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The Cambridge Introduction to
Theatre Studies

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Chapter 6

Theatre historiography

Until well into the 1960s, the terms 'theatre studies' and 'theatre history' were largely synonymous, because the first and major concern of the new subject was the theatrical past. Although today theatre history is by no means the exclusive field of teaching and research, historical study remains an important area of work for scholar and student alike. In this chapter, we shall explore the most important methods and research paradigms employed by theatre historians. We shall begin by identifying the principal sources employed by historians and then move on to discuss the different types of information they provide. In the second part of the chapter, we shall address the question of periodization, i.e. the way we can divide up theatre history into epochs and periods. The third and final part of the chapter will introduce and discuss recent theoretical approaches to theatre history, which in their most extreme positions question the very idea of theatre history itself. This focus on questions of theory and methodology means that we will not be looking at specific periods of theatre history (the Greeks, the Elizabethan period, etc.) but rather at the problems involved in the writing of it, which is technically called historiography.

What then does the theatre historian deal with? The answers to this question are as divergent as the approaches that can be followed. It is certainly not the task of the theatre historian to provide a seamless narrative of theatre productions in a given period. The approach will rather be determined by the way the historian views theatre itself in a particular period. Any form of historical research is informed by a set of (often not entirely conscious) preconceptions. One of these would be the definition of the object of study as, say, *aesthetic* in nature rather than *cultural* or *social*. (We have already pointed out that this distinction is an artificial one but it serves for the moment a heuristic, i.e. practical, function: see p. 2.) From this interest in aesthetic questions would probably follow that the historian might focus on past performances and productions, i.e. the theatrical 'work of art'.

It was the German scholar Max Herrmann (1865–1942), the founder of modern European theatre studies, who declared that the reconstruction of past

performances should be the main object of scientific study. In his major work, *The History of German Theatre in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1914), Herrmann described the goal of the theatre historian to be 'essentially the restitution of lost achievements until they appear before us with the vividness of a palpable image' (1914: 7).¹ This is indeed a bold programme, and means that the historian has to first obtain enough evidence and documentation to enable such a reconstruction. Herrmann's approaches were essentially philological and art historical in nature, drawing on the two dominant disciplines of his time.

Herrmann's goal leads us to the central question of all theatre studies, and not just theatre history: how can ephemeral phenomena of the past be captured and rendered suitable for aesthetic study of the kind envisaged by Herrmann? What documents can theatre historians draw on and how should they be studied?

Sources and reconstruction

It was, again, Max Herrmann who first provided a theoretical and systematic approach to theatre history within the framework of a method he termed 'reconstruction'. Although it is today a contested term, Herrmann meant that the theatre historian could, with sufficient source material at his or her disposal, visualize past theatre buildings and productions in enough detail that a physical reconstruction of a lost building, stage form or even of productions in historical style could be carried out. Apart from the academic gain of such an exercise, Herrmann imagined that such research could have immediate consequences for practical theatre. In *The History of German Theatre in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, he wrote:

We set ourselves the task of making a theatrical performance of the past live again in such detail that, if the financial means were made available, one could indeed present it to a modern audience without fear of provoking offence. (Herrmann 1914: 13)

The problematic and controversial nature of such an approach provoked criticism in Herrmann's own lifetime, and has continued ever since. Herrmann became embroiled in a dispute with another theatre historian over the reconstruction of the early Renaissance Mastersinger stage in Nuremberg's Church of St Martha. Although this controversy appears, with hindsight, to be fairly pointless and tangential to the concerns of modern theatre historians, the

methods Herrmann developed and, above all, his systematization and critical approach to source material set standards for theatre-historiographical methodology.

Basing his work on Herrmann's initial categories, the German theatre scholar Dietrich Steinbeck has attempted a further systematization of sources (see Table 3). On one level, Steinbeck differentiates sources into two groups, which he terms 'direct' and 'indirect'. The former are directly involved with the production of theatre. These sources may include the theatre building or performance space; the stage and its machinery; costumes and masks. Indirect sources are those that report on a production such as reviews, letters, diary entries, etc. The second distinction he makes concerns the language of mediation. Language is meant here in a metaphorical sense. Steinbeck differentiates between

Table 3. Sources for theatre history

Direct	Indirect
objective	meta-commentary
theatre buildings	scenarios
performance space	reports of performances
stage	descriptions of actors in performance
stage machinery	minutes
parts of the set	yearbooks
costumes	almanachs
props	theatre reviews
masks	theatre periodicals
prompt books	letters
individual roles ('parts')	diaries and memoirs
director's copies	biographies
stage manager's copies	anecdotes
model sets	theatre novels
technical drawings	pamphlets
contracts, deeds, account books	theoretical writings
playbills	posters and playbills
	representations in visual art (theatre iconography)
meta-commentary	interviews
stage photos	
films and video recordings	objective
ground plans	scripts and dramas
costume and stage designs	music (piano and full scores)
	notated choreographies

'objective language' and 'meta-language'. Objective language is that employed with a minimal degree of reflection. A contract or a deed of ownership documents relatively directly certain facts pertaining to legal and economic questions. Sources containing meta-commentary are always one level removed from the object of description and thus contain a higher degree of reflective commentary.

