PART I

The problem of the spectator

CHAPTER I

Introduction: assisting at the spectacle

A spectator is a corporeal presence but a slippery concept. Whether considering spectators in history or the present, in one's own culture or a foreign one, in film, television or any form of live performance from theatre or sport to mass political or musical gatherings, we are likely to drop quickly into intellectual quicksand. The reasons for the difficulty are apparent enough: audiences are not (and probably never have been) homogeneous social and psychological groups, their experiences are not uniform and impossible to standardize, their reactions are chiefly private and internal, and recording their encounters with events, regardless of the mechanism used to survey or register them, is usually belated and inevitably partial. Almost anything one can say about a spectator is false on some level.

Yet audiences are indispensable to performance and commentators cannot avoid them. In common speech people make generalized conclusions about reception they have observed (the audience hated it, or the fans went wild), while journalist-critics manage to divine group response from their own responses and from the reactions of those around them. In time their reviews may be given documentary status by performance historians. Film theorists established positions on spectators that widely influenced other fields. Sociologists of sport concern themselves mightily with fan psychology and behaviour. The television industry continues to take audience research very seriously, despite serious flaws in all methods of enumeration, since vast sums of money are connected to official audience ratings. Media scholars consider at greater depth and with a critical eye the same imperfect sets of observed or statistical calculations. Even the most methodologically exact theatre historian might now and then slip into the convenience of the first-person plural when discussing the reception of performances. Despite the plenitude of difficulties audiences present, analysts continue to deal with them and the world at large is curious about them. Notwithstanding the materiality of

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spectators, comprehending them is a problem in metaphysics. Writing about them may border on the impossible, but it also seems necessary.

In what follows I have tried to evade the impossible. I do not assume that spectators react in similar ways to the same event, or that they are socially unified just because gathered, or that my own responses are indicative of those of other spectators, or that spectators in history have received performances the way spectators do today. My attempts to sidestep these difficulties have given the work four features worth noting at the start.

1. The book does not have a single argument but is a gathering of thoughts about specific historical or theoretical problems related to spectators. Though I have connected the chapters and arranged them thematically, they are investigations that draw upon different methods and sometimes different theoretical fields. They are literally *essais*: trials or attempts at dealing with the intellectual trouble that audiences bring, views of performance problems from the standpoint of the watcher. A fully reasoned book on the spectator would mistake the problem, as I see it. There are many tales to tell about spectators, but there is no single story.

2. I range across different performance modes – theatre, television, sport, ritual, tourism, gambling – in an effort to uncover elements of contemporary culture that shape spectatorial experience and how it may be construed. Generally I propose that the medium is not the message: the message, if there is one, is in the spectator's presence, and thus sometimes I blur the usual distinction made between live and non-live performance. At times I try to question the semiotic basis for understanding the process of spectation, wondering whether creating meaning for the audience is a necessary object of performance.

3. While my examples are various, the nature of the investigation prohibits a comprehensive look at the topic; spectators are too historically and culturally specific to permit a grand mapping. I use examples as I have come upon them and as well as I can understand them, not claiming they are the necessary illustrations. To do this I have sometimes moved outside my own field of theatre and performance studies, drawing as needed on some of the investigative methods of qualitative sociology, political history and economy, media studies, psychology and art history. I may not have done this very well, but the effort is necessary to avoid a closed-circuit approach.

4. In brief, I am more concerned with the philosophic issues that spectators raise than with their specific experiences.

It has often been noted that there is no word in English (or in most European languages) to cover the two main senses involved in greeting performance, seeing and hearing. *Spectators* (those who look) gives us the first, *audience* (those within hearing) the second, both derived from Latin, and arguments have erupted at assorted times over the best usage. The classical (and biblical) traditions insisted that hearing the word was primary to understanding: Aristotle called spectacle (*opsis*) 'the least artistic element' of tragedy, Ben Jonson followed him, for once agreeing with a Puritan position, and the negative use of the word today in English (e.g. 'an empty spectacle') continues this bias. The popular traditions, on the other hand, regularly elevated the visual as capable of more direct contact with an audience; though without the authority of an ancient philosopher, many artists and theoreticians have favoured the eye, from Aristophanes to Jonson's nemesis Inigo Jones, from Charles Kean to Edward Gordon Craig and Bertolt Brecht. There are circumstances when we are chiefly listeners (for a radio play) or chiefly watchers (a mime performance), but most of the time both senses are involved and it is not helpful to distinguish the two words on an etymological basis. In general I use *audience* to refer to a group of observers of a performance, while *spectator* refers to an individual member of an audience, including a theoretical spectator or one I have myself imagined.

