Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism. By Tobin Nellhaus. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; pp. 236. $80.00 cloth.
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Reviewed by Jason Fitzgerald, Columbia University

Of the three terms in the title of Tobin Nellhaus's new study—*Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism*—none stands as the foundation of the others' emergence. The book is at once a contribution to media studies, a model for a new theatre historiography, and an apologia for the philosophical school known as critical realism. Its fragmented plot follows the rise of print culture and its multitudinous effects on theatre history. The story begins with the rise of literacy and drama in classical Athens and makes stops in medieval Europe and the English Renaissance before considering the rise of the eighteenth-century public sphere, and the vagaries of modernism and postmodernism. Nellhaus is an ambitious writer; the scope of his study and the vigor of his argumentation make it impossible to ignore the role that media studies must play in the future of theatre history.

Notably, the word *media* rarely appears in this text. Nellhaus prefers instead to use *communication*, to mark his departure from any technodeterminism that would connect the material of a medium directly to discursive paradigms (as, for example, in Friedrich Kittler). The determining factor here is not which media are used but how they are deployed in a particular society, an arrangement Nellhaus calls a "communication framework" (53). A lateral relationship thus begins to articulate itself, with society as the mediating term between media and theatre.

Nellhaus relies on critical realism (a term bearing no relation to Brecht and his dramaturgies) as a sociological model—one deriving from the philosophical school of the same name most associated with Roy Bhaskar but also developed by Margaret S. Archer, Andrew Collier, and others. An outgrowth of American pragmatism (Charles S. Peirce is a key figure for Nellhaus), critical realism carves a pathway between, on the one hand, an empiricist positivism that privileges only what is observable as real and therefore worthy of study and, on the other hand, a social constructivism that claims that perception (or discourse) *is* the only real. Positioning itself between these extremes, critical realism argues that there is a "real world" that each culture accesses through different socially conditioned epistemologies, although, in Nellhaus's words, "the specter haunting epistemology is ontology" (179).

Critical realism has had its greatest impact in sociology, from which Nellhaus derives his social model. Society, in critical realism, is composed of structures (socioeconomic configurations), agents (who act on the real world within the social structure's models), and discourses (the field of ideas). Nellhaus casually mentions that the latter layer, implied within critical realism, is his addition, its articulation necessary here to underscore its relevance to aesthetic history (14). The kinds of discourse and performance possible in any given society are shaped by its communication frameworks, the "practical procedures and social exigencies of everyday communication" (94). With this neat

formula, Nellhaus wraps media studies into the fold of critical realism, and he catches the theatre along with it.

Nellhaus uses Chapter 1, "Philosophy, History, Theatre," to summarize his critical methods; in Chapters 2 and 3, "Orality, Literacy, and Early Theatre" and "Embodiment, Agency, and Performance Strategies," he demonstrates how communication frameworks have bred particular dramatic forms, including Greek tragedy, medieval cycle drama, and eighteenth-century sentimental tragedy. Nellhaus notes, for example, how the use of "similitudes" (68) in medieval European drama—figural thinking, typology, allegory—derived from the role of the Bible as the ground of philosophy and history at a time when literacy was inconsistently distributed. Similarly, in the eighteenth century, the prominence of sentimental tragedy and gestural acting derived from the new division of private self and public sphere, with the former understood as based on a textual model in which gesture and sentimental expression could reveal "just as writing did" (127).

Chapter 4, "Social Ontology, (Meta)theatricality, and the History of Communication," in which Nellhaus tackles the transhistorical phenomenon of metadrama, makes the most direct connection between critical realist sociology and theatre studies. Nellhaus contends that the components of society—discourses, agents, and structures—are not only modeled but also signified in the theatre by the playscript, the characters/plots, and the performance event, respectively. "Theatre's key likeness to society is not a question of imitation or representation," he concludes, "but homology" (155). This relation explains what critics such as Lionel Abel and Elinor Fuchs have argued for years: that metatheatricality manifests in periods of epistemological confusion, when there is, as Nellhaus writes, a "question mark over truth" (164). Such times mark a shift from one communication framework, and companionate philosophical model, to another. What results is an indeterminacy, at the level of "agency" (156), in what it means to be a subject acting in a social world (think of Hamlet's delayed revenge, and Didi and Gogo's stasis).

Despite the compelling nature of this and other arguments, so much of *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism* is taken up with overly technical descriptions of methodology that its applications feel broad and schematic. This tendency is due, in part, to Nellhaus's ambivalent flirtation with social determinism. Although he insists that critical realism presumes a "real world" beyond its cultural constructions (one that terms like "communication framework" are designed to displace), it is not always clear where "reality" ends and "culture" begins. In Nellhaus's analysis, developments in the distribution of reading and writing align so profoundly with changes in performance genres that his conclusions often resemble the very cultural determinism he distrusts.

Nellhaus's historiography therefore grounds theatre history so firmly in the material conditions of media networks that it risks explaining the art away, taking little account of aesthetic imagination, the transmission of performance through history, or the possibility of interventions on history by theatrical representations. Nellhaus has little to say on these issues so important to performance studies over the past few decades, in part because he dismisses Foucault, Butler, and other social constructionists as simply replacing "reality" with language or discourse,

rather than analyzing the relations of power that determine what is imaginable or (un)thinkable in all forms of thought and practice, including both the making of theatre and the writing of history. Perhaps as a symptom of his conservatism, Nellhaus privileges less-recent secondary sources for his evidence (out of forty sources used in his discussion of medieval drama, for example, only six were published after 1989), leaving his relationship with current scholarship unclear. He also gives short shrift to modern drama, aside from a brief discussion of naturalism and symbolism and a somewhat random sampling of what he calls "theatrical *self-presence*" (174) in the late twentieth century.

Despite the limitations of Nellhaus's sociology, *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism* is undeniably an important read for anyone working to combine media studies with theatre historiography on a model other than that of technodeterminism or, for that matter, a reified opposition between performance and technology. Thanks to this intervention, and to his introducing theatre scholars to an important trend in contemporary sociology, Nellhaus's work opens many avenues for future exploration.

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Offstage Space, Narrative, and the Theatre of the Imagination. By William Gruber. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; pp. 192. $80.00 cloth.
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Reviewed by Beth A. Kattelman, The Ohio State University

In this intriguing book William Gruber discusses the aesthetics of absence, and interrogates the narrative strategies used by playwrights to help audience members conjure the unseen within their imaginations. Taking Plato's distinction between mimesis and diegesis as his point of departure, Gruber explores the wide variety of ways in which playwrights deploy these modes, and how subtle differences in their uses can have a huge impact on how "offstage space" is conceived by an audience. Gruber's is a wide-ranging volume that considers works from artists as disparate as Euripides, Edward Gordon Craig, Susan Glaspell, Brian Friel, Edward Albee, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Marguerite Duras.

In his introduction, Gruber notes that he is interested in exploring why a playwright might choose narrative over scenic enactment in a play. He then explains his intention of presenting a wide survey of plays that demonstrate various uses of narrative. Gruber notes that he does not aim to present a comprehensive overview, but rather to present "examples sufficiently numerous and varied to be illustrative" (13). He succeeds admirably in this aim, for the examples that follow present an extensive view of the ways in which playwrights have used telling versus showing to create the world of a play.

In Chapter 1, "Showing vs. Telling," Gruber launches into a discussion of that staple of classical tragedy, the messenger speech. He offers a brief survey of the criticism devoted to messenger speeches, and rightly points out that even though there is a long tradition of playwrights using this dramaturgical device,