The distinction between objective language and meta-language is an important one on a theoretical level because it throws light on the epistemological status of sources used, i.e. the kinds and status of knowledge they provide. It draws the theatre historian ineluctably into questions of reliability, the past 'as it really was' and similar contested issues. These are questions that concern all historical research, of course, and are not particular to theatre. Because of the ephemeral nature of the theatrical experience, however, they are particularly acute.

The importance and difficulty of such distinctions can be illustrated by looking at a playbill. Playbills are a particularly valuable and complex source for theatre historians. They were produced in huge numbers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where they provided the double function of theatre poster and programme. According to the taxonomy in Table 3, they belong primarily to the category of direct objective sources because they were, on one level at least, an integral part of the production process, in the sense that they usually give 'unmediated' information about the details of a performance: time, place, names of performers, synopsis, etc. In this sense, they provide a wealth of empirical data. A playbill demonstrates that a typical theatrical evening in the first half of the nineteenth century consisted of four or five different items and performative genres: a tragedy, a song, an interlude (a short play), a highland fling and a farce. Playbills document that theatre had not yet separated out into different institutions for different genres. Playbills, as our example from the New Theatre Royal in Glasgow in 1840 (Plate 6) indicates, usually included meta-commentary in the form of self-laudatory critical responses: 'received with shouts of laughter and applause'. Apart from performance-related data, playbills were often used by theatre managers for a variety of communicative functions ranging from self-promotion to audience regulation. In this case, the playbill announces in detail the reopening of the theatre and includes a form of promotional advertising for the local tradesmen involved in the building. The playbill also advertises for doormen; it contains information of a regulatory nature ('children in arms are not admitted and no smoking allowed in the galleries'); and in the 'Notice to the Frequenters of the Boxes', it describes an innovation to provide better circulation of air. Playbills invariably include information on pricing and, in this case, we learn that it was common practice to be admitted later at a reduced price.

without doubt the rebuilding of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on the South Bank in London. The architects and scholars involved in this ten-year project expended considerable time and money 'reconstructing' the theatre in Elizabethan terms. Not only that, but the building is supposed to provide the necessary requirements for authentic period productions, again a dream of Max Herrmann not achieved in his lifetime.

Reconstructionist projects are also under way using computer-based techniques. The Theatron Project is devoted to providing advanced multi-media teaching and research material documenting the history of European theatre. This project makes use of a virtual reality interface to access a great many 3D architectural models of major European historic theatres linked to supporting textual and graphic databases (see www.theatron.org – last accessed 17 February 2008).

The Virtual Vaudeville Project, based at the University of Georgia, is currently working on reconstruction using a combination of motion capture, computer-gaming technology and traditional documentation to create an environment that allows users to enter a virtual theatre to watch a simulated late-nineteenth-century vaudeville performance: 'The objective is to reproduce a feeling of "liveness" in this environment: the sensation of being surrounded by human activity onstage, in the audience and backstage, and the ability to choose where to look at any given time (onstage or off), and to move within the environment.'² Using motion capture technology, the movements of real performers are grafted onto computer figures to simulate natural movement. The computer game software also enables users to navigate in a 3D environment and observe the stage action from a variety of perspectives (see Plate 7).

Projects such as Theatron and Virtual Vaudeville combine archaeological and high-tech perspectives to reinvestigate the theatrical past. The term 'theatre archaeology' can also have much more contemporary resonances, as we saw in Chap. 3. The work of Mike Pearson and Brit Gof (Pearson and Shanks 2001), but also of other groups with a commitment to exploring historical connections with living communities (see Chap. 11), indicate that the connection between theatre and history is much more complex than just a question of reproducing past production practices – however interesting these may be.

Theatre iconography

Theatre iconography is a subdiscipline of theatre historical research with a focus on visual, as opposed to written or oral, sources. Broadly speaking, one can say that theatre iconography is concerned with theatre as a theme

