

Review:

McConachie, Bruce: *Engaging Audiences - a cognitive approach to spectating in the theatre*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2008). ISBN-13 978-0-230-60988-4, ISBN-10: 0-230-60988-0, pp. 248

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In *Engaging Audiences – a cognitive approach to spectating in the theatre*, Bruce McConachie presents a timely publication that touches on some important features of consciousness and human perception as applied to audience spectatorship processes. McConachie offers an overview of audience engagement that covers general, social and cultural aspects of cognition. His analysis throughout the book draws on a wide variety of critical theorists from a range of backgrounds and disciplines, such as Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier, Erving Goffman and performance theorists including Aristotle, Artaud and Auslander. McConachie applies his thinking to examples from performance and play-text incorporating a range of Shakespeare plays, various productions of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. There are also useful endnotes provided for each chapter.

The opening chapter on General Cognition explores areas such as 'cognitive multi-tasking' (28) and gestalt consciousness, which examines the integrated experience of performance. McConachie takes a somewhat semiotic approach to cognition here although does, in places touch upon the wider perspective offered by embodied approaches. For example, his consideration of memory is of interest and draws attention, to a degree, to audience appreciation in the present moment via short-term memory as much as any consequent memory that might be drawn on in subsequent audience interpretation. McConachie takes into consideration the 'spatial relation of bodily action' (39) in a brief fashion within this overview of general cognition and memory. He clarifies how 'conceptual blending' is a more accurate term for the sweepingly used 'suspension of disbelief' (43) which is useful to students considering the willingness of audiences to engage in theatrical spectatorship. This becomes particularly pertinent in relation to those performances that 'push the blend' between

the actor/character continuum (47), which occurs in most live art work (although the reader would have to make this connection for her/himself). The consideration of the 'play' of consciousness is interesting, related briefly to Bakhtin's carnivalisation, flow and framing (51) and could point towards those performance theorists applying this thinking to more immediately innovative and wide ranging practice in the performing arts. As this suggests, the cognitive approaches that McConchie summarises in this chapter provide a useful way in to more detailed texts in this area such as Susan Broadhurst's application of Neuroaesthetics to a range of technological artistic practice or my own consideration of the embodied appreciation processes attributable to visceral performance.

In the second chapter on 'Social Cognition in Spectating', McConachie's analysis covers various social aspects including empathy, gesture, speech and emotion. On the whole, he continues to foreground the silent/invisible division between audience and performer that exists in conventional theatrical relationships without acknowledging an actual embodied integration of audience member and performance that can occur in much contemporary practice. He focuses on an 'us and them/me and it' perspectival attitude which is centred around traditional notions of production and reception despite his overview of neuroscientific research within perception processes in Chapter 1, which embraces reception experiences that can be applied to performance styles that move beyond the traditional into the modern and immediately contemporary. As a result, certain illustrations provided, such as the reference to *Top Girls*, are somewhat reductive and simplistic in the application of the traditional notion of spectator to work that subverts this.

Chapter 3 surveys 'Cultural Cognition in History', providing an interesting overview of how humans fuse the primitive and cultural in making sense of work and clarifies the way in which culture 'helps people learn what to pay attention to' (122). Furthermore, following Roy D'Andrade, McConachie shows how it is 'the pieces of culture', its subsystems, rather than culture as a gestalt that shapes perception. He highlights the rules, models and boundaries of watching performance that are shaped by social and cultural frames. As much as McConachie considers the 'contained world' of the theatre space (135) and the influence on performance/audience spatial relationship he only does this within the traditional architecture of what is 'accepted' and understood as theatre space, rather than considering site-specific/site-sympathetic work which occurs outside of such spaces and plays with environment *in order to exploit* more holistic, experiential possibilities for audience perception. This is a further factor that emphasises McConachie's more conventional approach to theatrical forms.

The consideration of salient meaning and narrative in relation to the formal structure of playwriting and production, covering narrative structures, language, metaphor, nuance, irony

and speech that plays with collective memory, is interesting and offers a deeper analysis of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Churchill's *Top Girls* by way of illustration. This is useful to students learning about approaches to the analysis of performance texts, the latter illustration opening up the significance of audiences generating meaning via deconstructive means in contemporary work, which was not touched upon in Chapter 1. The overview of genre still remains firmly within the realm of play-writing and traditional theatre rather than opening up the debate to touch on that work which exists outside of these realms. Reference to casting touches on gender and interracial factors but does not examine these elements in detail. Here, again, the reader would need to turn to other texts for more in-depth analysis of this area .

It is within the epilogue, which seeks to be 'impressionistic' and 'evocative' (185), that McConachie, drawing on James H. Johnson's analysis of musical innovation and listening, points towards the fact that performance modes evolve and thus spectatorship approaches, roles and experiences will do the same. This epilogue summarises historical approaches taken to spectatorship experience and the consideration of 'Modernism FEAR and Hegemony' (200-7) highlights certain ludic subversions that are demanded in perception processes with expressionistic work. McConachie's concluding argument for cognitive historiography is timely in pointing towards the pleasure to be had in rereading forms and productions of the past applying the cognitive approaches of the present.

F. Elizabeth Hart has stated that 'Engaging Audiences provides a major synthesis of theatre/performance and cognitive studies' finding 'the right balance between scientific details and theatrical examples', which I would agree with to a certain extent in that he does so by way of an introduction to these areas. Although, I would stress that there is a lack of in-depth application to a diversity of specific forms and performances. Where John Emigh, suggests that 'McConachie constructively engages with the recent findings of cognitive scientists to challenge fundamental assumptions about how and why we view and recall theatrical events', I would question how far McConachie 'challenges' as he tends to remain within the straightforward notion of the spectator as one who views and the audience as that which hears without considering the more unusual, embodied audience experience that so much contemporary work inspires. That said, McConchie simplifies and makes accessible some complex cognitive theories and applies these to audience spectatorship in a meaningful way. As a result he does provide interested parties with a readable critical overview that interweaves aspects of performance, historiography and cognitive theory. This is a useful addition to the theorising of the audience role in performance and covers the vast areas of General, Social and Cultural approaches to cognition in a summative fashion. I would certainly use this text in my own teaching on modules that question the experience and function of the audience/performance exchange. I would recommend that this be read as a

companion text with other writings within this field that provide in-depth analysis in relation to each particular area covered. With this in mind, *Engaging Audiences – a cognitive approach to spectating in the theatre* is a useful addition to writings in this area and would be of benefit to any student with an interest in the role of the audience and the processes of spectatorship in traditional theatrical situations.

Biographical Note

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