

## THE POWER OF THEATRE FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE

PETER MEINECK, *Theatrocracy. Greek Drama, Cognition, and the Imperative for Theatre*, London/New York: Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 9781138205529.

IN THIS BOOK PETER MEINECK endeavours to approach the historical/cultural phenomenon of ancient Greek theatre from a perspective informed by the advances in cognitive neuroscience, cognitive science more broadly, as well as related sub-disciplines. In the Introduction (“Theatre as mimetic mind”) the author expounds the whole rationale of his study: namely how the function of the brain and the neural mechanisms of man may provide a point of departure for the explanation of a variety of cultural phenomena. As he explains, “the human mind is extended in a feedback loop between brain, body, environment, and back again” (p. 8). Emotions are a key part of this discussion (pp. 9-14), but the focus of the author’s interest is on the mechanisms engendering them, rather than on themselves as they may be deduced from the textual evidence. Empathy (pp. 18-22) is an equally central notion, understood not as the mere “transference” of an affective state from one person to another, but rather as the capability to discern emotional signals projected by another person and the concomitant effort to insert those signals within a relevant context via our predictive cognitive mechanism.

Each subsequent chapter borrows a term from Aristotelian *Poetics* for its title – though each of them is understood and interpreted in the author’s own way. Chapter 1 (“*Mythos*. probability and prediction”) deals with the manner in which the human cognitive mechanism follows the plot of a drama and reacts to its unfolding. The author is particularly interested in surprise as a central element of the plot; more specifically, he aims at further developing, from a cognitive perspective, Aristotle’s assertion that the best plot surprises are those that we feel able to insert into some sort of predictive pattern: *ἐπεὶ καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τῶς τῶς ταῦτα θαυμασιώτατα δοκεῖ ὅσα ὡς περ ἐπίτηδες φαίνεται γεγενῆσθαι* (*Poetics* 9. 1452a6-7). Meineck draws on cognitive, as well as phenomenological, studies in order to underline that whereas surprise is

essential for cognition, *unresolved* surprise proves highly frustrating and also counter-productive. The import of the Aristotelian notion of εἰκός (“probability”) is equally underscored, since it reflects the significance of probabilistic thinking as a key factor in mental conceptualization (p. 37-38). Thomas Bayes’ theorem concerning statistical probability is also brought into the discussion (pp. 39-41), yet in a way that does not make entirely clear how it may illuminate ancient theatrical practice. The gist of this chapter, as stated in the conclusions, is that ancient spectators were encouraged, via probabilistic/predictive thinking, to be open to receiving novel information and even engaging in explorations into alterity.

Chapter 2, entitled “*Opsis*. The embodied view”, focuses on how the physical environment is not merely a part, but an essential one of the spectator’s experience at the theatre of Dionysos. The Aristotelian term ὄψις is therefore employed in an idiosyncratic way, not in the sense of the visual element of the spectacle (stage setting, props etc.). In fact, Meineck’s reference to ὄψις in *Poetics* is rather sketchy and seems to lay particular emphasis (without expressly referring to it) on the highly debated formulation καὶ γὰρ †ὄψις ἔχει πᾶν† (6. 1450a13), thus claiming that, according to Aristotle, ὄψις “encompassed the other five elements of tragedy” (p. 53). Foregrounding the embodied character of theatrical experience, the author refers in this chapter to the complex neurobiological processes of perception, prediction and action; key within these processes is dopamine, a chemical that effectively acts as a stimulator of human possibilities. The Aristotelian notion of φαντασία is considered relevant in this context, since it does not merely entail a perception and a concomitant representation that leads us to action, but also an affective tagging that involves prediction (p. 55). Key to promoting this capacity is the open-air theatre and, more pointedly, the panoramic views of the sky, which enable the spectators not simply to watch the play before them, but also to simultaneously engage in deep contemplation. A central inference is that the theatrical experience on the south slope of the Acropolis — “a dopamine-inducing environment” — “promoted alternate modes of thought and contemplation” (p. 72).