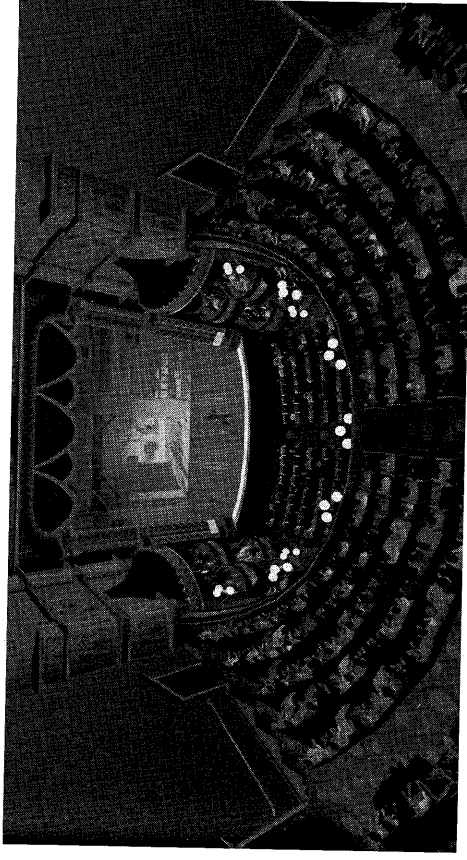


Plate 7. Virtual Vaudeville Project, University of Georgia. Reconstruction of The Union Square Theatre, New York, 1895–6.

or subject of the visual arts. However, the visual material of interest to the theatre historian is extremely varied, and intersects only in certain cases with the interest of the art historian. In practice, theatre historians are interested in particular kinds of figurative visual sources, such as Greek vase-painting, illustrated medieval manuscripts, woodcuts, engravings, paintings, lithographs, caricature and photography.

Theater iconographical research can be divided into the following phases:

- (1) Discovery and identification of visual sources as a means to reconstruct the 'reality' of past theatre practices. These sources serve to 'document' in a purely illustrative fashion theatre-history books, and are seldom subjected to rigorous examination in terms of their reliability and contextualization. It is assumed that pictures more or less 'speak for themselves'.
- (2) Systematic propagation of theatre iconography as an autonomous field of collection and archival activity. In the late 1950s, there were the first calls for picture collections based on scholarly criteria. However, only in recent years have such demands been genuinely met, with the aid of computer technology. The Dionysos Project at the University of Florence has now made available on DVD-ROM an archive of over 20,000 images.
- (3) Critical reflection on the referential status of theatrical images. To what extent can such images be regarded as 'evidence' or as 'eyewitness' accounts of theatre practices? This has led to a theoretical re-examination of fundamental questions regarding visual conventions, the media of images and their relation to other sources.

A subdiscipline under the name theatre iconography, which combined the second and third phases, did not emerge until the late 1980s. It includes researchers whose areas of interest – for example the *Commedia dell'arte* or eighteenth-century acting – are heavily dependent on the interpretation of visual sources. Some are also researchers who are primarily interested in the theoretical and methodological problems of iconographical research. The field can be regarded as the combination and productive interchange between these two perspectives: focused historical investigation balanced by theoretical reflection on the status of the visual documents.

Theatre iconography or iconology?

There are various ways of studying historical pictures. The art historian Erwin Panofsky differentiated three levels of pictorial analysis: pre-iconographical, iconographical and iconological. The first two levels attempt to establish relatively incontrovertible facts regarding, say, historical persons depicted or the use of an allegorical motif. Iconological analysis is, in Panofsky's words, devoted to interpreting images in relation to their historical context to elucidate their 'actual meaning'. The Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan has adapted the terms to theatrical pictures to propose essentially a differentiation between documentation and interpretation:

Iconography would be the term for designating 1) an ensemble of documents representing this or that phenomenon, 2) their description and classification. The term iconology would be reserved for an interpretative and comparative study, for research into the relationship between the iconographic object and its historic context, between the icon and its referent. (Kowzan 1985: 68)

Although Kowzan does not develop his distinction further and gives no examples, it is clear that he sees scope for an entirely new field of research, which goes beyond problems of documentation, identification and ascription of pictorial documents, to a putative historical reality. What is implicit rather than explicit in his essay is that theatrical *iconology* could become a field of study in its own right, an area of hermeneutic research *sui generis*, and not just an aid for theatre or art historians. This distinction has been further developed in the essay 'Interpreting the Pictorial Record: Theatre Iconography and the Referential Dilemma' (Balme 1997).

Theatre-iconographical research has developed around those epochs where there is an abundance of source material, or where there is a dearth of written documents so that the visual sources gain in value or are indeed indispensable. The latter case pertains to Greek vase-painting. Thousands of painted vases have been uncovered in Greece and the former Greek settlement areas such as Southern Italy. The images provide a great deal of information about

ancient Greek culture, including theatre. The collection and cataloguing of these images has long been a field within classical studies and archaeology, and in recent years specialist studies on the theatrical images have appeared (Taplin 1993 and 2007).

The vast number of images created around the activities of the *Commedia dell'arte* troupes have made the visual record a central feature of *Commedia* research as a whole. Because of the large number of these images and their often complex genesis, we find contributions from both theatre and art historians. The *Commedia dell'arte* also provides a link to the importance of theatrical subjects for artists such as Callot, Watteau and Longhi, who often represented Italian actors in their pictures. This has also meant that art historians have contributed to theatre-iconographical research, albeit indirectly (see Katritzky 2006).

