Arnold Aronson

Their Exits and Their Entrances: Getting a Handle on Doors

Aeschylus, father of Greek tragedy, was also the first to realize the potential of drama taking place 'inside' and 'outside' – a change from his earlier plays which is quite clear from the *Oresteia* onwards; and although the Elizabethan theatre was unconcerned with the literal representation of place, exits and entrances were no less crucial to its dramaturgy. Along with the proscenium arch came the stage doors actors fought hard to preserve until the nineteenth century, when first the box set and then the dominance of naturalism required doors to be literalized – as essential for slamming in Ibsen as for the complex avoidance strategies of a Feydeau farce. In the following article, Arnold Aronson discusses the role of the door, actual, assumed, and iconic, in world theatre – and takes a lateral look at its significance in the TV sitcom. The author is Professor of Theatre at Columbia University in New York, and author of *American Avant-Garde Theatre: a History* (Routledge, 2000), *American Set Design* (TCG, 1985), and *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* (UMI Research Press, 1981). Arnold Aronson served as President of the International Jury for the Prague Quadrennial in 1991 and 1999, and will be Commissioner General of the 2007 Quadrennial. A version of this essay was presented at Brown University at the conference held in 2003 in honour of Don B. Wilmeth.

ONE OF THE most iconic images of American popular culture of the 1990s came, of course, from television: Jerry Seinfeld's apartment door bursting open, with Kramer grasping the doorknob and sliding into the room as if the door were dragging him by its own sheer will. A manic force was thrust, as if from some other cosmic sphere, into the relatively calm, if absurd, world of Jerry Seinfeld. This is a comic rhythm we know well from more than half a century of television sitcoms: Ed Norton, only slightly less antic than Kramer, invading the phlegmatic arena of Ralph Kramden in the 1950s *The Honeymooners*, or the deceptively benign Ethel Mertz (a sly reference to Kurt Schwitters's branch of Dada perhaps?) apprehensively opening the door to Lucy's frenzied domain from *I Love Lucy* of the same era.

In the world of sitcoms, but equally true in drama since ancient times, the door is a barrier: a bulwark against the chaos that lurks just beyond. But it is an easily transgressed border, and the forces of disorder slip in with ease to disrupt the illusory status quo. At the end of each episode, harmony and balance are temporarily and tentatively restored; the door is closed again until next week and the homes and lives of the characters are left in fragile limbo.

Our stages, our movies, our television shows, depict rooms with doors; characters come and go, opening and closing doors, and yet we rarely notice unless the action is intended to draw attention to itself: a character makes a broad comic entrance; someone hides behind a door; a squeaking door induces terror. What is theatre, after all, if not a series of exits and entrances? The word 'enter' may be the commonest word in a *commedia dell'arte* scenario – for the plays were essentially a series of comings and goings, making the text a catalogue of doors, as it were. The word 'exeunt' marks the rhythm of Shakespeare, and when Antigonus 'exits pursued by a bear' he does so, even on the Shakespearean stage, through a door. The door marks a beginning and an end; it punctuates comings and goings.

Similarly, the fundamental language of computers is a binary one consisting of zeros and ones: a digital doorway is open or closed.

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X04000223

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A *commedia* scenario, or a television sitcom scenario, is also a binary system – the doorway opens and information flows in; it closes and the information flow ceases. A classic example of this is the so-called 'stateroom scene' from the Marx Brothers' film *A Night at the Opera*, in which Groucho discovers that his cabin is barely larger than a closet. Moreover, he discovers three stowaways in his steamer trunk: Chico, Harpo, and Allan Jones, who plays the romantic lead in the film. Over the next few minutes, cleaning personnel, waiters with trays of food, a manicurist, a plumber, and others enter the cabin. The door opens repeatedly and each time more chaos invades the cramped space. Following our metaphor, there is ultimately an information overload and the system crashes: the door to the cabin breaks open and everyone inside spills out into the hall.

