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0521847478 - Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words

Julia A. Walker

Excerpt

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PART I

Introduction

AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, AMERICAN CULTURE was electrified by a revolution in communications technology, with the typewriter, wireless telegraph, telephone, phonograph, cinematographe, and radio appearing within a thirty-five-year span. The typewriter was in production by 1874; the telegraph became wireless in 1896; the telephone generated its own network, reaching from the East Coast to Denver by 1884, becoming fully transcontinental in 1915; the phonograph created a demand for sound recordings which were in mass production by 1893; the cinematographe introduced a new type of entertainment – silent film – in 1895; and the radio made its first broadcast in 1906. As many scholars have noted, the wide-scale implementation of these new communications technologies changed the way Americans experienced distance and time.¹ What has been less discussed, however, is the way these new technologies altered the experience of communication itself. When a pattern of electrical impulses could be sent across the continent and decoded in a matter of seconds, when the grain of the voice could be heard apart from the immediate physical presence of the speaker, when meaningful gestures were presented by bodies removed in both space and time, the messages transmitted through these new technologies must have seemed strange because so unexpectedly distant from the moment of their communicative intent. The act of communication – once experienced as a relatively integrated process – must have felt as if it were suddenly rent apart, splintered into the newly separable elements of bodies, voices, and words.

Floating free in the debris of modernity's shattering blow, these isolated elements posed the problem of where exactly meaning lay: did it reside in or as a function of words alone, or did it include performative features such as gesticulation, intonation, and dynamics? This book argues that such questions and the debates they spawned serve as the founding context of

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American theatrical modernism. For it was in the theatre – that art form most dependent upon bodies, voices, and words – that fears concerning these new communication technologies were given their most acute cultural expression. Analyzing plays by Eugene O’Neill, Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson, and Sophie Treadwell, this book locates the origins of American theatrical modernism in expressionism, a dramatic form that has been long misunderstood. Recontextualizing American expressionism within the history of modernity, I show that it is not simply a minor derivation of the better-known German movement, but a complicated artistic response to the forces of modernization. For, giving shape to these experimental plays was the vague but intensely felt anxiety that new communication technologies would displace the human artist from the act of making meaning, mechanically reproducing bodies (e.g., in film), voices (e.g., in phonograph recordings), and words (e.g., the typewriter). Frequently featuring bodies “seen but not heard,” “voices heard but not seen,” and telegraphically terse dialogue, these plays figure such fears not only thematically in their dystopic vision of modern life, but formally in their expressionistic style.

Readers familiar with recent scholarship on modern technology will recognize an echo of Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986; trans. 1999) in this book’s subtitle. Indeed, Kittler’s work, in bringing the discourse theory of Michel Foucault to bear on media studies, has influenced my understanding of these communication technologies and their impact on modern consciousness. But, as the difference in our titles suggests, we begin our respective studies from separate points of departure. Where he is primarily focused on the technologies themselves, examining the way they shape our understanding of ourselves as conscious subjects, I am more interested in the human body and the crisis it suffered in the moment these new technologies first appeared. For, while they made the body newly visible through the metaphors they offered, these technologies also threatened to displace, replace, or even erase the human body whenever the vehicle of technology was made to substitute for the tenor of the body. Wishing to recuperate a sense of the profound ambivalence – the fears as well as desires – that many turn-of-the-century Americans felt toward these new communication technologies, I propose in this book a way of understanding the cultural expressions that accompanied their emergence.

Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” remains one of the best analyses of this modern ambivalence toward technology. Written in 1935, it stands as an artifact of that

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ambivalence as well. In speaking of the mechanical reproduction of objects that were once created by hand, Benjamin laments the loss of the original object's "aura," its unique situatedness in space and time. What gives that object its aura, Benjamin surmises, is the artist's relationship to the materials out of which it is made; mechanical reproduction strips the object of that relationship, fetishizing it into instant commodity form. While postmodern theorists are not incorrect to accuse Benjamin of "nostalgia," they often err in reducing his complex ruminations to a naive longing for the past. For, while he does, in fact, lament the loss of an unalienated past, he also recognizes the anti-elitist potential of these technologies in providing more democratic access to powerful works of art. That he saw that potential so quickly put to fascistic ends with the Nazi propagation of film led him to end his essay on a less than optimistic note. But that he saw both potentials existing within such technologies of artistic reproduction has been frequently overlooked.