Acting and actors in the eighteenth century form another central focus in theatre-iconographical research. From the mid eighteenth century onwards, individual actors were discovered as an interesting subject by painters such as Hogarth, Reynolds and Gainsborough. These popular paintings were frequently copied and rendered in other cheaper visual media such as engravings and even porcelain, and were thus made accessible to a wider public. At the same time, we find an intense theoretical discussion on the status of acting, and some research has focused on the interplay between visual discourses on the one hand and theoretical discourses on the other (West 1991).

The presentation of the actor via images continues and expands with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century. Theatre photography as an area of theatre-iconographic research has as its focus the second half of the nineteenth century, when the medium went through a number of technological changes. Although photography can potentially record any aspect of the theatre, most research has concentrated on the interplay between the new medium and acting. Like painting or caricature, photography is regulated by highly specific codes and conventions, which are closely connected with other pictorial media (such as painting) and with acting practices. In the early period of theatre photography, roughly the time 1860 to 1910, when photographs were produced almost exclusively in studios, there emerged a productive financial and artistic co-operation between actors and photographers.

The photographs of this period testify to a media revolution of considerable significance. A crucial innovation concerned the size and availability of photographs. Large portrait photographs were replaced by the so-called *carte-de-visite* format. These small images, which measured approximately 2.25 by 3.5 inches, could be produced, and above all reproduced, very cheaply. The

replacement of the older daguerreotypes, which only existed in one version, by the mass production of *cartes-de-visite* and later by the postcard created a whole new economy of mass distribution. This increased circulation of images resulted in turn in a complete rearrangement of perceptive practices. The aesthetics of the glass-plate daguerreotype, which still retained the aura of uniqueness, corresponded to the conventions of portrait painting. The mass produced *cartes-de-visite*, on the other hand, tapped into, or indeed created, an unexploited expressive dimension that appealed directly to the emotions. Photographs were now no longer expensive acquisitions for the decoration of middle- and upper-middle-class drawing rooms. They became articles of consumption. Persons depicted in various poses on late-nineteenth-century photographs (whether members of the family or eroticized performers) established a new, much more intimate relationship with the owner of the pictures.

Actors and actresses had a considerable involvement in these wider social changes. They quickly discovered the publicity and staging potential of the new medium, and used their corporeal know-how to great effect. Above all, they influenced the practices of portrait photography. The photographic studio became a kind of miniature stage, with painted backdrops and the usual theatrical accessories where actors could demonstrate their abilities in self-advertisement. It is no doubt this element of staging that connects past and present theatre photography. Photographs were produced as postcards and sold as souvenirs. Like the stage itself, the theatre photograph is always an image of an image, because it never represents a piece of found, authentic reality, but something that has already been shaped and staged.

Periodization

Theatre historiography encompasses more than just critiquing source material and reconstructionism. Of equal importance is the question of periodization; that is, how we divide theatre history into discrete epochs and geographical spaces. Because theatre studies arose relatively 'late', it turned initially to more established disciplines – mainly literary and art history – for its models of structuring the past. Neither proved, however, to be entirely suitable for transferral to the theatre.

An approach that focuses on productions of specific works, particularly of famous dramatists, throughout history arrives at a conundrum: literary reputation and theatrical practice do not always coincide. Therefore the periods defined by historians of literature do not necessarily have the same relevance to historians of theatre. Perhaps the most striking example of this disjunction

is Romanticism. Doubtless a central period of European literature, its application to drama, let alone to questions of staging or acting, produces a different set of coordinates for each area of theatrical activity, as well as a different set of stylistic characteristics. This problem is exacerbated even more when one leaves the mainstream stages and attempts to include popular forms such as pantomime, vaudeville or music hall.

The oldest and most widespread approach to periodization divides up theatre history along geocultural lines, but here too there are different possibilities. They range from expansive histories of European or Asian theatre to the more common national histories of French, German, Italian theatre, etc. and include more detailed regional, or even city-focused, studies. When the latter are capital cities (e.g. a history of theatre in Paris), then the claim is usually of a national scale, as capital cities are often regarded as metonyms of the whole nation.

Large-scale studies – those of international or continental sweep – follow, in principle, the same patterns and norms of periodization. On closer inspection, however, these appear to be somewhat arbitrary and subject to the problems discussed above. They follow criteria designed in other disciplines, or simply switch from literary, art historical or theatre-specific coordinates as they see fit. Table 4 is a compilation of period designations as found in accessible and widely read theatre histories.³

Although these studies are by no means uniform in their specific valuations and emphases, they basically do share the same approach to periodization, which, from the Middle Ages onwards, is structured around individual nation states, particularly Italy, France, England and Germany on the one hand, and cultural and aesthetic movements (Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism) on the other. After beginnings in classical antiquity with individual chapters for Greece and Rome, the history of European theatre is divided into national developments during the Middle Ages, and this division is retained throughout. These are usually merged with period classifications deriving from other disciplines such as Humanism, Renaissance, Baroque, Enlightenment, etc.