The title of this chapter, 'Assisting at the spectacle', is of course a literal rendering of the French *assister au spectacle*, which means in colloquial English simply 'to be present at a performance' – to be a spectator or a member of an audience. I use the phrase in a larger or metaphoric way because it brings to mind one of the most persistent historical and theoretical issues: are spectators passive receptors, merely consuming what is offered, or are they active participants, adding something to the event? In what ways does a spectator assist the spectacle?

WHAT IS AN AUDIENCE?

As one person walks across an empty space, another watches, in Peter Brook's famous formulation at the start of *The Empty Space* (1968: 9). But if this were 'all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged', then any observation anywhere of one person by another would qualify. As a metaphor the formulation has its attraction, and there has been a long-standing reliance upon theatrical imagery to describe elements of our interaction with the ordinary. But Brook's idea does not help much in understanding an audience in the stricter sense of a group attending to a

performance in a theatre or cinema or stadium. Does the solitary spec-
tator really constitute an audience? We might as well deal with this issue
first, as it affects the value I will place on spectator presence. Solitary
watching is most associated with television, though it is not a necessary
condition: many examples exist of communal TV viewing, from sports
bars to soap-opera parties. Further, in the case of broadcasts millions of
scattered viewers are watching alone or in small groups – for the World
Cup or the Super Bowl, hundreds of millions worldwide – and most of
them are aware of their simultaneous participation in this larger audience,
a circumstance that distantly resonates with the experience of the theatre.
John Fiske (1987: 80) claims that 'television provides a common symbolic
experience and a common discourse, a set of shared formal conventions
that are so important to a folk culture'. I would add that the knowledge
that one is watching the same programme at the same time as millions of
others is directly connected to the cultural commonality television can
provide and creates an audience, though an audience without presence.
A solitary spectator for a video on the same set, however, cannot be called
an audience in any sense, just as the proliferation of channels on cable and
satellite reduces the prospect of shared experience that characterized
television in its terrestrial era. As programme delivery mechanisms for TV
and the internet move toward on-demand downloads, private viewing
will probably become even more common, destroying the concept of a
'television audience' that network broadcasters have relied on.

Though I am primarily concerned with theatre and other live events,
I must consider briefly how postmodernity and above all the electronic
media have affected the audience, in idea and actuality. I agree with Alain
Badiou (2004: xv) that 'postmodern' as an adjective has been 'evacuated
of all content' – he suggests his own work might be described instead as
'more-than-modern'. But the *condition* of postmodernity is definitely at
hand, whether it is conceived primarily as interdependent world eco-
nomies, a set of interrelated communications systems or a psychosocial
state of being. As a historical epoch that defines culture, postmodernity is
palpable; it has what I call 'reality-in-the-world'. (I use this phrase, a twist
on Heidegger's *Dasein* – 'being-there' or 'being-in-the-world' – to avoid
confusion with Lacan's 'the Real', or with the historical movement of
realism and its adjectives 'realistic' and 'realist', which are descriptions of
a style.) For help on the spectator in postmodernity, I turn first to
Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst's *Audiences* (1998), a work by
media sociologists which divides contemporary audiences into three
types: simple, mass and diffused. The *simple* audience is the traditional

one, spectators gathered together bodily for an event performed live in a
theatre, concert hall, or sports stadium, those literally within hearing. The
second type, the *mass* audience, is composed of the scattered spectators of
television and other mass media; the authors include film in this category
because of its mass distribution, though from the standpoint of gathering
or presence, an assembly of people in a cinema is actually a simple
audience. Their final type, the *diffused* audience, refers to dispersed
spectators in media-saturated societies who are continually surrounded by
representations:

> The qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to
> *leak out* from specific performance events which previously contained them, into
> the wider realms of everyday life. Being a member of an audience becomes a
> mundane event (36–7).

In this condition, similar to what Guy Debord a generation ago called
'the society of the spectacle', the incursions of electronic simulations are
so pervasive that there is no substantial difference between watching and
not watching. Citizens in the capitalist world have little choice but to be
part of the spectacularization of life, so that, as Abercrombie and Long-
hurst put it, 'Everyone becomes an audience all the time' (68).