One of the reasons Benjamin's essay has been misread, I believe, has to do with an anti-Benjaminian tendency to view history through the lens of dominant ideas. That "the culture industry," as his Frankfurt School colleagues deemed it, so quickly assumed hegemonic power in the western world, for example, has led many critics to emphasize the cautionary aspects of Benjamin's essay, as if it were an unambiguous indictment of mass-produced art. But this is to presume a sort of "whig" history of ideas, where the emergence of dominant ideas only is worthy of being traced. A contention of this book, however, is that cultures also develop out of a dialectic engagement with *failed* ideas – those ideas that are disproved, disparaged, and dismissed from the dominant culture but whose negation gives shape to subsequent patterns of thought. In them lie important and largely untapped secrets of cultural history that can shed new light on misunderstood cultural forms such as American dramatic expressionism. Failed ideas are, to be sure, much more difficult to excavate. Their traces are often found only in their negation; "progress," in other words, is a narrative made from successive waves of failed ideas that have been cast off. Turning our attention to those failed ideas, however, can tell us much about how such progress was made. As I show in the first half of this book, they can provide us with a fuller sense of the cultural context out of which American expressionism emerged and may in fact challenge the long-held belief that it was merely a minor derivation of the better-known German movement.

That narrative – first floated by journalists reporting on "the new stagecraft" arriving from Europe in the 1920s – was cemented in 1972 by

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Mardi Valgemaes's *Accelerated Grimace*, the first full-length critical study of American expressionist drama. Citing the term's first use by French painter Julien-Auguste Hervé in 1901 and its subsequent adoption by German literary critic Kasimir Edschmid in 1917, Valgemaes asserts that "expressionism, like most new developments in early twentieth-century art, music, and literature, originated in Europe" (2). He cites the American premieres of Robert Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1921, Georg Kaiser's play *From Morn to Midnight* in 1922, and Walter Hasenclever's play *The Son* in 1925 as important and necessary influences on the expressionist plays written by American dramatists, based upon formal homologies such as the stylized presentation of a subjective inner world, compressed syntax, exaggerated caricatures, and episodic action (8–10; 2–3). While it is true that American and German expressionist dramas share many of these traits, it is not necessarily true that German expressionism was the only or even primary influence upon the development of the American form. Yes, German expressionism predates the development of American expressionism, but the German plays were not produced on the American stage until many of the American plays had been written and, in some instances, already produced. Yes, American playwrights had access to copies of the German plays, but they consistently denied having read or been influenced by them. O'Neill, for example, claimed that *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* were written "long before I had ever heard of Expressionism" (quoted in B. H. Clark 83), while Rice insisted that *The Adding Machine* was "a spontaneous thing. I had no experience with German expressionism at that time" (quoted in Elwood 3). Although Lawson and Treadwell made no such public disclaimers about the influences on their plays, Rice offered them his own defense, asserting that "there is no foundation for the belief that the Americans – Lawson, O'Neill, Treadwell, whatever others there were – were imitating German forms" (quoted in Elwood 6). Valgemaes, like many critics, dismisses such denials on the grounds that they were likely motivated by the playwright's conscious or unconscious desire to protect his or her artistic vanity. But this seems rather unfair since O'Neill did not fail to credit Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hauptmann as important influences on his work, and Rice allowed that, however unaware he was of any debt he owed to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, it might indeed have been an "unconscious" influence. There may have been other reasons why these playwrights did not want to admit of German influence, including the anti-German sentiment that persisted in the wake of World War I,² but vanity is not a very convincing reason to reject their denials.

