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Double Take

Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre. By **Elin Diamond**. Oxon: Routledge, 1997. Pp. xvi + 226. £27.99 Pb; £96 Hb.

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Read Maria Shetsova's original review which was published in *Theatre Research International*, 23, 1 (Spring 1998), p. 193.

Reengaging closely with Elin Diamond's ground-breaking *Unmaking Mimesis* is a daunting task; a piece of work of dizzying erudition presenting readers with complex interventions in the field of feminist performance analysis—with lasting impact. Reflecting on the etymology of mimesis which denotes both the act of representing and representation itself, Diamond's opening gambit posits that 'mimesis […] is impossibly double, simultaneously the stake and the shifting sands' and that 'by its own operations loses its conceptual footing' (p. v). It is this double nature of mimesis which according to Diamond allows for its potentially transgressive potential. Framing her overall argument with Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht and Luce Irigaray as main interlocutors, Diamond's 'unmaking' proposes to 'read mimesis theory with/against/through feminist skepticism and desire' (p. x).

As noted by Maria Shetsova in the original review for this journal, the book's 'pivotal essay is Diamond's revision of her 1988 article 'Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism'.[1] In it, she uncovers the potency of a Brechtian-feminist paradigm through which '*gestus* invites us to think about performers in their historical and

sexual specificity' (p. 54). This in turn lays the ground for a feminist criticism which '"alienate" or foreground those moments in a playtext when social attitudes about gender and sexuality conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology' and which 'would refuse to naturalize or valorize female dramatists but would focus on historical material constraints in the production of images' (p. 54).

Diamond's invitation to draw on gestus and historicization in order to construct an effective feminist engagement with mimesis has been hugely influential and has helped make Brecht a familiar companion for both makers and critics of feminist performance. Elaine Aston likens the importance of *Unmaking Mimesis* to Laura Mulvey's theorizations of the male gaze in film theory, further noting how the author 'drew our attention to the practical ways in which feminist theatre did more than make us aware of the gaze and the way in which women are looked at, it offered the opportunity to make a critical intervention in the structures of looking'.[2]

However, to restrict the book's impact and influence to Diamond's reworking of Brechtian principles is to do both author and reader a huge disservice. Subtitled 'essays on feminism', its stands as a whole yet each of the three parts can be apprehended separately as the name suggests. The first section is a standalone elaboration on the connections between early realist theatre and contemporaneous hysteria diagnoses and case studies with a focus on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabbler. The second offers Diamond's exploration of 'gestic feminism' subsequently applied to the plays of Aphra Behn and Caryl Churchill. The final section concerns postmodern feminism, with a discussion of the plays of Adrienne Kennedy and performances by Peggy Shaw, Robbie McCauley and Deb Margolin. Each of these different parts present the reader with connected yet self-contained arguments, as Diamond astutely moves from Brecht to Sigmund Freud, Hélène Cixous to Michel Foucault and Paul Gilroy to Benjamin, the latter also becoming the thread which connects the historically

distant case studies together. As a whole, Diamond powerfully advocates for ‘the Benjaminian nonidentical similar’ and/or Trin T Minh-ha’s ‘not quite the same not quite the other’ enabled by mimesis as a way ‘to explore relatedness while refusing the easy assumption of analogous or common reference points’ (p. 181).

It would be hard to do justice to each section with the detail it deserves, due to the detail, complexity and erudition of Diamond’s writing. Therefore I choose to rather end this review with the sections that marked me most strongly as I reengaged with the work, nearly twenty-five years after its publication, either due to how they have circulated and evolved within our field or how they fit in a broader theoretical lineage.

Diamond’s argument regarding early realist theatre’s relationship to hysteria operates on two fronts. The first is that hysteria offers realism ‘one of its most satisfying plots’ as in ‘deciphering the hysteria’s enigma realism celebrates positivist inquiry’ (p. 4). She detects strong similarities in a selection of Freud’s case studies of ‘hysterics’ and the new theatre of the time. She argues:

> For Ibsen and his English imitators, A.W. Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, the conventionalized fallen woman became more than an automatic sinner. Her social position, her desires, her confusion, most of all her secret sexual past were a problem, *the* problem that has to be solved. Like Freud’s case histories, the new realism progresses by going backward, revealing the psychobiography of nervous women (p. 18).

Similarly to the analyst, spectators are made to excavate what unconscious drives and secret pasts drive realism’s heroines’ irrational and often anti-social behaviours (or conversely, turn to analyst into a spectator of sorts). The second point is that realist mimesis of ‘the true self’

can ‘be construed as a form of hysteria’ (p. 7) exactly because it can never fully represent—and thus needs to repress and displace—the hysterical body which ‘dangerously disrupts the subtle discussion on which realism thrives’ (p. 25).

