

Book Reviews

***Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now: Criticism and Theory in the 21st Century* edited by Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 212 pp. (paperback)

By Amy Borsuk

In this collection, editors Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady have compiled thorough, multi-lensed essays which aim to conduct 'Presentist' readings of Shakespeare's work that argue for 'Presentism' as a key critical mode of scholarly engagement with Shakespeare. This mode of engagement acknowledges our position in 'the now' while always reinterpreting our past. DiPietro and Grady have curated this collection with two related goals: first, to demonstrate Presentism as an essential methodology, distinct from New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, for engaging in historical analysis of Shakespearean text and performance; and secondly, to demonstrate how Shakespeare's plays engage with a notion of 'now' or the 'present' and how this resonates with our present. The contributors aim to answer DiPietro and Grady's question, 'Where, then, does Shakespeare figure in the much more urgently felt immediacies of our changing world?' (2) Altogether, the anthology conducts rich, dense work interrogating relationships between the early modern past, the present, and Shakespeare through epistemological modes such as eco-criticism, phenomenology, aestheticism, affect, labour, and Marxist theory.

Throughout the book, the 'present' serves as 'a methodological starting point, the inevitable horizon of interpretation, or its enabling condition' (4), which as both an object of study and a state of existence always inescapably structures our ways of thinking and writing. DiPietro and Grady position these Presentist essays as a demonstrable return to the favourable dialogic practice of reading history in the context of the present, which they argue that New Historicism and Cultural

Materialism no longer achieve. Their methodology is fundamentally dynamic and self-reflexive, conscientious that:

the significance of [Shakespeare] texts is never static or 'timeless', but rather involves a negotiation and constant renegotiation between horizons of interpretation and an ever-shifting present, from which we view the past with new understandings, with different interpretive lenses, with different senses of what is important and relevant, and what is not. (2)

However, the fluid, time-focused, and at times ahistorical analyses of Shakespeare's historical context and texts in these articles undermine the overall assertion that Presentism is a return to the original methodological intentions of Cultural Materialism. While the contributors focus on specific histories through sociopolitical and economic lenses, the differences in these contexts are often collapsed or left un-analysed in order to make the past feel more immediate with the present; this is particularly evident in Whitney and Reinhard Lupton's chapters.

The book is structured into nine chapters, with each contributing author demonstrating how Shakespeare can be positioned and made visible within the 'immediacies of our changing world' (2). Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady's opening essay, 'Presentism, Anachronism and *Titus Andronicus*' gives attention to the dialectical tension between historicist work focused on understanding text in context and the inescapable reality of merely accessing the 'present'. They draw parallels between the early modern audience for *Titus Andronicus* and contemporary, post-9/11 audiences, arguing that the play's portrait of Aaron the Moor and his effective terrorism resonates today because of the 'turbulence of global politics post-9/11' (14). In chapter two, 'The Presentist Threat to Editions of Shakespeare', Gabriel Egan explores competing New Textualist and New Bibliographical contemporary practices for editing Shakespeare's quartos and folios to demonstrate the paradoxically conservative results that arise from radical practices, and vice versa, in folio editing. 'Shakespeare Dwelling: *Pericles* and the

Affordances of Action' by Julia Reinhard Lupton reads *Pericles* through the 'urgency of the now' manifest in 'the present time of performance' (60), drawing from craftivism, theories of affect, labour and affective labour to analyse 'the capacities of artisanal efforts to general political speech' within the play (61). In Chapter 4, Cary DiPietro writes about virtual place as a form of theatre and conducts a fascinating eco-critical analysis of the early modern ecology, pastoral imagery, and aesthetics of Prospero's island in *The Tempest*. Although he does not evoke Presentism directly, he argues that the pastoralism within the play evokes an audience's nostalgic connection to the past. Charles Whitney uses a New Economics lens on the presence of common enclosures and fields in *As You Like It* to argue that 'some of what was becoming culturally residual then in relation to the capitalist dominant needs to become culturally emergent now, in some new form, in relation to that same dominant' (105); that is, the protection of common land in *As You Like It* needs to be revived for the planet today. Similarly, Lynne Bruckner eco-critically explores the parallels in the relationship between land and political power in 21st century America and 16th century England in her chapter, 'Consuming means, soon preys upon itself': Political Expedience and Environmental Degradation'. W.B. Worthen, in the seventh chapter, explores contemporary performance as re-performing memories of Shakespeare, rather than being any original or true Shakespearean text. Hugh Grady's chapter 'Reification, Mourning, and the Aesthetic in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*' focuses on aestheticism as a mode of theoretical political engagement in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the final chapter, Mark Robson closes the collection with an appropriately playful, yet rigorous, engagement with anachronisms and evocations of 'the present' in *Julius Caesar*.