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What if we were to take these playwrights at their word? What if they were not directly influenced by German expressionism in the writing of their plays? What if there were other – perhaps more influential – sources closer to home? This book contends that there were, demonstrating one such source in speech educator S. S. Curry's theory of "expression." Curry, drawing upon the work of French vocal instructor François Delsarte, challenged conventional elocutionary instruction by insisting that communication was not a function of the voice alone but a whole bodily process that depended upon the perfect coordination of all three "languages" of the body – verbal, vocal, and pantomimic. Tapping into cultural anxieties about the new communications technologies that made these languages visible in their newly isolated form, Curry's theory inspired the "expressive culture movement," a broad-based program of personal and social reform advocating the performing arts as a means of overcoming the alienating conditions of modernity. An example of what Jackson Lears refers to as "anti-modernism," it held that these new technologies alienated human beings from their natural condition, throwing the body's rhythms out of alignment with the spiritual forces of the universe. Indeed, silent film rendered moving lips separate from the words they spoke – words that appeared on intertitles jarringly distant from their imaged source; phonograph recordings reoriented the experience of listening by erasing the spectacle of singers or musicians practicing their craft; even the typewriter altered the act of correspondence – its regular and standardized forms stamped out the idiosyncracies of handwriting that were believed to reveal the writer's "personality." It was thus to repair such losses, to restore a sense of human integrity to the act of communication, that students of the expressive culture movement were taught to re-coordinate their verbal, vocal, and pantomimic languages. By participating in drama, music and dance, students could recalibrate their body's natural rhythms to a state of harmony with the spiritual universe and thus counter the alienating conditions of modern life.

As popularized through the expressive culture movement and implemented in high school and college literary instruction, Curry's theory of expression was well known to all who came of age between the 1890s and 1910s, including the expressionist playwrights discussed in this book. In it, American dramatists had a ready means of representing modern alienation when they sat down to write their expressionist plays in the 1920s. Indeed, Curry's three languages appear to be the source of these plays' distinct formal style; counterpointed, rather than coordinated, they represent the spiritual malaise experienced by each play's central character as he or she comes to

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terms with the imposition of industrial rhythms on his or her life. That these playwrights did not dispute the term “expressionist” to describe their plays (however much they refused German attribution) suggests a tacit acknowledgment of Curry’s theory and/or the expressive culture movement more generally as a source. Audiences schooled in expression and familiar with its popularization may have been confused by these plays’ cynical appropriation and ironization of Curry’s theory, but they would have known immediately how it was being used and what it was meant to represent.

That we can no longer see the link between Curry’s theory and these expressionist plays has to do with the way the expressive culture movement has been erased from cultural memory. Based upon a moral-philosophical understanding of human character and a Romantic belief in mystical sources of inspiration, it was dismissed as a failed idea. So, too, was Curry’s theory of expression – despite its legacy in New Critical formalism and methods of oral interpretation. Associated with finishing schools for young ladies and the lost art of elocution, expression was at once feminized within the cultural imaginary and deemed unworthy of serious scholarly attention such that it was little more than a footnote by the time Valgemaie began his study. No wonder he did not consider it a possible source – even when he inadvertently stumbled across its path. As Valgemaie notes in regard to the epigraph with which his book begins, the term “expressionist” actually first appears in the United States in 1878, in a novel by Charles DeKay. Although Valgemaie doesn’t pursue its significance, that novel is in fact an early parody of expressive culture enthusiasts.

In identifying the expressive culture movement as an important source of American expressionism, this book not only offers an alternative account of these plays’ origin, but does so by fully contextualizing them within the history of cultural modernity. For, only by situating them within this history, can we see how these plays functioned as an aesthetic response to the very real fears and anxieties attending historical modernity. Modernism, in other words, is not simply an aesthetic movement marked by stylistic innovation (as explained by traditional formalist criticism), but must also be understood as a cultural response to the changed conditions of modernity. Appearing within an aesthetic register, it functions as a culture’s attempt to represent itself to itself. This is not to say that the artist is an impersonal node through which a culture inscribes its meanings. Rather, as I discuss below, artists often respond in highly personal ways to the cultural and historical changes which find expression in their art. What I wish to