Although this division seems, at first glance, quite familiar and not particularly problematic, closer inspection reveals that it is actually based on eclectic criteria. The theatre historian Thomas Postlewait has identified twenty-two separate criteria by which theatre periods are determined (Postlewait 1988: 305–6). Many of these can be found in Table 4. Examples are:

- (1) *political empires or dynasties*: Egyptian, Roman
- (2) *monarchies*: Elizabethan, Restoration
- (3) *intellectual and artistic change*: Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment

Table 4. Periodization in European theatre historiography

Time	Period	Theatre forms and dramatic genres (selection)	Place
to 500 BC	pre-theatrical forms	mystery cults; rituals; dances; ceremonies	Mediterranean; Egypt; Africa
500–350 BC	classical antiquity	attic tragedy and comedy; satyr plays; <i>minimus</i>	Greece; Asia Minor
300 BC–500 AD	classical antiquity	atellane; Roman comedy and tragedy; pantomime	Roman Empire
1000–1550	Middle Ages	tropes; liturgical drama; saints plays; miracle plays; mystery plays; interludes; <i>Corpus Christi</i> plays; morality plays; passion plays; <i>sacra rappresentazione</i> ; <i>foculatores</i>	Europe
1490–1600	Renaissance and Humanism	Humanist theatre; <i>trionfi</i> ; <i>intermezzi</i> ; <i>commedia erudita</i> ; tragedy; pastoral plays; <i>Commedia dell'arte</i> ; <i>Rederijker</i>	Italy; Germany; Netherlands
1550–1642	Elizabethan and Jacobean	major dramatic genres; court masques	England
1580–1700	<i>Siglo de oro</i> and Baroque	auto sacramental; <i>entremeses</i> ; cloak and dagger plays; <i>comedia</i> ; <i>zarzuela</i>	Spain
1600–1700	Baroque and Classicism	<i>Commedia dell'arte</i> ; opera; Jesuit theatre; <i>tragedie classique</i> ; comedy; farce; <i>ballet de cour</i> ; <i>opera seria</i>	France; Italy; Germany
1700–1780	Enlightenment	restoration comedy; <i>comédie larmoyante</i> ; <i>genre sérieux</i> ; bourgeois tragedy; Storm and Stress; Singspiel; reform opera; <i>ballet d'action</i>	Europe
1780–1850	Neo-Classicism; Romanticism	neo-classical drama (Germany); romantic ballet; melodrama; Grand Opéra; <i>Musikdrama</i>	Europe; North America
1850–1900	Realism; Historicism; Naturalism	<i>pièce bien faite</i> ; vaudeville; Meininger; free theatres	Europe; Russia; Americas
1890–1915	Modernism	symbolism; art nouveau	Europe; Russia
1919–1939	Avantgarde	futurism; expressionism; constructivism; surrealism; Bauhaus; political; agit-prop	Europe; Russia; North America
1940–1968	post-war theatre	absurd drama; happenings; political popular theatre	Europe; North America
1968–present	contemporary	postmodern; intercultural; postcolonial; postdramatic	Africa; North America; Caribbean; Europe

- (4) *normative attributes*: neo-classical
- (5) *nation states*: English, German, French
- (6) *pan-national*: Scandinavian, Slavic, African
- (7) *philosophical schools*: Humanist
- (8) *chronological*: 1470–1590, eighteenth-century, post-war
- (9) *literary movements*: Romanticism, Naturalism, Modernism
- (10) *famous persons*: Shakespearean
- (11) *art history*: Baroque.

The multitude of criteria used is not just due to the fact that information has been compiled from different books. The period designations listed here (and some others besides) are common to the studies consulted. In fact, the situation is more complicated even still because the table only lists major dramatic forms and styles. Not included are the criteria of stage design, theatre architecture and technology or institutional forms, which give quite different divisions and points of change.

Seen positively, this categorical confusion could be adduced to the complexity of the phenomenon, theatre's inherent multi-medial constitution that combines literature (drama) and the fine arts (set design, architecture), anthropology (traditions of acting) with social and political change (theatre as an institution). It is probably not even sensible to try and unify all these disparate factors and their different chronologies of change under homogeneous periodic categories.

It may be of some solace to know that the problems presented here are by no means unique to theatre history, but are discussed with equal, if not more, vehemence in disciplines such as history, literature and art history. Historical periods are today regarded by many scholars as necessary cognitive constructs rather than as immutable and clear-cut lines of demarcation. Some of the new approaches to theatre historiography discussed in the next section proceed from an explicit or implicit critique of periodization.