   The distinctions among audience types are not absolute, and one
spectator might participate in all three categories with the same event: in
the daytime attend a football match as part of a simple audience, watch
highlights of the game on the evening news as part of a mass audience,
and record its broadcast for what the authors term a 'narcissistic' or
private use of the video at a future date (I detail this Debordian process in
chapter 8). The questions of 'liveness' treated by Philip Auslander (2008)
become relevant here, and more complicated. He holds that the media-
tized world has redefined the live, which can no longer be accepted as a
given or natural state but must be seen only in terms of the simulated.
Television, the 'determining element of our cultural formation' (2), has
altered our perception of what performance is. True enough, though the
issue is larger. If in the West and other so-called first-world countries we
have reached a state where communications, entertainments and other
electronic interactions are so pervasive and incessant that we cannot avoid
them, and do not wish to, then perhaps we have moved into a new phase
of human life, one in which it does not much matter whether an event
occurs live before us or distantly in some simulated, recorded or heavily
mediated form. Writing this at a computer in Dublin I am listening via
the internet to a real-time broadcast of recordings from KCSM, a jazz

radio station in California, while also on an internet chat line with my daughter in India. These events are happening 'live' in real time but so thoroughly mediatized that they might as well not be. Crucially, they involve the corporeal presence of one person only: myself. Perhaps I am on the way to becoming what Matthew Causey (2006) calls the 'posthuman spectator' with 'posthuman subjectivity'.

Auslander's book is important, though he is more interested in the legal implications of his topic than the philosophic ones. Yet I doubt that many spectators are as perplexed about the live as he implies. They may not care whether a news event or a TV show is broadcast simultaneously or delayed, or if a high-tech simulation is inserted in a live concert or theatre performance, or if a cinematic special effect is generated digitally, but they are likely to remark the distinction. At stadium rock concerts the giant video screens which double the musicians' presence may be 'the manner in which audience members access the performance' (Causey 2006: 23), but if so that occurs with force only because of the authenticating live manifestation of the performers' bodies. Walter Benjamin's famous assertion that mechanical reproduction has rendered the aura of the original work of art obsolete, for all its credibility in the 1930s and historical importance thereafter, must not be conflated with market value. The ready availability of cheap reproductions, or Baudrillard's exposure of the simulacrum, have not reduced the auction successes of Picassos and Rembrandts. The rapidly rising prices of famous works, and the excessive anxiety about their authenticity, even if driven by investment factors, suggest that the original has by virtue of its rarity achieved added monetary appeal. Perhaps this is true of the live as well, as Jill Dolan (2005) insists. To paraphrase Causey, what most distinguishes the live is the spectator's distant awareness of its true opposite, which is not the recorded or the simulated, but death. The death we carry within us is the perpetual ghost at the spectator's banquet, another reason for thinking that the presence of the spectator is more important than the presence of the actor.

A final point about the audience for electronic media: a number of commentators now assert that the standard notion of the TV audience as an observable phenomenon is a fiction made at the convenience of the television industry and too easily accepted by scholars. Related to judgements about the undominated uses of TV that viewers can make, itself prompted by Michel de Certeau (1984) on the resistant power of consumerism, writers such as Ien Ang (1991) assert that industry notions are completely detached from the actuality of the audience, that the

industry lacks any interest in what spectators really think or do, instead presenting data to advertisers or state agencies that can convince them of the value of financial sponsorship. The television audience is inherently unstable, says Bird (2003: 3), because it is 'everywhere and nowhere'. We know quite a lot about reception, Katz holds (1996: 9); 'what we know least about is the psychology and sociology of the viewing experience itself . . . how viewers position themselves before the screen'. In Fiske's concise formula (1989: 57), 'There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing.'

CONSTRUCTING THE SPECTATOR

If there are major headaches in trying to understand the character of the diffused media audience, returning to film and live performance provides only limited relief. On what basis can we think of a simple audience in a cinema or theatre as any different from a mass television or diffused audience, anything more than a random collection of individual spectators, even if they happen to be in one space? If all spectation is ultimately psychological and personal, are we not forever trapped in conjecture and supposition?

The problem was first faced seriously in film studies, but partly deflected. In his early work in the 1960s Christian Metz presumed a linguistic basis for understanding reception, affected by Roman Jakobson's communication model of sender-addressee and transmitter-receiver. Metz's hypothesis was that the 'messages' of narrative film were primarily photo-realist and embedded in the product. As Thomas Elsaesser (1995: 12) summarizes, for Metz 'The spectator/receiver's job was merely to "decode" the message "correctly", which meant that "subjectivity" was located in the "phatic" dimension of the communication act.' In this semiotic (or telegraphic, or Saussurean) view, the film text, from shot to shot, already inscribes subjectivity. If an actual spectator diverges from the inscribed subject position, what has occurred is not a flaw in the theory but in the transmission, a 'failed reception'. Metz's later work (1982) developed a more sophisticated approach to subjectivity centred around the idea of scopophilia, and it is only fair to add that he never conflated the theoretical subject with actual spectators, but the structuralist basis remained.