Altogether, *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now* is ambitious in its scope, at times overly so, but does open a new mode of dialogical historical work that offers a fundamental shift of perspective. It is not a declaration or justification of Shakespeare's relevancy, nor an exploration of how Shakespeare has been remoulded to speak to contemporary concerns, but rather an argument for the importance of recognizing

how we invest in and reinterpret the past always in relation to our 'now'. It is an engaging book for researchers both new and familiar with Presentism as well as for those who seek to focus on the subjectivity and relational foundation of historicism, particularly as conducted through Shakespeare studies. The concept of Presentism is repeated clearly throughout the chapters, which helpfully reinforces learning, even when the distinction between Presentism and its supposed predecessors struggles to feel distinct. Simultaneously, the complexity and depth of each critical analysis yields diverse original research that will readily engage scholars focused on contemporary conceptions of 'Shakespeare'. *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now* demonstrates that Shakespeare is a cultural topic, a body of texts and plays, and a historical subject which is constantly being expanded by scholars who continue to engage diachronically with Shakespeare-of-the-past and Shakespeare-of-the-present.

***Critique and Postcritique* edited by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski**

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017. 336 pp. (hardback)

By Jaelyn Endris

There is perhaps little surprise that in our contemporary moment of political fragmentation predicated on an anti-intellectual resistance to criticism, the function and politics of critique should be the subject of much debate and energy. As such, the role of critique is one primary concern of Anker and Felski's *Critique and Postcritique*, an edited collection of essays from scholars working in and around literary studies. *Critique and Postcritique* aptly situates itself within the 'energy, excitement, and revitalization' (Anker and Felski 20) of contemporary literary studies enlivened and re-envisioned through feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial studies, among others and reflects ways in which scholars in the humanities might destabilize often entrenched paradigms of criticism. For Anker and Felski, this manifests at the

level of the institution as well, locating how ‘the ethos of critique is losing its allure...unfolding hand in hand with a larger sense of crisis in the humanities and of institutional retrenchment’ (20). The energetic pull between genres of critique as diagnosis, or critique’s role in ‘the scrutiny of an object in order to decode certain defects or flaws’ (Anker and Felski 4), and genres of postcritique that resist diagnosis through situated and reparative models of critique, formulate, for Anker and Felski, a productive tension that renders postcritical approaches as both antidote and alternative through ‘countertraditions of critique’ (21). For Anker and Felski, postcritique is thereby a means of resisting against ‘an extended assault on the autonomy of universities’ (18) through the reimagining of critique as political investments interrogated within and through ‘the forms of value, play and pleasure cultivated by an aesthetic education’ (20), wherein postcritique might thereby ‘forge stronger links between intellectual life and the nonacademic world’ (19). *Critique and Postcritique* therefore embarks on an exploration of postcritical modes to determine ‘fresh ways of interpreting literary and cultural texts that acknowledge, nonetheless, its inevitable dependency on the very practices it is questioning’ (Anker and Felski 1).

Moving between diagnostic, paranoid, or symptomatic approaches and affective, reparative, and perspectival approaches to reading, *Critique and Postcritique* draws most heavily from intersections in literary criticism and feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial studies. Through the political and cultural situatedness of these fields, reading as method becomes an object of investigation in an attempt to render reading not as dogmatic or apolitical but as situated and lived. For example, Toril Moi’s chapter ‘‘Nothing is Hidden’: From Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on Critique’ and Ellen Rooney’s chapter ‘Symptomatic Reading is a Problem of Form’ both take up an interrogation of reading as method to understand how critique might function both as a means of productively undoing entrenched structures and as a means of understanding one’s personal and political investments in a particular text. Moi notes that critique is not synonymous with theory and that ‘a theory is not a method’ (35); she articulates how

reading is less about the application of a theory to a text to determine its deep, hidden meanings and more about ‘different thematic or political interests’ (Moi 35) that inform how meanings are produced through the ways in which one looks at text. For Rooney, these investments in situated readings also formulate a practice of critique through iterative breakages and reformations of reading, highlighting how ‘symptomatic reading...anticipates its undoing, undoing itself, again and again’ (Rooney 147). One of the hallmarks of *Critique and Postcritique* is how reading therefore might be taken up as a practice in which critiques might iterate upon and reformulate critical positions through an understanding of reading as an active, agential process.