Is there a way of out of this dilemma? One can simply ignore it, as some traditional theatre historians seem to, who continue to structure their material along the same mixture of national or pan-national criteria. Although there is certainly no easy solution, it is essential that theatre historians take cognizance of the problem and consciously position their work in reaction to it. A good example of this critical self-positioning can be found in the textbook, *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* (Zarrilli *et al.* 2006). Not only does this volume group together Western and non-Western developments – rather than separate them out – but the authors provide a new approach to periodization by structuring theatre history around ‘modes of human communication’:

One of the identifying characteristics of human awareness and consciousness is the development of the ability to reflect upon and communicate who we are. Theatre and performance are complex, culturally embedded, historically specific kinds of communal reflection and communication. Because major new developments in modes of human communication led to profound changes in the ways people thought about, related to, and organized their worlds, each of the four parts of this book are organized to mark such transformations and relate them to theatre and performance. (Zarrilli *et al.* 2006: xxviii–xxix)

The four parts focus on orality, the emergence of print culture, modern media culture and the age of global communication. Constructing periods according to modes of communication is certainly a new solution to the old problem of periodization. It is probably the best way to cope with the complexity of the medium of theatre in its diverse cultural and aesthetic manifestations through time. Notwithstanding such approaches, the novice student of theatre studies will still have to deal with the canonized categories and divisions of theatre history – but hopefully with a sharpened awareness of their constructedness.

Contemporary approaches

The critique of periodization is one of the many discussions that arose in the 1970s and 1980s, when a new generation of theatre scholars began to question many of the premises they themselves had been trained under. The overarching paradigm they began to question is known as *positivism*. Philosophically speaking, positivism is based on the premise that scientific disciplines should only concern themselves with phenomena that can be deemed empirically verifiable and are thus intersubjectively communicable. In terms of methodology, positivism proceeds from hypotheses that can be verified or falsified on the basis of trial and error. Although familiar as the basis of the natural sciences, in the nineteenth century this method was also applied to the ‘soft sciences’ such as history and the study of literature. Because of its rigorous attitude to ascertaining the ‘truth’ of past events, positivism came to be synonymous with an almost obsessive interest in gathering and ascertaining the reliability of source material, rather than with interpreting it in social or aesthetic contexts. At its best, positivist research provides the basis of any historical branch of the humanities; at its worst, it does little more than gather and order putative facts. The positivist consensus of many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities came under attack in the 1960s. The critique was led in the main

by scholars with a materialist or Marxist orientation. Their major argument was that knowledge was by no means 'value-free' as positivist scholars would like to believe. On the contrary, knowledge is determined by specific 'interests' that influence how scholars define their objects of enquiry and organize the whole process of research. The epithet 'materialist' meant, in the context of historical research, a stronger focus on social and economic factors as opposed to more abstract 'ideas' or aesthetico-stylistic trends.

After some delay, the positivist debate eventually reached theatre historiography. The major influences on theatre historians came, as usual, from other disciplines. Important scholars and theories included the historian Hayden White, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism or 'cultural poetics'. Of these, Hayden White's theory of 'metahistory' has had the most profound effect on historiographical debates in the narrower sense (to Foucault and New Historicism we shall return below). In a series of publications, most notably *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973) and *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), White claims that historical science, far from arranging incontrovertible 'facts' in a natural order, employs the same techniques of narration as literature. Historians employ techniques of emplotment arranged in genres such as comedy, tragedy and satire, and resort to tropes familiar to literature such as metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche. A student of structuralism, White argues that language determines the historiographical as much as it does the 'poetic act' (White 1973: x).

An early response to the challenges posed by White and others came from the American theatre historian Bruce McConachie in his essay 'Towards a Post-positivist Theatre History' (1985). McConachie develops his critique of traditional positivistic theatre history from phenomenology (see Chap. 5) and hermeneutics (in the main the writings of the French structuralist Paul Ricoeur). Put succinctly, McConachie argues that it is not possible for theatre historians to assume an objective point of view. As an example, he cites the famous production of John M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, which, when premiered at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1907, led to riots because of its excessive realism:

Was the Abbey Theatre production of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* done realistically? The historian would need to add, 'From whose point of view?' Seen through the eyes of the Dublin working men and patriots who rioted in 1907, the play was not 'realistic' at all, if by realistic we mean, in part, a faithful rendering of everyday reality. From Synge's, Lady Gregory's and Yeats's angle of vision, on the other hand, the

production more or less reflected the reality of Irish peasant life ... But why 'take sides' at all? Seen through a postpositivist lens, there were several kinds of performances of *Playboy* at the Abbey in 1907 because there were several kinds of audiences. (McConachie 1985: 481)

The epithet 'postpositivist' does not specify a particular methodology, but rather a general discontent with established ways of narrating and representing theatre history. If there is a common denominator to the different theoretical approaches that began to emerge in the 1980s, then it is an increased concern with the factor 'audience'. McConachie's example illustrates that an understanding of theatrical performances is incomplete without taking cognizance of the meanings audiences (as a collective) and spectators (as individuals and groups) attribute to them.