A psycho-semiotic refinement of Metz, influenced by Lacan and most notable in France, attempted to realize a more complete account of subjectivity. The British journal *Screen* took up the call in the 1970s and 1980s, famously in Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative

cinema' (1975), which argued that the female spectator was excluded from classical Hollywood film because that tradition constructed the spectator in the male subject position, leaving no space for alternative response. Intended as a manifesto for change in film making, the article was actually more influential in the academy, especially through its theory of an inscribed 'male gaze' which dominates spectatorship. Despite its radical significance Mulvey's view was rooted in an assumption that the spectator's subjectivity is limited by the film's authority. Most oddly, given her topic, Mulvey ignored the prospect of spectator agency. Equally important was the application of the Lacanian concept of 'suture' by Jean-Pierre Oudart (1977–8) to describe the ways the spectator is psychologically 'stitched into' the world of the film through the oscillation of 'looks' organized by point of view. But the psycho-semiotic assumption that the film text governs spectator response, aside from its disconnection from actual spectators, further totalized Lacanian ideas into a monolithic theoretical model based on gender and sexuality. Imagining the viewer as stuck in Lacan's mirror stage, at the centre of an illusionary representation, as Baudry did (1985, originally 1970), supposes a spectator unable to recognize the line between fiction and certainty (reality-in-the-world). The *Screen* approach was challenged by various materialist critical moves and also by cognitive film theory, both of which focused on the conscious rather than the unconscious processes mobilized in viewers. Moving completely away from Lacanian theory were a set of reception studies of actual cinema audiences in history and the present, similar to the sociological approach to media audiences and subject to similar methodological difficulties.

In theatre studies we can identify parallel trends, though without the critical trap of a determined subjectivity. Of the books in the linguistic or semiotic tradition, most of them written in the 1980s, I mention especially Patrice Pavis (1982), Marco De Marinis (1993) and Marvin Carlson (1990) as addressing the two-way character of communication in the theatre. Live performance, with its multiple points of view and optional spectation procedures, does not encourage critics to presuppose a determining text, whether written or performed, nor a theoretical subjectivity for the recipient. Lacan nonetheless provided the basis for Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* (1992), an investigation of the indeterminacy and ephemerality of performance. In Herbert Blau's *The Audience* (1990), a collection of essays about disappearing inspired by Beckett and Derrida as well as Lacan, the author chooses to speak for no spectator but himself. Blau approaches audiences by considering how playwrights and theatre artists have conceived them psychologically.

More concerned with a materialist consideration of gender are Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1991) and Sue-Ellen Case's *The Domain-Matrix* (1996), which have been broadly influential in reconfiguring ideas of subjectivity and have sparked a number of contributions on gender and the queer that are directly applicable to spectators. In a different vein, Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1997), an essential book on the topic, relies on literary reception theory and circumvents the problem of subjectivity by not adducing specific audience results. It is difficult to expand upon Willmar Sauter's statistical exploration of contemporary audiences (2000) since it is circumscribed by data from middle-class Swedish theatregoers and does not take theoretical account of the biases of spectator surveys or the legitimate uses that might be made of them. Bruce McConachie's treatment (2003) of the psychology of Broadway audiences in the early Cold War period is filled with insight, though the support he uses, Lakoff and Johnson's research in cognitive psychology, is scientifically uncertain. McConachie is well aware of the problems the method poses but proceeds nonetheless on the assumption that a direct relationship exists between audience perception and the intellectual and emotional 'containment' characteristic of an age. He deduces spectator response through textual and performance analysis, but despite the cognitive frame the *process of deduction* is little different from that achieved in other structuralist theoretical frames such as the semiotic, Freudian or Lacanian approaches he rejects. A different advance in the study of historical audiences comes from Christopher Balme's *Pacific Performances* (2007), a book about European encounters with the cultures of the South Seas from the first contacts of explorers in the eighteenth century to contemporary touristic displays and diasporic re-imaginings. Looking at both the reactions of Europeans to the manifestation of Polynesia and Polynesian sights of the new arrivals, Balme places spectatorship inside intercultural encounter.

My examples are seriously incomplete; no summary account can manage the fact that the spectator is the unspoken topic of most work in theatre and performance studies, even if that spectator is a pale hypothetical inference of the commentator's imagination.

A deeper problem is that – McConachie aside – most analysis of performance supposes a semiotic configuration, with speaking subjects on stage (the transmitters) and more-or-less silent objects in the audience (the receivers). Even when the author is well aware of the indeterminacy and multiplicity of signifiers and the ungraspable shape of what they might signify, and attentive to the reciprocity of communication and the