, Teatro Nave, in Santiago's immigrant neighborhood, Barrio Yungay, which, in recent years, has seen a rise in populations of Haitians, Colombians, and Peruvians. The play features immigrant stories and storytelling, with a focus on "their lived experiences and the gaze(s) upon them" (95). But most of the storytelling is through imagery, music, and staging, starting with the display of photos and newspaper clippings spectators are confronted with in the lobby, and followed by the framing and unframing of the characters on stage, which encourage the spectators to see how newcomers are visibilized and invisibilized in daily Chilean life. Bulman's analysis is strengthened by her application of Barthes's ideas about "punctum" and "studium" to the shifting gaze of the spectators in a highly visual live performance. Plastic and gold represent another storytelling component of the play. At times, the stage fills with plastic bags, plastic wrap, and other forms of disposable plastics. Other times, a glittery gold frame dominates the set. Bulman finds these images illustrative of the wider claims *Fulgor* is making about inclusive and exclusive cultural practices in contemporary Chilean society.

Chapter Two examines two plays, one from Chile by the company Mario, Luiggi y sus Fantasma, *Manual de carroña*, and another from Argentina, *En la sombra de la cúpula*, by León Pruzzo. The Chilean work, which debuted in 2016, depicts a tense dinner party among animals, accompanied by human servants, gathered to reveal a piece of artwork. Actors portray either animals or humans through gesture, movement, and masks. The play starts off in silence and ends in cacophony. Bulman argues that *Manual de carroña* echoes Lauren Berlant's theories of "Cruel Optimism," the animals reproduce class hierarchies and divisions and represent "humans' irrational attachments to the very people and objects that are harmful to them" (Bulman 125). The next play in this chapter, *En la sombra de la cúpula*, by León Pruzzo, performed in Buenos Aires more than 250 times between 2016 and 2019. Here, again, the venue becomes part of the visual messaging; the play performs at the top of the historically prestigious Bencich Building, where the famously working-class turn-of-the-century author, Roberto Arlt, greets spectators gathered to watch a play about a poor, depressed servant dreaming of a better life while the allegorical character of Death also wanders the space. Characters and spectators go on a walking tour of the area of the building used for the performance. Hallways lead spectators into new physical and imaginary realms; "the real, the fictional, and the imaginary spaces merge," according to

Bulman, to create what Hans Theis Lehmann calls “a dialogue with the dead” (Bulman 153).

The second half of *Feeling the Gaze* explores multimedia displays in performance. Chapter Three illustrates the strategic use of screens in *Los millonarios* by Alexis Moreno, performed by the Chilean theatre company, Teatro La María. It also investigates *Próximo* by Argentine playwright Claudio Tolcachir. Bulman explains that *Los millonarios* portrays a law firm in which nameless lawyers callously discuss the fate of a Mapuche man awaiting trial in shocking, aggressive dialogue that “lay[s] bare both the characters’ and the nations’ subconscious, allowing spectators to observe individual and national internal feelings alongside conscious or articulated attitudes” (183). Bulman also provides her readers with the historical context of *Los millonarios*, taking into account the legacy of conquest, colonialism, and dictatorship that have continually marginalized Mapuche communities. She also outlines the Luchsinger-Mackay court case in the 2010s, in which a group of Mapuches were charged with killing wealthy landowners, but several of the accused were released due to lack of evidence. The dialogue, metatheatrical, and prerecorded clips create decisively stressful scenarios on stage and screen, which Bulman finds illustrative of Sergei Einstein’s concept of a “montage of attractions” and Zygmunt Bauman’s theories of “moral blindness” (184).

The second part of Chapter Three focuses on a very different display of screens in performance. *Próximo*’s characters are from two nationalities (Spanish and Argentine) and find themselves in a long-distance relationship relying on screens for face time and communication. One is a Spanish actor, the other is an Argentine man temporarily living and working in Australia. The characters use a variety of everyday digital devices, including cell phones, laptops, and tablets to speak to each other as they move through the stage space. Bulman posits that “cyberspace” becomes a space of hope and support in this piece. The characters find connection and comfort across distance and borders, even though they solely exist within screens for each other. Interestingly, Bulman points out, spectators in the audience only see the in-person side of things; they do not see the screens illuminated or projected. Bulman argues that *Próximo* depicts what Theresa Brennan has described as a “transmission of affect.” According to Bulman, “the performance’s screens demonstrate this collision between affective axes by scrutinizing how the various senses—touch, smell, hearing, and sight—function in a world of screens” (Bulman 227). A few theorists, including Butler, Massumi, and Diane Ackerman, additionally shape Bulman’s understanding of the impact that the lack of touch and the curtailing of other senses has on the development of screen-based intimacy. Ultimately, rather than limiting their bond, the screens in this performance allow characters to care for and support each other in cyberspace, if not in physical space.

Chapter Four discusses screen usage in Sergio Blanco’s *Tebas Land* as well as Lola Arias’s *Doble de riesgo*. The French-Uruguayan author of *Tebas Land*, Blanco, produced and performed his play in Buenos Aires in 2016. It ran for four years in Argentina, in addition to debuting internationally. Bulman guides readers through the visual imagery, screen projections, and metatheatrical elements employed in *Tebas Land*, pointing at the ways in which Blanco revisits, rewrites, and updates the

classic play referenced in its title, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Bulman incorporates the work of Linda Hutcheon on the subject of adaptation in her analysis as she describes how the author references Sophocles' script in his play about a playwright and a prisoner. The screens, Bulman observes, show spectators new scenes and reveal the theatre apparatus at work. They also project the presence of audience members recorded in real time. For Bulman, Blanco's retelling of classic tragedy within the basketball court of a Buenos Aires prison is a testament to the enduring power of art, storytelling, and the humanities/humanity in general (290). Bulman's final analysis focuses on Lola Arias's 2016 installation *Doble de riesgo* in the Parque de la Memoria, which she considers representative of a new type of archives, based on feelings and affect, which she calls "sensichives" (324). Arias's installation combines art and performance with real images and historical documents related to the appalling human rights abuses committed by the military junta from 1976-1983. Bulman recalls spectators becoming actors as they moved through the exhibit and engaged with interactive displays, including a guard booth with a working microphone and a video camera set up for filming and streaming in real time. Rooms featured in the installation include "Veteranos," which documents the Malvinas war, "Ejércitos paralelos," which examined the junta's culture of surveillance, and "Sonido de la multitud" where spectators were encouraged to speak/sing/chant into a karaoke machine, replicating the voices of resistance movements during the dictatorship and the post-dictatorship era. In her analysis of this multifaceted piece, Bulman draws from and builds upon existing scholarship on artwork, installation, memory and archives by diverse scholars: Walter Benjamin, Andrea Guinta, and Diana Taylor, among others. Bulman explains: "engraved, recorded, and saved on screens and other digital devices, the sensichives open spaces of interaction between history and memory, the individual and the community, the artist and her audience . . ." (294).

As a final note, Bulman's investigation into visuality and affect in contemporary Southern-cone performance is rich with relevant samples of theatrical dialogue, most of which she herself translated into English, making the texts more accessible to English-speaking readers. Bulman's eye-witness accounts of Southern Cone performance prove themselves to be an invaluable resource for students and scholars interested in understanding the evolving performance/spectator relationship in Southern Cone Latin American theatre in the digital age. *Feeling the Gaze* details diverse forms of theatre and performance in conversation with political activism, historical research, technological innovations, and aesthetic visions in Chile and Argentina, which should be of interest to anyone engaging in scholarship on Latin American theatre today.

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