As a result of this investment in a practice of reading, *Critique and Postcritique* also puts important emphasis on the position of the reader and the disposition of critique, or ‘the attitude with which critique is approached’ (Castiglia 212). Heather Love’s chapter ‘The Temptations: Donna Haraway, Feminist Objectivity, and the Problem of Critique’ re-imagines Donna Haraway as a literary critic which resists the idea that critique is destructive and examines critique as an ‘attention to care-in-the-making’ (Love 68). Christopher Castiglia’s chapter ‘Hope for Critique?’ begs a similar question through a shift in critical disposition from paranoid to hopeful readings, whereby critique is not ‘the assumption that texts conceal beneath their surface an abstract agency’ (Castiglia 211) but rather ‘an imaginative space coexisting with and perpetually troubling the imperative here and now within which new ideals...can be envisioned’ (218). Through Love’s attention to care in critique and Castiglia’s attention to a critical hopefulness, reading as method is further re-envisioned as a form of dynamic fieldwork, as ‘experiments in ways of looking’ (Love 66) that take up new or different dispositions that ‘actively contribute to the ethics of the possible’ (Castiglia 226). Through this imagining of critique, the critic herself is not only implicated but also made responsible for her investment in a practice of reading; this resists the complacency of singular, apolitical critique in favour of a situated, reflexive, and iterative process of looking for multiple perspectives and meanings.

While *Critique and Postcritique* is a book primarily interested in the traditions of literary criticism, the suggested postcritical approaches to reading practice offer innovative and productive ways through which practitioners and scholars in performance studies might extend these literary traditions into practice-based research. This resonates as critical reading takes shape through postcritique as a form of practice-based knowledge production determined through an engagement with self-reflexive, situated models of knowing (Barrett 2). Of particular interest to performance scholars and practitioners might be the way in which Heather Love extends Nathan Hensley's concept of a curatorial reading, in which readers cultivate a 'persistent critique' (Love, 68) that is 'established in the making' (Love 68). This approach might collide with Barbara Bolt's concept of materialising practices, or reflexive, embodied practices that 'constitute relationships between process and text' (Barrett 5), and offer those working in performance studies an interesting opportunity to examine how notions of practice-based research might extend or sit alongside more conventional forms of critique. As a result, *Critique and Postcritique* reflects a timely and imaginative look at practices of critique that extend beyond received conventions to find new alliances with other ways of knowing and signals a productive future for critique that performance studies scholars and practitioners will want to read.

Works Cited

Barrett, Estelle. 'Introduction'. *Practice as Research Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. Ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007. 1-14.

***Thinking Through Theatre and Performance* edited by Maaïke Bleeker, Adrian Kear, Joe Kelleher, Heike Roms**

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2019, 321 pp. (paperback)

By Bojana Janković

‘This is a book for students,’ announce the editors of *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance*, a book ‘for use in classrooms’ (1). Structured in four sections, devoted to watching, performing, traces left and interventions undertaken by theatre and performance, the volume edited by Maaïke Bleeker, Adrian Kear, Joe Kelleher and Heike Roms consists of 21 essays, each starting from a question. These questions vary greatly: some appear ontological, for example, Kelleher opens the book by asking ‘Why Study Drama?’; while others unravel from a deceptive simplicity as when Thomas F. DeFrantz begins by asking ‘What is Black Dance? What Can It Do?’ and concludes that Black dance is ‘dancing beyond disavowal towards Black joy’ (97). Others still jump straight into questions of political responsibility, by asking if staging historical trauma re-enacts it (Nyong’o 200-10). Each of the essays follows a similar structure: the titular question establishes the problem, which is investigated through a case study and dissected through a specific methodology.

The stated intention of *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance* –to be used by students and in classrooms—is therefore present from the very outset of each chapter. On a formal level, the book answers the question ‘what does an essay about theatre and performance look like’ by presenting an array of possible answers. Miguel Escobar Varela’s chapter on intercultural exchange (173-85) folds personal experience into academic research, starting from the former and introducing scholars like Rustom Bharucha and Dwight Conquergood in slow, deliberate steps, to arrive at concrete advice for intercultural makers and researchers. When Mike Pearson titles the sections of his essay ‘Let’s presume’, ‘Let’s venture’ or ‘Let’s allow’ (115-29), he not only

investigates ‘how theatre thinks through things’ but also breaks the mould of essay-writing by illustrating how lateral thinking is also lateral writing.