The door sets up a rhythm – it is a visual equivalent to a metronome – that not only regularizes the action but sets up expectations. Once we understand the structure we eagerly await the next opening of the door and the next flow of information. But just as important, the door establishes a boundary: a demarcation between the cramped and confined space of the cabin and the much larger world of the ship. It also marks the bounds between order and chaos, between a world of rules and a world of alogical action. To go through the door is to pass from one state of being, or one world, to another.

Doors of Perception

In the following I would like to consider three aspects of the door. First, what the introduction of the door on the stage did to create tragedy. Second, why, in the special universe of sitcoms, are the doors to New York apartments always unlocked? And finally, are the doors we see on television the same as those we have encountered onstage for the past two and a half millennia?

We do not think of the door as an invention, yet I would suggest that it is the most profound technological and scenographic development in the history of theatre. It is such an obvious device that it is hard to conceive theatre without it. Yet when Greek tragedy emerged at the end of the sixth century BC, there were no doors on the stage. Of course there were doors in ancient Athens, but in a society that conducted much of its business, both commercial and political, in the open air, the door did not loom so large. And strange as it may seem, it was decades before someone thought of putting a door on the stage. Pre-door tragedy was a very different kind of drama from that which was to follow in the post-door era. There were practical implications in the introduction of doors, changes to the structure and rhythm of the drama; but there were also profound implications on a metaphoric, symbolic, and philosophical level as a result of this seemingly simple and innocuous development.

The introduction of the door delineated two separate spaces: the world seen and the world unseen; the known and the unknown; the tangible and the implied. In the words of Jim Morrison of the 1960s rock group The Doors, 'There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors' (which may have been a reference to Aldous Huxley's famous book on hallucinatory drugs, *The Doors of Perception*, whose title, in turn, was borrowed from William Blake). Carl Jung described the dream as 'the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul, which opens into the primeval cosmic night that was soul long before there was a conscious ego'.[1]

The theatre functions as a kind of collective dream for its society. It is a door into the soul of humankind. On some level, I believe, doors on the stage, even in seemingly benign farces, echo this opening onto the inner world of the soul. Every time a door opens on the stage, a cosmos of infinite possibility is momentarily made manifest; every time a door closes certain possibilities are extinguished and we experience a form of death. The creation of a boundary on the stage, ironically, made the possibilities for what the dramatist could achieve in the theatre virtually boundless.

Theatre is, in large part, about presence and absence. Perhaps one of the most elemental forms of theatre is the game of peek-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a-boo that we play with babies. They can watch with glee for hours on end as we hide and reveal our faces, while they swing back and forth on an emotional pendulum between the terror of loss and giggles of surprised delight and relief. We do this as adults, only we call it theatre. The curtain hides a world and we are curious, anticipatory; the curtain opens and we often applaud and even gasp with delight. But even more powerful than the curtain – which is becoming almost an anachronism in the contemporary theatre – is the door. Behind closed doors lie the possibility of pleasure as well as the terror of the unknown; open doors symbolize both promise and loss. W. H. Auden seemed to understand this quality of doors in his poem, 'The Door', from *The Quest*.

> We pile our all against it when afraid,
> And beat upon its panels when we die:
> By happening to be open once, it made
> Enormous Alice see a wonderland
> That waited for her in the sunshine, and,
> Simply by being tiny, made her cry.

There is an old theatre adage, often applied to Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, that if a gun appears in the first act it must go off by the last. Likewise, I would suggest, if a door is closed in the first act, it must be opened by the last or vice versa. August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* is largely structured around a locked door, and modern drama is often said to begin with Nora's slamming of the door at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House.* Although that particular door is one we never see, her passage through it marks a profound transformation for the character, for the drama, and for society. Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* essentially begins with Madame Ranyevskaya and her entourage returning home, entering the house through a door. And the play ends as the characters leave, closing the door behind them, leaving the butler, Firs, locked alone onstage to die.

