Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art (review)

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ture. Although markedly attentive to the impact of feminism and neo-Marxist critical paradigms on contemporary art practices, the author elides the significance of race, ethnicity, and sexuality as generative crucibles of avant-garde work. Save for a lone reference to "the innovative and radical work of artists such as Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Adrian Piper" (134), the text excludes consideration of border art and other resistant cultural movements fuelled by the activist work of artists from socially aggrieved communities. *Avant-Garde Performance* thus unintentionally re-inscribes a crucial danger articulated by Fusco, emphasizing a Eurocentric lineage of avant-garde practice that marginalizes the contributions of minority artists. While *Avant-Garde Performance* offers significant contributions to the study of experimental art movements, particularly those that flourished at the juncture of performance with visual and conceptual art, faculty choosing to adopt this text might consider placing it in dialogue with studies that more consciously reflect on the marginalization of artists of colour within avant-garde praxis, including works that focus more explicitly on the theatre and performance of the Americas, in order to productively interrogate the implicit dynamics of exclusion at work in any process of canon construction.

MICHAEL C. FINKE. *Seeing Chekhov: Life and Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp. 256, illustrated. $29.95 (Hb).

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Michael Finke's *Seeing Chekhov* represents a landmark contribution to Chekhov studies and thus to literary studies more broadly. It serves as a model of how a sensitive and probing psycho-biographical study can illuminate a writer's output intelligently – from Chekhov's voluminous correspondence, to his dashed-off early stories, to the profound mature fiction, to his durably stimulating plays.

Chekhov wrote famously of his own "autobiographobia." As would any practiced therapist, Finke takes this as an invitation to dig deeply into thematic obsessions in Chekhov's life and poetics. (An important antecedent in this endeavour is the penetrating work of Savely Senderovich.) But this is no crudely configured Freudianism. While carefully developing "an interpretive framework that allows space for its subject to continue breathing" (16), Finke draws out of a hefty stock of evidence concerning Chekhov's dual professions as a doctor and writer the idea that his behaviours were rooted in "deep-seated anxieties and desires connected to issues of seeing and being seen, hiding and showing" (13). It is not enough to say that this book sheds light on Chekhov's notorious elusiveness: Finke demonstrates that elusiveness – as a function of

this author's relentless efforts to position himself as the gazer, not the gazed upon – was the hallmark of Chekhov's being, his professional life, and his writing.

The first chapter, "To Be Seen or Not to Be Seen," ushers in this discussion with an analysis of Chekhov's dual attraction and aversion, as a playwright, to the public eye, the arena in which he experienced the greatest visibility. The chief public disaster to beset Chekhov, of course, was the premiere of *Seagull*, which he fled once the performance turned out to be a flop. Finke argues that in *Seagull*, "Chekhov's audience *sees* seeing [Treplev's play performed by Nina Zarechnaya for his family], and what follows is a dramatization of the dangers entailed for an author who cannot keep his self outside of the scene" (11). For Treplev, a playwright viewed in his humiliation must commit suicide; Chekhov simply ran. In Finke's estimate, he felt vulnerable when gazed at by others.

Prose writing, on the other hand, seemed to offer better protective camouflage. Chekhov wrote, "[I]f I'm going to write, then it has to be from afar, from a crack in the wall" (qtd. on 25), and Finke finds a sustained theme of such voyeurism in the early prose. But he does not impose a prefabricated frame of psychoanalysis on Chekhov. Rather, his argument develops from the organic life material he has unearthed: "in times of success I cower and feel a powerful impulse to hide under a table," wrote Chekhov (quoted on 22); writing under a pseudonym, said Chekhov, is "just like walking naked with a large mask on and showing oneself like that to the public" (qtd. on 32). The terminology of psychoanalysis – "scopophilia, scopophobia, and exhibitionism" (51) – is introduced gradually and pertinently and is used sparingly.

Seeing Chekhov performs an unprecedentedly discerning investigation into the interface between Chekhov's identities as doctor and writer. Chekhov was greatly invested in his professional identity as a doctor, Finke argues, because it put him in the role of observer; conversely, Chekhov long avoided medical treatment for his tuberculosis, which would subject him to a fellow doctor's gaze: "it outraged him [...] to be seen by others as ill" (198). Finke bashes the dogged myths about the author's ever-objective doctorly eye. He gives us literary proof that Chekhov's own anxieties about his professional identity intrude on his prose and makes a larger argument about the predominance of the "seeing and being seen" complex as the defining factor in the identities of many Chekhov characters. The book treats a large number of texts, analysing or alluding to around seventy-five short stories and plays; this enables the author to demonstrate iterations of the complex throughout Chekhov's career, but it may strike some readers as an overdose of plot.

In the chapter "Self and Other through the Lens of Science," Finke situates Chekhov in relation to Darwin and his discourse on degeneration; in "Erotic and Mythic Visions," Finke takes on the question of Chekhov's own sexuality (explored wantingly in Donald Rayfield's 1997 biography) and elaborates on

the "erotics of seeing" (148) in Chekhov's works. It should be noted that analysis of dramatic works surfaces only intermittently (for instance, Finke uncovers the meaning of Zola's *Dr. Pascal* for *The Cherry Orchard*), yet the entire argument bursts with performance potential. These chapters are too rich and dense to paraphrase effectively; suffice it to say that Finke stays on task with his theme.

The book's coda is an unusual treat. Finke offers a provocative reading of "Chekhov's Things" – the physical spaces of his houses, the configuration of his study, objects in his study, his books, his bedroom, and his ill body. Here are a few of the enticing *things* that come under careful scrutiny in this symbolic reading: Chekhov's binoculars, his walking stick, paintings by Levitan, a bookcase, an antique cloth, and a fishing pole.

While Chekhov would have balked at the probing eye that grasps "his lifelong struggle to determine how he would be seen, and how he would define his self through his seeing" (200), he might have authored this very list in jest – a common practice in his early prose. This reminds us that behind every Chekhov word, just as behind every component of Chekhov's life and works attended to by Finke, there lies a history, a depth, and territory for interpretation inaccessible to the untrained eye. Finke shows us a new way to see Chekhov.

Even if you don't go in for psychoanalytical theory, you will find this book insightful in surprising ways. This is the result not only of meticulous research but also of a constant awareness on the part of the author as to the pitfalls of insensitively executed readings. Finke's *Seeing Chekhov* is a delicate, precise, fascinating, and exciting piece of scholarship that belongs in every Chekhov seminar and on the shelf of every theatre practitioner or scholar.