

*French Visual Culture and the Making of Medieval Theater.* Laura Weigert.  
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In the opening pages of her book, Weigert critically summarizes the debate on the mutual influences between visual arts and theater that, starting from the early twentieth century, looked at realism and affective devotion as the key factors of an intermedial exchange, the

directions of which remain uncertain. In order to break the dualism between art and theater, the author adopts—borrowing from various authors and interpretations (Barthes, Zumthor, Michael Fried, Josette Féral)—the idea of theatricality as a way to connect texts and artworks to the experiential process of late medieval performances. The reader is introduced to a notion of visual culture related to the unique power of visual communication of the urban performance in the late Middle Ages in the kingdom of France and in the dukedom of Burgundy.

In that specific context, what defines the visual culture of large-scale civic performances—both sacred and secular—is “the representational potential that human beings and visual images shared” (7). The *mystères par personnages* were a combination of figurative artifacts (painted cloths, tapestries, statues, and mechanical figures) and living figures. Those materials were common to both religious celebrations and royal entries. In order to reactivate this material complexity and to reconsider the autonomous value of the documents as texts belonging to a specific culture, Weigert starts from an image that the studies of the last century have consecrated as a symbol of medieval theater—the stage drawn by Hubert Cailleau in the frontispieces of the two manuscripts of the Passion of Valenciennes, which was performed in 1547.

After an overview of the multimedia and multisensorial nature of *personnages* (chapter 1, “Vocamus Personagias”), chapter 2, “Ouvrez vos yeux et regardez,” is dedicated to the relationship between illuminated Passion plays and the commemoration of performance. More precisely, it revolves around the comparison between the illustrated manuscript of the text of a Passion play from Arras (1470) and the two handwritten and illuminated versions (created in the 1550s and in 1577) of the Passion of Valenciennes. Cailleau’s miniatures, and their spaces and figures, are analyzed as reductions of the actions and presences that contributed to a performance event. Comparisons show “to what extent Cailleau’s miniatures depart from the performance tradition they are thought to represent” (123). The open space of the late medieval performance turns into the linear structure and the layout of the front scene. Weigert reads these processes as the advent of an imitation of ancient theater that replaces living traditions. With an impressive survey of classic and recent studies, the author argues with great clarity and multiple references the distance between the actual performances and the preserved texts. The reduction processes that are implicit in the production of texts, both handwritten and printed, established a vision of the *mystères* “along the line of the antiquarian idea of theater” (188). As suggested in chapter 4, “Cy s’ensuit le mystère,” about the printed versions of the *mystères*, the result is the creation of the modern reader-playgoer. Weigert here makes an explicit reference to what J. Stone Peters demonstrates in her work *Theatre of the Book* (2000), in which the printed texts of plays and the printed descriptions of festive events reveal themselves as tools to shape and unify performance cultures in early modern Europe.

In chapter 5, this horizon expands even further thanks to the analysis of the Laon Miracle (an exorcism that took place in 1566 in the cathedral of Laon) and the value of its sources in religious disputes. The book concludes by resuming the vexed question of the disappearance of the large-scale performances on Christian mythology from the mid-sixteenth century on. This process connects the memory of events within the texts to the organizational and religious

restrictions aimed to establish control over the civic rituals. This convergence is as necessary as it is convincing, and seals the overall contribution of the essay. In reviewing sources and materials of visual and performance culture, Weigert's work recontextualizes the decline of civic performance in the relationship between representations, devotion, and public sphere, with the conflicts of the age of the Reformation and of the Wars of Religion as a backdrop.

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