We actually know, more or less, when a door was first used on the Greek stage. It was around 460 BC. We know this because Aeschylus' trilogy, *The Oresteia*, dates from 458 and is so radically different from what came before it that it is clear that something must have occurred to modify the tragic form. That monumental occurrence was the door. None of the extant plays prior to the *Oresteia* – *The Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes*, *The Suppliants*, *Prometheus Bound* – requires a door or any sort of scenic structure. *Prometheus Bound*, for instance, takes place on a rocky mountaintop, *The Suppliants* in an open field. All available evidence suggests that most of the pre-Oresteian drama was 'doorless'.

Before the 'Oresteia'

Imagine, if you will, the 'pre-door' Theatre of Dionysus in the early part of the fifth century BC, newly constructed on the hillside of the Acropolis. The *theatron* consists of wooden benches embedded in the rocky slope beneath the Parthenon, and they overlook a terraced flat area, the *orchestra*, where the actors and chorus will perform. There is no structure on this flat stage other than, perhaps, an altar. A temple to Dionysus lies behind the orchestra, and a vista of the open countryside is visible beyond. Unlike our modern experience of theatre, in which we sit enclosed in darkness peering into an artificially illuminated box, the ancient Greeks sat in the bright Mediterranean morning sun in springtime, watching mythological stories being re-enacted against the glorious background of the landscape that was for them the centre of the universe.

The Persians, for example, begins, as most Greek tragedies do, with the entrance of the Chorus. How do they enter? There are no wings, no doors, no curtains. We see them coming up a long path from behind the *orchestra*. This takes some time and we can observe them coming into view, as if over a horizon, perhaps beginning their song as they approach the stage – for anapests are a marching rhythm. They finally arrive on the stage and sing and dance. Towards the end of their first choral ode we see another actor coming up the pathway behind the orchestra. In case we don't see him, or in case we don't know who it is, the Chorus tells us: 'But lo! she comes, / A light whose splendour equals eyes of gods, / The mother of our king, I kneel'.[2] And they go on for seven more lines.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While the Queen is certainly deserving of a lavish introduction, the length of the choral speech is determined by the distance the actor must traverse. The Chorus are, in essence, vamping, covering from the moment the audience first sees the actor until he arrives on the stage. As the various characters proceed up these paths, we might experience feelings of anticipation, expectation, doom, horror, or optimism. What we cannot experience, however, is *surprise*. Entrances in the early Greek theatre were processional – they unfolded through time. And exits took on the qualities of a final musical chord fading off into inaudibility.

But the introduction of a scenic structure onto the stage, and with it the door, fundamentally altered the rhythm of the tragedy. Now characters could appear suddenly and disappear quickly. A processional rhythm was replaced with what we might now call a cinematic rhythm by the simple introduction of the door. Instead of a continuous action happening in essentially real time, the door – and the illusion it created – allowed an intercutting of scenes that had the effect of telescoping time and space. Dramatists were no longer confined, if indeed they had ever been, to real time onstage.

A Door to Imaginary Worlds

The *Oresteia* is the first extant play that requires a door. There are specific references to a palace, there are entrances and exits in and out of the palace, there are sounds from 'inside', and references to action within. *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* change locales during the course of the action almost with abandon: *Choephori* begins at the tomb of Agamemnon, shifts to the exterior of the palace of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, then to the interior, and finally to the exterior again; *Eumenides* begins outside the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, moves to the interior of the Temple, then to the Temple of Athena in Athens, and concludes at the court of Areopagos.

It is almost as if Aeschylus, having been given a new toy, cannot play with it enough. The door creates the possibility of multiple locales; but more important, it actually creates drama. The audience learns of the murder of Agamemnon and Cassandra aurally – from Agamemnon's anguished cries from behind the door. A twelve-line choral ode follows, and then a remarkable event occurs. The door opens revealing a tableau of Agamemnon dead in his bath, wrapped in a purple robe, Cassandra dead on top of him, with Clytemnestra standing triumphantly over them.