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emphasize here is that those changes are not merely incidental; they are, in fact, important sources of meaning. That is why it is important to understand dramatic modernism in relation to the historical changes associated with modernity. Where dramatic modernism differs from other forms of cultural modernism, of course, is in the specificity of its medium. Unlike painting, sculpture, literature or music, it utilized the formal languages of the theatre by which to articulate its modernist concerns. But the theatre was not just one site of articulation among many. Given the emergence of new communications technologies, it was a site of anxiety as well. After all, these technologies threatened not only the act of communication (as expressive culture's followers believed), but the very art of the theatre itself insofar as they fractured its formal languages into independent modes of signification. But, even as they functioned as a source of modernist anxiety, these technologies also provided playwrights with a heuristic for thinking about the way meaning is created by bodies, voices, and words. Borrowing Curry's verbal, vocal, and pantomimic languages, these playwrights gave aesthetic shape to their modernist concerns, creating the innovative formal style of American dramatic expressionism. This book thus expands the critical focus on expressionism, zooming out from an exclusively aesthetic consideration of its formal features to a larger cultural examination of the way those features developed in response to modernity.

One reason why the traditional critical narrative of German influence has been uncontested for so long has to do with the fact that German sources were indeed influential in the production and reception of American expressionist plays. As has been well established, many of the scene designers involved in the production of these plays studied the new stagecraft in Europe. Robert Edmond Jones, for example, worked under Max Reinhardt in Germany before designing the sets for O'Neill's and Treadwell's expressionist plays. And even those who didn't study abroad would have been familiar with new trends in the visual arts coming out of Europe – thanks to books by Sheldon Cheney, Oliver Saylor and Kenneth Macgowan, touring productions of Diaghilev's *Ballet Russe* (1911) and Max Reinhardt's *Sumurun* (1912), and, of course, the 1913 Armory Show. Such images would have been known not only to scene designers but to audiences generally, for whom artistic modernism would have provided a ready reference for understanding the visual style of American expressionist plays. The mistake critics have made is in assuming that the influences that shaped these plays' production and reception necessarily influenced their composition as well.

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This, however, is to assume that playwrights wrote their expressionist plays with specific staging effects in mind when, in fact, nearly all of the playwrights discussed in this book were surprised and delighted to see the ways in which their ideas were realized on stage by the creative teams designing their plays' first productions. Indeed, many of the expressionist features singled out for comment by critics were devised by someone other than the playwright (e.g., Jig Cook's plaster dome in *The Emperor Jones*, Blanche Hays's use of masks in *The Hairy Ape*, Lee Simonson's giant calculator in *The Adding Machine*, Mordecai Gorelik's cartoonish backdrop in *Processional*, and Robert Edmond Jones's use of colored lights at the conclusion of *Machinal*). What this reveals is that, even within a theatre collective like the Provincetown Players, the composition and production processes were relatively independent.

This points to a crucial development in the productive relations of the American theatre. Where playwrights in the nineteenth century typically wrote their plays to fit the measurements of a specific company or a commissioning star, playwrights in the early twentieth century were beginning to write autonomous works of dramatic literature. The first part of this book elaborates the conditions that made this possible, demonstrating how technology helped convert what had been an actor's theatre throughout the nineteenth century into a playwright's theatre in the twentieth. Chapter 1 traces the ascent and decline of the actor's interpretive authority, seeing it figured in the "point," an acting technique whereby actors used their bodies to realize their interpretations of a playwright's text. With the rise of new technologies, however, that authority began to disappear, as actors' bodies increasingly became inscribed as signs within a scenic or filmic text that was authorized by someone else, usually the playwright. Chapter 2 discusses how, in the very moment that the artistic mantle of the theatre was passed from actor to playwright, the performative languages of the theatre came under attack. Once gesticulation and vocality could be recorded and reproduced, skills such as acting and elocution were deemed intellectually suspect, necessitating the redefinition of disciplines such as oratory within the new research academy. Tracing this process of redefinition and the debates that propelled it, this chapter shows how a text/performance split became institutionalized, stranding playwrights on the virgule between literary and theatrical values. Their double bind was, in part, resolved by changes in copyright law – the subject of chapter 3. It demonstrates the historically difficult position playwrights occupied in relation to the law. For, while copyright protected them from unlawful publication, it did nothing to

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protect them against unauthorized “copies” of their plays on stage. Detailing the legislative and judicial battles fought to protect performance rights, this chapter shows how those rights were finally secured with the invention of new recording technologies that rendered a performance “original” from which copies could be made. With texts and performances thus deemed distinct legal entities, the dramatic text could finally be separated from the theatrical apparatus and thus considered its own autonomous art form.