I re-lived the excitement of my (early) student discoveries several times while reading *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance*. This is the discovery of a cherished subject being contorted, collapsed and expanded. Broderick D. V. Chow’s disassembling of the idea of a trained body as an unthinking body (145-57) pushes against the doctrines of acting still held in most UK drama schools. Jazmin Badong Llana (211-24) asks how theatre thinks through politics by discussing the annual re-enactment of a 1985 massacre committed during a protest in the Philippines, which opens complex questions of party politics, institutional appropriation, and historical re-contextualisation. To those familiar with the contributors’ work, the essays in this collection may occasionally appear familiar; but to those beginning their explorations, or even redirecting towards a new topic, these essays illuminate possible avenues to follow, often loudly bypassing the harmful norms of theatre and performance practice. Colette Conroy does not ask how theatre can be accessible but what a *fully* accessible theatre is (47-57), moving beyond ideas of inclusion within existing theatre structures to a place where theatre is re-imagined because audiences are understood anew.

In the above mentioned introduction, Bleeker, Kear, Kelleher, and Roms stipulate the contributors were not asked to survey ‘the current state of knowledge in one or other area of the discipline’ but rather to ‘construct essays [...] that work through particular provocations, ideas or methods of approach’ (4). This open-ended invitation makes the individual article’s attempts to simplify or complicate the question at hand all the more visible. Louise Owen (70-84) uses *Beyond Caring*, a performance about zero-hour workers in a meat factory, to introduce foundational Marxist thinking; the focus on representation of economic systems, embedded into the essay title, limits this exploration to the performance itself, without allowing it to expand to the working conditions of theatre-makers. Theron Schmidt’s article (158-70) appears almost as a companion piece to Owen’s essay;

by invoking task-based dances of Yvonne Rainer and one-to-one encounters of Adrian Howells, Schmidt articulates theatre as a space where conditions of contemporary work are questioned and ‘worked through’ (167). Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink (100-14) establishes the discipline of scenography (silently different to the Anglo-American stage-design), disassembles the practice-theory binary in favour of an intertwined relationship between the two, and expands the notion of scenography to a symbolic link between the spaces outside and inside the theatre. While Groot Nibbelink’s article can function as a crash-course for those new to the discipline, contributions such as the one by Bojana Cvejić, on social choreography, (270-83) may require a more experienced or theoretically-confident reader; this illustrates the collection’s wide understanding of both students and classrooms.

The range of topics considered in the volume invites another question, of whether case studies match the topical array in their diversity. The volume predominately discusses European and North American work, but it is not entirely limited to one region or tradition and is invested in showcasing different ways to make, think and reconsider theatre and performance in the context of different political, social, and economic circumstances. Latin American company Colectiva Siluetas, and their performance *Afuera: lesbianas en escena* (*Outside: Lesbians on Stage*) become Sruti Bala’s case study for how theatre impacts audiences in tangible, rather than funder-friendly terms (186-99). Carl Lavery evokes Mike Brookes and Rosa Casado’s project *Some Things Happen All At Once* to suggest an ‘ethics that emerge from audiences’ confrontation with the materiality of stage pictures’ (266) in contrast to the less subtle (and perhaps more frequent) spelling-out of eco-ethical ideas. The last section includes articles on disrupting institutions which appropriate radical performance (Johnson, 243-56) and recognising theatricality as an enabler of law (Nield, 284-95). Johnson explores Christopher D’Arcangelo’s ‘unauthorised works’, which in the 1970s disrupted major museums, and makes them a mediator for a re-examination of institutional frameworks performance adapts to today. Locating instruments of theatricality in the racist performance of violence against

Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panthers, gagged and chained in a courtroom, Nield reminds that performance is always used politically – just not always by those who make it. A volume which begins by asking why ‘drama’ should be studied, therefore finishes by suggesting that studying, making, and teaching drama, theatre, and performance comes with a set of specific societal responsibilities as well.

Renouncing the idea of collating a comprehensive survey of current scholarship, the editors of this volume send a different kind of invitation to their contributors and readers: to begin from the idea that thinking (through) theatre means thinking outside the black box, whether understood literally or as a symbol of the normative. This makes *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance* a good classroom companion for students in higher education and their pedagogues, but also a considerate guide for those making, writing, or otherwise engaging with performance.

***Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling* by Alke Gröppel-Wegener and Jenny Kidd**

London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 136 (hardcopy)

By Meg Cunningham

In an entertainment culture that is saturated with the buzzword ‘immersive’, Alke Gröppel-Wegener and Jenny Kidd’s short book *Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling* stands as a contemporaneous critical engagement with an ever-widening field. The book is distinctively oriented ‘against a backdrop of increased (uncritical) use of the term ‘immersion’ within a range of contexts, and a broader narrative turn within culture and across society’ (106). Set in an intersection of many genres, this book lays out a critical framework that both academic and industry critics can use to systematically investigate immersive storytelling experiences, not just by engaging the audience experience but by examining the production itself as well as intention within the

creation process. Therefore, Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd expand their critical analysis beyond the well trod paths of audience reception studies and neoliberal critique.

Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd draw examples from international productions and 'reference scholarship from disciplines as diverse as media, games, theatre, theme park design, human computer interaction, and museum studies to make sense of the quality of immersion' (18). They engage with the term 'immersion' and its various uses in these different industry and scholarly fields including transmedia studies, adaption studies, the experience economy, Virtual Reality (VR), and experiential marketing. They determine that there is not yet a single critical framework useful for critics to address the complexity of immersive storytelling experiences that can be applied to all of the mentioned genres of study. Ultimately, they propose a multi-layered, flexible, critical framework that addresses the creation, implementation and experience of story within an immersive event.

Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd's critical investigation with immersive storytelling 'explores how story emerges at the interstices of the creative process, the creation itself, and the experience of the participants' (17). In order to critically examine the emergence of story in these theatrical experiences, the multi-layered critical framework they propose can expand or contract based upon the format of the experience; this critical framework is able to embrace the many genres within this field. Their framework sits upon several interwoven 'orientations' that critically interrogate immersion: (1) the role of the participant; (2) the development process of story-telling and -making; (3) the creation of story within space and through sensation; and (4) the properties of story that are revealed from the previous three categories. As one of the greatest strengths of the book, Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd illustrate the relationship between these four orientations in a clear and concise Venn Diagram (found on page 28); it includes a fuzzy edged circle of 'immersion' that encompasses the story orientation and overlaps the outer circles of participant, process, and creation orientations; this diagram further reveals the complex relationships

between story, creation, experiencer and genre. Throughout the book, they ‘introduce a mechanism for *critically* engaging with how stories are not just told, but *made* through experience’ (104, emphasis in original); in this emphasis, Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd contribute a new form of critical engagement into the field, no longer only focusing on the audience experience but the creation and creation process.

After utilising their framework to analyse the vast *Harry Potter* universe and a smaller case study, an immersive heritage experience at St Fagans National Museum of History in Wales, Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd direct the chapter just before the conclusion, ‘Against Immersion?’, outward toward the current climate surrounding scholarship of immersion to address some of the reoccurring criticism against the term ‘immersive’ and the privileging of ‘immersive experience’ as cultural capital. They highlight a variety of critical threads (societal and scholarly) against consumerist, manipulative and escapist uses of ‘immersion.’ Within this chapter, they remind the reader ‘that it is criticality itself that we wish to promote as a practice of reflexivity in and around immersive encounters’ (85), so each researcher should draw up their own distinctions around the complexity of immersive storytelling experience and not solely focus on any one (negative) aspect of it. Although they don’t specifically refute the ‘charges’ against immersion—for example, ‘immersion has been co-opted by the mainstream’ (90) or ‘immersion is addictive’ (94)—they do echo Lukas’ question (2016): ‘Why assume immersion is inherently negative?’ (100) for critics to consider. For the critic, they embrace Lonsway’s notion of ‘complicated agency’ (2016) that allows for both ‘empowering and disempowering, supportive and challenging of free will, educational and consumerist’ (100) critical engagement with an immersive encounter. Throughout the book, by engaging with the multi-faceted nature of immersive storytelling experiences, Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd provide tools within which critics can examine and engage with the complex field.

This is not a book for the making or practicing of immersive storytelling experiences; rather, it specifically aims to inform those who engage critically and analytically with this type of work. The final chapter

emphasises the book's short and quick capture of the current status of the field. It is one of the first books that attempts to encompass the diversity of genres that fall under the description of 'immersive storytelling'; and although this is a vast territory to cover, by primarily applying their critical framework to the wide world of *Harry Potter* (from novels and films to theme parks and exhibitions), Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd are able to touch upon the smorgasbord of genres.

Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling is a wonderfully straight-forward, streamlined read. For those familiar with the scholarly work around immersion and participatory theatre, this book will read as a contemporaneous survey; for those engaging with this field for the first time, this book will serve as a comprehensive introduction to the complexity necessary for critical engagement. With more theatre and performance work falling under their category of 'immersive storytelling', whether as self-defined or not, Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd's timely framework provides a foundation for those who critically engage with it.