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Towards a semiotic and somatic mode of attention in the spectator.

Abstract

The avant-garde legacy of criticizing the traditional passive positioning of the spectator in theatre and challenging the relationships between stage and audience, I argue, encourages theatre practitioners and theorists to relate to post-modern performances through binary concepts. It is common to make an opposition between an active or passive state in the spectator and consider the stimulation of her senses and intellect as separated. In this dissertation I reflect on the possibility to stimulate the modes of attention in the spectator during a performance rather than thinking in terms of active and passive. I moreover propose to consider theatre as a place where the spectator can be both encouraged to rationally look for meaning and to sensorially engage with the performance at the same time. My argument unfolds through the description of my process of creating a solo dance performance that awakened both the semiotic and somatic modes of attention in the spectator. I describe how such a performance led the spectator to adopt a dual focus, where she directed her attention both extrospectively and introspectively, that is, took on an analytical role over the performer at the same time as adopting a phenomenological attitude of listening to her own body. I claim that this dual stance in the spectator can enhance her appreciation of a performance, with the spectator becoming attentive to and engaging with every detail of the work. I close this thesis by recognizing another binary to challenge, namely the dichotomy of the concepts of presence and representation in theatre and propose to further pursue my research by embracing the idea that the semiotic impact of the performer on the spectator cannot be separated from her somatic impact.