Peter Bürger has described autonomy as a defining condition of artistic modernism. Tracing historical changes within the function, production, and consumption of art, he shows how art became increasingly separated from its social context. Where sacred art served a communal function, for example, modern art reflects the self-understanding of the historical bourgeoisie. Where sacred art was anonymously and communally produced, modern art is produced by individual artists. Where sacred art was meant to be experienced by a collective social whole, modern art is individually consumed. Although this historical evolution was marked by periods of uneven development, it has resulted in the reification of modern art into its own autonomous object (48). As applied to modern drama, Bürger’s model suggests a similar – if delayed – process of development. For, though the theatre has long been a collective art form, in the modern period it has undergone a similar process of autonomization. As the first part of this book demonstrates, the playwright’s eclipse of the actor was accompanied by a radical devaluation of the performative languages of the theatre and a legal separation of the dramatic text from any performance of it, causing playwrights to assume a new relationship to their art. No longer tied to the producing apparatus of the theatre, playwrights were independent producers of an art form that was increasingly devoted to the portrayal of bourgeois life and consumed by audience members who, plunged into silent darkness, were encouraged to experience it individually rather than as part of a collective social whole. What this means is that the reification of American drama into its own autonomous art form marked the beginnings of American dramatic modernism.

This book demonstrates that expressionism was an important early phase of this development. For, in ironizing Curry’s three languages, the expressionists not only represented the technologically induced alienation of their central characters but also found a way to establish their own legitimacy within a regime of literary value that considered drama a “bastard art.” This is Susan Harris Smith’s apt description of drama’s uncertain position within

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the early twentieth-century American cultural field; born of the theatre, its literary paternity was always suspect. Although, as Smith notes, the roots of such an attitude can be traced to the anti-theatrical prejudice of centuries past, she argues that this “anti-dramatic bias” became acute at the turn of the twentieth century when anxieties over drama’s relationship to the category of the literary became particularly rife (5–6). While Smith thoroughly documents the existence of this bias and its legacy in twentieth-century American literary criticism, she nonetheless leaves its origins obscure. Those origins, this book reveals, lie in the anti-performative foundation laid at the base of literary high modernism by figures such as George Santayana and T. S. Eliot. Disputing Curry’s claim that all three languages were necessary to the act of communication, they maintained that meaning was a function of verbal signification alone.

With the performative languages of the theatre thus devalued, playwrights faced a serious problem: how to create plays of literary value without forsaking the theatrical medium. Martin Puchner has recently argued that, at the turn of the twentieth century, modern drama gave birth to “a theater at odds with the value of theatricality” (7). He suggests that writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein got around this problem by writing plays that were simply meant to be read, while playwrights such as W. B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, and Samuel Beckett forged a different solution, devising new means of controlling the meanings generated by the stage apparatus. But long before what Puchner calls the “diegetic” theatre of Brecht and Beckett – and in the very moment that Joyce was writing his “closet drama” – there was another group of playwrights who had worked out yet a third possible solution. They were the expressionists who, by disarticulating the performative languages of the theatre from the authority of their texts, were able to secure their otherwise questionable literary status while writing plays that remained theatrically viable.

The second part of this book details the work of four such expressionists, demonstrating how their ambivalence toward the new culture of technology led them to develop their expressionistic style. For, while it helped create the conditions of their artistic autonomy, it also threatened to render them obsolete. Ironically appropriating the three languages that technology made visible in their newly isolated form, these playwrights found a way to give expression to their own personal fears and professional anxieties. Chapter 4 examines Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1921; 1922), reading both plays as formal allegories of O’Neill’s oedipal and