“*Ethos*. The character of *catharsis*” is the title of the third chapter, which deals with the function of the mask; *catharsis*, although it features in the title of this chapter, is a notion that will more clearly be explained in chapter 7. What Meineck seeks to foreground here is the peculiarity of the mask as a visual call for attention and a means for projecting emotions. The mask — as revealed by an experiment with Noh masks tilted back and forwards (pp. 94-95) — is capable of projecting mutable expressions in the

spectators' minds. Indeed, its schematic qualities act as a material anchor for the projection of our own emotional predictions: in this sense it can be considered as a "prediction generator". Thus, far from being "abstract", the ancient *προσωπεῖον* was capable of engaging spectators on a deeply personal level. The references to the relative import of peripheral and foveal vision, as well as to Kuleshov's experiment, illuminate the neurobiological processing of masks by the audience (pp. 96-100). However, the spectator's mode of engagement with the mask is not uniform across times and places and Meineck rightly highlights the fact that it depends, not merely on the general cultural background, but also more specifically on the spectators' literacy and level of education (pp. 100-109). Illiterate and semi-literate people are found to be processing faces more "holistically" in the sense of relying more on instinctual and emotional, rather than on analytical, processes. Therefore, we are warned against positing a uniform appraisal by Athenian theatre-goers of the action played out before them by masked performers.

The fourth chapter is entitled "*Dianoia*. Intention in action" and again departs from an Aristotelian term which is understood in a special way: as "meaning" and "intention" not expressed via speech acts, but through movement: namely, through dance, gestures and, more generally, physical action performed onstage. A central notion in this chapter is kinesthetic empathy: indeed, scientific experiments have shown that in processing the movement of others we are activating parts of *our own* mental systems involved in the production of movement. Narrative information reinforces stage action and the result of both is the cognitive absorption which creates an empathetic response. Invoking the experimental inferences of neuroscience – especially as regards the neural mirror system – Meineck draws attention to the fact that the human brain "understands" actions via motor simulation (pp. 127-132). The way in which kinesthetic empathy works also enriches our appraisal of the function of the mask, since bodies are far better in communicating affective states than faces, especially in the large area of the ancient theatre (pp. 132-134). What is further stressed is the importance of group action in the theatre as embodied in chorality and, as a prime instance, in processions, which involve coordinated movement highly capable of conveying strong emotions.

The elements of music (*melos*) and speech (*lexis*) are the topics of the next two chapters (5 and 6): those two elements round off the discussion of the multifarious ways in which emotion is created and conveyed in the ancient theatre. The author rightly emphasizes the role of the *aulos*, a powerful instrument that can provoke intense affective responses and promote

“emotional contagion” (pp. 157-162). Lament, as a special kind of music heard in the theatre, is further discussed; in this context, the author rightly touches upon the “musical tragic paradox”, first foregrounded by Plato: namely that people may feel pleasure while watching lamentation and abandon themselves to a tearful mood (*Republic* 10. 605c). The theatre could, therefore, become an eminent outlet of emotional expression: “an affective mirror for a kind of cultural therapy within a society traumatized by conflict and war” (p. 167). Prediction and “musical expectancy” is another topic discussed by the author (pp. 169-174), whose aim is to emphasize the contribution of music to the overall effect of drama, especially since it helps create surprisal or indeed challenge our expectations. In terms of *lexis*, now, what is particularly highlighted is the importance of metre and rhythm, which decidedly reinforces the emotional effect of poetry. The section on “masked language” (pp. 185-188) concentrates on the fact that dramatic speech, as Oliver Taplin has remarked, is actually “enhanced” by the mask, since the audience pays attention to the words more closely. Finally, Meineck focuses on Aeschylus, especially *Persians*, in order to show how words — sometimes “mere” unintelligible exclamations — may cause dissonance, dissociation, cognitive absorption and empathy (pp. 191-200).

The final chapter (“*Metabasis*. Dissociation and democracy”) essentially offers a recapitulation of the central arguments exposed in the book, while stressing the idea of *μετάβασις*: a term borrowed again from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and adapted by the author in order to signify not a change of fortune, but the effects of dissociation and cognitive absorption, which are capable of promoting among the audience enhanced decision making and empathy. Both these elements, as the author argues, are not merely profitable for the spectators, but also, significantly, enable the very practice of democracy, since the audience is encouraged to explore and potentially embrace a different perspective of reality, to pursue new interpretations, novel modes of understanding and perceiving things. Therefore, the theatre of Dionysos was capable, through surprisal, expectancy, emotional affect and other modes of influence to offer “a gradual kind of *catharsis* in the form of empathetic understanding” (pp. 210-211).

In sum, Meineck’s book covers a key desideratum in classical studies by offering a comprehensive treatment of the ways in which cognitive science and neuroscience may enhance our understanding of ancient theatrical practice. Such a synthesis is certainly not an easy task: at times one feels that there is more scientific exposition than concrete discussion of poetry, but this is inevitable, since the author is attempting forays into barely explored ground

and provides interdisciplinary insights in a bold and sometimes experimental way. *Theatrocracy* is a particularly valuable contribution to both classics and drama studies, one that will certainly provide the instigation for manifold further investigations within a broad and promising area of research.

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