These arguments have implications not simply for historical analyses of realism and its subsequent incarnations, but also precisely for work predicated on the deconstruction or outright rejection of the genre, offering a rich basis on which to consider this work on feminist grounds. In a 2007 article on rape in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, Kim Solga offers an example of its expansive usefulness. Whilst not contesting Kane’s desire to ‘blast’ a hole into English social realist traditions, she draws on Diamond to note how both the purposefully unstaged act of sexual violence against Cate by Ian as well as Cate’s continual fits brought about by the hinted-at abuse by her father

> mark her body with the sign of what realism yearns to rationalize: the causes behind her ‘‘illness,’’ causes that turn out to be traceable not to her own misbehaviour or to her body’s rebellious physiology but to her social and physical mistreatment in a world where women, especially vulnerable young women, remain the quintessential Other in the drama of the powerful male self.[3]

This leads Solga to argue that conversely to the operations of realism, spectators are denied the visual and narrative satisfaction offered by the discovery for the reasons of Cate symptoms which in turn renders Kane’s intervention into realist drama a gendered critique. This argument in turn has additional implications for the politics of staging acts of sexual violence in Western theatre and performance more broadly and points to the enduring appeal and productiveness of Diamond’s feminist diagnosis of Ibsenite realism and its fascination with ‘fallen women.’

The final section, 'Towards a feminist postmodern', still reads as theoretically innovative and struck me as anticipating arguments in queer and feminist theory made over the decade following *Unmaking Mimesis*' publication. In her thorough analysis of black American playwright Adrienne Kennedy, Diamond quotes the playwright from a public interview in which she states always having wanted to be Bette Davis. She ties this to Kennedy's play *A Movie Star has to be in Black and White* in which three (white) classic Hollywood movie stars, one of them Bette Davis, 'speak for' the main (black) character Clara. Diamond investigates the effect on spectatorial consciousness in a context in which 'identification-as-*racial* resemblance breaks down' (p. 128). This leads her to consider the question of identificatory pleasure and how 'becoming aware of and politicizing one's identifications, like the process of identification itself, is potentially transformative' (p. 125). The chapter overall draws on Kennedy's work in order to consider how identification may offer the same subversive potential as Brechtian historicization, as Diamond considers the range of contradictory objects that populate the stage images and text of the plays, intermingling North America, Europe and Africa. She states: 'If historicization posits a subject who delights in making comparisons, identification posits an unconscious wish to transgress the boundaries of social and sexual identity' (p. 109). She also notes how the transgressive potential of identification simultaneously points to '*the inaccessibility of such identifications except as cognitive restagings'* and that Kennedy thus challenges the 'present tense of bourgeois production' (p. 130).

This quest to harness identification's transformative potential strongly echoes a groundbreaking text of queer of colour critique published two years later in 1999, José Esteban Muñoz' *Disidentifications*. Muñoz similarly looks at a range of work by queer artists of colour who draw inspiration from white and straight cultural material, including explicitly harmful representations of race and gender. Discussing a similar tale of fascination with Bette

Davis, this time from James Baldwin, he argues that Baldwin's relationship to Davis is 'a disidentification insofar as the African American transforms the raw material of identification (the linear match that leads toward interpellation while simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star'.[4] In the same vein as Diamond he also shows that disidentification can be self-reflexive and aware, and imbued with political potential, stating:

> Queer desires, perhaps desires that negate self, desire for a white beauty ideal, are reconstituted by an ideological component that tell us that such modalities of desire and desiring are too self-compromising. We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it but with a difference.[5]

I do not want to simplistically equate both scholars' work, keeping in mind the discrete aims of their theorizations, as for Muñoz queerness, race and desire play a much greater role in the book's intervention where Diamond's focus is mimesis in its relationship to feminism. Yet it is hard not to see the similarities in both authors' explorations of the productivity of uncomfortable or seemingly inappropriate objects of dis/identification and it can appear as if their historical closeness signals a perspectival shift of queer and feminist work at the time.

Similarly, Diamond's conceptualization of temporalities in the final chapter on feminist solo performance seems to anticipate the turn to temporality in the work of Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman and Heather Love, the latter also drawing significantly from Benjamin's work in order to analyse queer attachments to painful histories.[6] Many of the works discussed above, alongside *Unmaking Mimesis*, seem squarely to intervene in what Diamond describes as the 'still-fractious debates about identity politics' (p. 181). *Unmaking Mimesis* has in this regard (and in many others) a huge deal to offer still, and in recalling the

dual etymology of mimesis as not only representation but also the work of doing the representing that Diamond stresses as her starting point, it may be worth to draw continued inspiration from feminist mimetic practices which 'take the relationship to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same' (p. xvi).

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[1] Maria Shetsova, '*Unmaking Mimesis*. By Elin Diamond', *Theatre Research International*, 23, 1 (Spring 1998), p. 193.

[2] Elaine Aston, *Feminist Theatre Practice: a Handbook* (Oxon: Routledge, 1999), p. 13.

[3] Kim Solga, '*Blasted*'s Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible', *Modern Drama*, 50, 3, (Fall 2007), pp. 346-374, p. 357.

[4] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), p. 18.

[5] Ibid, p. 15.

[6] The books I am referring to are: Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); and Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009).