

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by CHRYSTYNA DAIL

Baroque Modernity: An Aesthetics of Theater

By Joseph Cermatori. Hopkins Studies in Modernism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021; pp. xxii + 298, 10 illustrations. \$37 paper, \$37 e-book.

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Joseph Cermatori's *Baroque Modernity: An Aesthetics of Theater* forwards an important intellectual history of modern aesthetics that traces a productive fascination with baroque style, and especially baroque theatricality. Against the backdrop of dominant understandings of modernist priorities that privilege minimalism, "making it new," and mimetic realism, Cermatori highlights key works by Friedrich Nietzsche, Stéphane Mallarmé, Walter Benjamin, and Gertrude Stein to reveal an alternative modernity that is unapologetic about its incorporation of the baroque.

Working specifically at the intersection of theory and theatre, Cermatori's account is careful to show that the modern preoccupations with the baroque he outlines are not anomalous moments of nostalgia or lapses in otherwise sound modernist judgment. On the contrary, these baroque preoccupations demonstrate the persistence with which baroque aesthetics have provided new ways for thinkers to meet the demands of modern crises. "The baroque does not come and go; it does not get lost and reappear," Cermatori makes clear. "As an aesthetic framework, the term instead names something like a stubborn, underlying *condition* of modernity" (17). The baroque, according to Cermatori, is noteworthy above all as an aesthetics that centers and embraces theatricality. Using the art historian and critic Michael Fried's remarks to articulate an antitheatrical modernism (within the world of painting and sculpture), Cermatori's project works to show how baroque modernism challenges and queers this repressive position, not only within the world of theatre arts but, perhaps more unexpectedly, also within the worlds of philosophy and critical theory.

The four chapters dedicated to Nietzsche, Mallarmé, Benjamin, and Stein each pursue different threads of Cermatori's larger argument. Chapter 1, "Overcoming Ascetic Style," considers Nietzsche's work on tragedy and his complicated

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relationship to Wagnerian opera. Cermatori situates Nietzsche as one who struggles against the baroque, only to discover “his own susceptibility” to it in his thinking and writing (53). The great strength of this chapter resides in the careful delineation of two different baroques—resentful and affirmative—that come to light, first in Nietzsche’s negative response to Wagner’s *Parsifal*, in which he sees “the baroque of church, bourgeoisie, empire, and the eternal law” (58), and next in Nietzsche’s own philosophical writing, where his rhetorical style is infused with theatricality. As Cermatori puts it, Nietzsche “clamors for . . . a properly Zarathustrian vision of baroque style, a noble, active, and life-affirming force, full of multiplicity, variation, and perpetual difference” (58). Significantly, Nietzsche’s liberatory baroque, centered more on individual critical thought than on totalizing institutions, stands at the beginning of Cermatori’s account, paving the way for his subsequent explorations.

In Chapter 2, focusing primarily on Mallarmé’s *Hérodiade* and *Livre* alongside other fragmentary writings, Cermatori highlights Mallarmé’s efforts to create “a nonmimetic theater of striking and enigmatic poses, a modern baroque form of gestures drama” (84). Cermatori takes pains to argue that *Hérodiade* is not merely closet drama, nor is *Livre* merely a book; rather, both attempt to “provide the setting for a new form of collective ritual” (98). Counterintuitively, Cermatori argues that this “potentially utopian form of community” is possible “precisely because of the interpretive difficulty of [Mallarmé’s] poetry” (99).

Turning next to Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* in Chapter 3, Cermatori presents this treatise not only as an obvious example of a modern excavation of the baroque past for historical purposes but, more important, also as providing a theory of modern drama—one that “dissolves its protagonists into constellations of figures in tension with one another, creating a spatial dramaturgy of historical setting or landscape rather than a temporal one of efficacious human action” (104). As with his chapter on Nietzsche, Cermatori is especially attentive to developments in Benjamin’s thinking that uncover a more nuanced understanding of the baroque and its “more radical political potential” (130). In this case, Benjamin’s writings on Bertolt Brecht reveal surprising ways in which the playwright inherits and transforms baroque conventions. Cermatori also shows how Benjamin develops an important critique of Nietzsche that helps him establish another “dialectic internal to the baroque, between *mournful* and *messianic* uses of allegory” (142). Though not quite the exuberant, affirmative “Yes” of Nietzsche’s baroque (44), Benjamin’s insistence on the potential for hope is striking in contrast to the grieving that otherwise suffuses his baroque form of *Trauerspiel*.

Although he is not interested in tracking specific instances of influence among the thinkers at the center of his chapters, Cermatori makes helpful connections throughout the book, and the final chapter on Stein fittingly emerges as the culmination of ideas outlined in his previous explorations of especially Nietzsche and Benjamin, and, to a lesser degree, Mallarmé. In his discussion of Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Cermatori provides the most sustained consideration of a live performance in this study. Undeniably influenced by baroque themes and style in its conception, *Four Saints* is also a groundbreaking work of avant-garde theatre, significant not only for its collaborative artistic priorities, but also for centering an all-Black cast. Moreover, as Cermatori points out, “the vision of baroque

style Stein glimpsed in *Four Saints* is one that transmutes mournfulness, miraculously, into gaiety” (165). In the final moments of this chapter, Cermatori gestures helpfully toward “Stein’s meanings for queer and racial politics,” emphasizing how her baroque productively disrupts, defamiliarizes, and deconstructs established norms (180).

Cermatori is not the first to identify baroque leanings in Nietzsche, Mallarmé, Benjamin, and Stein (the Introduction and Epilogue, however, propose more provocative figures for future study in this regard). At times, the terrain he traverses has significant overlap with important scholarly work such as Martin Puchner’s *Stage Fright* and Samuel Weber’s *Theatricality as Medium*. These are quibbles, however. Cumulatively, Cermatori’s carefully researched book offers a significant lens for understanding not only the reach of the baroque on the history of modern aesthetics, but also its hold on contemporary theatre and performance art.

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Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Plays by Women: The Early Twenty-First Century

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When a critical essay collection as expansive as this new offering from Peggy Farfan and Lesley Ferris is released, it does more than mark the scope of contemporary plays in the field; it also maps the terrain of our current scholarly moment—the gatherings where potent collaborations began, the professional communities that shape our work, and the places where earlier scholarship has twisted and branched, opening up new lines of inquiry for emerging scholars to pursue. Although it is not the primary emphasis of *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Plays by Women: The Early Twenty-First Century*, a vital scholarly genealogy undergirds this edited collection of twenty-eight chapters both from researchers who helped to establish the academic field of feminist theatre criticism and from scholars whose work is taking the profession in urgent new directions. Farfan acknowledges the influences of “literary foremothers” (2) on playwrights in the collection, but there’s also intrinsic feminist value in noting the ways feminist scholarly approaches have taken root in the academy. “I feel the best about scholars—the academic world,” Adrienne Kennedy told Branden Jacobs-Jenkins: “They Xeroxed my plays and kept them