The 'postpositivist' critique articulated by McConachie and others (and we find similar arguments articulated in France, Italy and Germany) led to a comprehensive methodological pluralization within theatre historical studies. In place of ideologically 'neutral' chronologies we find a plurality of 'histories': the theatre of class groups, from the perspective of gender and/or ethnicity. Not only do we find the unitary concept 'theatre' being questioned and defined through the perspective of different interest groups, but the supposedly objective position of the theatre historian comes under scrutiny as well. The logical corollary of such pluralist approaches is that the theatre historian is also asked to locate him/herself in relation to the object of investigation. Far from being an objective observer, the scholar is implicated explicitly and implicitly in the research, and asked to articulate this position. The process of self-reflection as part of research (and it extends beyond the field of historical research) has been termed 'positionality' (Dolan 2001: 65).

In the remaining pages of this chapter, it is only possible to sketch briefly some of the important influences that have made themselves felt within recent theatre-historiographical debates. The field is always changing, and once discrete approaches seem to be forming forever-new alliances. The following is intended as a record of past achievements that still influence, in some way, contemporary endeavours of theatre historians.

The work of the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault has had a decisive influence on theatre historians since the 1980s. The key concepts here are 'discourse' or 'discourse analysis' and 'power'. Foucault's theory of 'power' undertakes a fundamental reevaluation of the concept itself. In contrast to a Marxist understanding, which sees power in pejorative terms as an instrument of repression in the hands of the ruling classes, Foucault argues that power is a productive force regulating all levels of social relations. He makes this

argument most clearly in his study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), where he calls for an end to the negative application of the word 'power'. Power does not just negate, he argues, it also produces and manifests itself more thoroughly, albeit covertly, in everyday social and cultural practices than in centralized state institutions.

The method Foucault developed to examine the hidden dynamics of power is called 'discourse analysis'. Discourses are highly complex networks of rules governing language. In Foucault's terminology, a discourse determines knowledge for a given society and period by governing what can be said and written and in what forms it can be articulated. Knowledge is thus a product of the discourses rather than the other way round. The concepts of 'discourse' and 'power' are highly abstract, and function independently of individual subjects.

Foucault repeatedly drew attention to the fact that power can be studied in the way changing discourses construct our understanding of the body differently – the body is one of the main locations of power in the Foucauldian sense. The body has been one of the main *loci* where theatre history (and theatre studies more generally) have made use of his theories. An obvious place of encounter has been the actor and the 'art' of acting. In his study *The Player's Passion* (1985), Joseph Roach makes explicit use of Foucault's concepts, and analyses the rise of theories of acting in the eighteenth century. Roach places these theories in the context of philosophical and scientific discourses on the body, which shifted from the old Galenic notion of 'humours' to newer concepts elaborated by Descartes and others. This approach enables Roach to illuminate the 'old' discussion about the actor and emotion (see Chap. 1) from a variety of new perspectives.

Foucault's ideas have also had a decisive influence on feminist and gender theory, although the feminist discussion is much wider and pre-dates the reception of Foucault. Concepts such as 'hidden history' or 'her-story' were formulated to demonstrate that women's contributions to theatre history have been repressed and consciously or unconsciously 'written over' to obscure their presence. In an initial stage, this approach concentrated on the contribution of women dramatists, actresses and theatre managers to write an alternative history to the one formulated in the positivist studies.

A seminal study in this re-evaluation is Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* (1988). Case argues that theatre and its history have been dominated by a triple-male perspective. In Greek theatre, for example, male writers produced texts acted by men for (predominantly) male spectators. Thereby, a male perspective attains the status of 'universality' and is imposed on female spectators as their own. Of particular interest is the convention of male actors playing women (which we find in Greek, Elizabethan and some Asian

forms). Case argues that research has hitherto neglected the possible homoerotic implications of such conventions in the context of predominantly male audiences.

A second major impulse for theatre historiography came from cultural and historical anthropology. Since the early 1970s, a number of scholars have been working to establish a field of research that applies ethnographical perspectives and methodologies to historical phenomena. Traditionally, the cultural anthropologist has always studied contemporary societies *in situ*, an approach that privileged the present and made it difficult to accommodate the problem of historical change. At the same time, historians began to see the possibilities offered by the 'microperspective' developed by ethnography. Leaders in this field have been Carlo Ginzburg (Italy), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (France), Natalie Zemon Davis (USA) and Greg Denning (Australia) to name only some. Important contributions from the anthropological side of the fence have come from Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins.

Two central questions arose here. The first was methodological and theoretical. Essentially, it was the problem of how the basically structural-synchronic approach of anthropologists could be reconciled with the chronological-diachronic perspective of historians. The American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins focused the debate around the key terms 'event' and 'structure'. How do events (the domain of the historian) influence structure (the domain of the social scientists) and vice versa? This extremely complex problem led to the second question of territorial divisions. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz described the territorial realignments brought about by the cross-fertilization between the two disciplines as 'a change in the ecology of learning that has driven historians and anthropologists, like so many migrant geese, into one another's territories: a collapse of the natural dispersion of feeding grounds that left France to the one and Samoa to the other' (Geertz 1990: 324). What Geertz implies here is that France has a history and Samoa does not (or at least has only a very recent one); and that Samoan culture is characterized by 'timeless social structures', whereas French history is only of interest in as far as it is manifested in significant, i.e. political, 'events'. It became evident to perceptive observers on both sides of the feeding grounds that such a dichotomous view was untenable.

To effect productive interdisciplinary exchange, it was necessary to bridge some missing links. These bridges came from a variety of sources. One was Victor Turner's theory of social drama. Although developed on the basis of fieldwork among a Central African tribe, it was eagerly adopted by historians and projected back onto Europe's tribal past – ancient Greece for instance – where historians had been gradually realizing that the structures and cultural patterns obtaining there may have had just as much in common with Central

Africa and pre-contact Samoa as with Louis XIV. Another bridge was provided by the so-called interpretive turn in anthropology, represented by the work of Clifford Geertz himself who began to adopt and adapt theories of hermeneutics and textual analysis for the analysis of social phenomena. His method of thick description was eagerly adopted by historians as a means to obtain a microperspective on particular historical events.

Theatre history has responded to this 'anthropological turn' in a number of ways and under influence from different disciplines. Perhaps the most far reaching has been 'New Historicism', a term coined by the literary historian and Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt. Taking his lead from Foucault's notion of discourse on the one hand, and Clifford Geertz's 'interpretive anthropology' on the other, Greenblatt has argued for a radical reconsideration of the relationship between Shakespearean drama and the cultural 'background' from which it arose. For Greenblatt, a Shakespearean tragedy and a treatise on exorcism are part and parcel of the same cultural system in which texts circulate and interpenetrate one another. New Historicists subject 'objective' documents to complex readings that are normally reserved for literary texts, and thus upset established hierarchies. They also, in Greenblatt's case at least, move effortlessly between the past and present, in an attempt to elucidate the complex inter-relationship between the historian and his/her object of study.

The influence of New Historicism on theatre history has been considerable, and not only because Greenblatt's own field of research, Shakespearean drama and theatre, coincides with a key period of theatre history. The complex readings engendered by this approach have provided valuable stimuli to theatre historians working in different periods, although the major focus of new historical research continues to be on the early modern period. Important studies outside the English Renaissance include such diverse topics as Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), which moves between London and New Orleans and the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries in its analysis of performance, cultural memory and the slave trade; and Stephen T. Brown's study of the rise of *Nō* theatre in medieval Japan, *Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh* (2001). These two examples must suffice as proof of the breadth of application that these very different studies demonstrate.

Summary and outlook

Discussions of theatre historiography have over the past ten to fifteen years tended to reiterate the 'crisis' of theatre historiography. Although this

continuous lament is beginning to wear thin it is for no other reason than that the flow of theatre historical studies is increasing in quality as well as quantity. If we take the word 'crisis' to mean a state of instability, then it can be seen in a more positive light. The impact of 'critical theory' on the humanities over the past thirty years has been far-reaching and palpable in all but the most inaccessible niches of historical research. Students of theatre history will be confronted by a range of approaches in the works they read. They will need to find their own 'middle ground' between an understandable need for 'solid historical facts' and the necessity to question this very foundation with the help of new theories and methodologies.

Further reading

The best discussion of theatre historiography still remains Postlewait and McConachie (eds.), *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance* (1989). Apart from the editors' theoretical remarks, the volume contains a number of essays that illustrate different approaches ranging from reconstruction to feminism. Vince's contribution to this volume provides a useful historical overview of the discipline. A more concise discussion of some of these questions can be found in the section on historiography in Reinelt and Roach, *Critical Theory and Performance* (1992), 293–8. Brockett and Hildy's *History of the Theatre* (2007) contains in its later editions useful exercises at the end of each chapter under the rubric 'Looking at Theatre History'. These include reflexive discussions of sources and different scholarly viewpoints on issues. A feminist view of theatre history was introduced by Sue-Ellen Case in her book *Feminism and Theatre* (1988), which sparked off a great many specific studies of women in theatre in different periods and countries, such as Davis (1991), Aston (1995) and Canning (1996). For an application of new critical methodologies to British history, see Bratton (2003). An important recent work is Zarrilli *et al.*, *Theatre Histories* (2006), a multiple-authored approach to theatre and performance history that includes cross-cultural perspectives from different continents and time periods.