This scene is possible only because of the door. Without a door the cries of murder would have to come from somewhere down the hillside with the bodies carried up the long pathway to reveal their deaths; or they would have to be killed in plain sight. While there was no explicit prohibition against violence on the stage in ancient Greece, violence was rare for purely practical reasons: the Greek dramatists understood that the physical act of murder could not be realistically recreated on the stage; and even if it could, it is not as satisfying as giving rein to unfettered imagination. Behind a door we can envisage anything. The screams conjure up far greater horror than any murder that could reasonably be recreated on the stage.

The door hides; the door reveals. And it also hides again. On the vast open stage of pre-Oresteian drama, how were dead bodies disposed of? Either they had to be carried off – an awkward solution – or they unceremoniously became actors again, got up, and walked off the stage. But once the door was introduced, it could close after the scene of revelation and the bodies were simply gone with only the audience's memory of the carnage remaining.

That simple facade and doorway transformed the way in which audiences perceived the theatre. The space behind the facade, of course, had not changed – it was the same Athenian countryside the audience had seen the previous year when they came to the festival when there was no facade. But now illusion came into play. If the door in *Agamemnon* represented the Palace at Argos, then anyone emerging through the door was understood as coming from the palace. Thus, the audience imagined the various rooms of the palace, even though they remained un-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seen. That also meant that the world beyond was not Athens but Argos.

This sense of imaginary worlds becomes even richer in Shakespeare's day. When Hamlet enters through the door for the first time, he is in the palace at Elsinore. More important, we accept that he has just arrived from the university, and we believe that if we could somehow go through that same door, there would be a waiting carriage and a road that would take us back to Wittenberg. That is what a door can achieve.

The Door as a Metaphor

When we go to the theatre, regardless of genre, we are watching a transformation. An ordinary human being is transformed into Medea or Hamlet, or the ghost of a warrior, or a dancing cat. But equally important, an essentially ordinary space is transformed. The simple stage can become the 'vasty fields of France', the front of a palace in Thebes, or a suburban living room. The stage, regardless of its shape or configuration, is a magic circle transforming everything within it. But entering into a magic circle is not a simple matter. In Goethe's *Faust*, Mephistopheles must be invited within Faustus's room:

FAUST: A knock? Come in! Again my quiet broken.
MEPHISTOPHELES: 'Tis I!
FAUST: Come in!
MEPHISTOPHELES: Thrice must the words be spoken.
FAUST: Come in, then![3] (IV, 1–5)

The very process of entering transforms Mephistopheles, who in this case takes on human form. This is a metaphor for the theatre. We invite actors into our rooms, as it were. The actors enter the stage through a door and they are transformed. On the classical French stage the start of the play was preceded by three loud knocks on the stage floor. Ostensibly this was a signal to the audience, but it could also be understood as a ritualistic summoning of spirits from the nether regions – spirits who would then enter through the door as the curtain rose, magically transformed into actors.

And herein lies the answer to the question of the 'open-door policy' of television sitcoms. Kramer and his cohorts are descendants of *commedia dell'arte* masks. And these masks, in turn, are most likely descendants of medieval devil clowns. (Harlequin's patchwork costume probably evolved from the patched linings of jackets worn inside out by the lords of misrule.) And these devil clowns can in turn trace their ancestry to the imps and tricksters of folk performance and ritual.

In other words, Ed Norton, Fred and Ethel, Eddie Haskell, and a host of other similar characters are devils. They are thus excluded from the domestic sphere under normal circumstances and can only enter by ritual invitation. But like the open window through which Dracula enters, the unlocked door provides a sort of permanent passport that eliminates the need to knock. These devils may come and go at will.

But where are they entering *from*? In reality, it is from backstage, a very unglamorous and even chaotic world with virtually no relation to the illusion the audience sees onstage. Yet the powerful symbolism of the stage implies a world beyond – unseen, yet present. When we see an actor entering through a door, we understand that he or she is coming from, say, outside the house to the inside, or from one room to another, or, to quote the traditional stage direction, from 'another part of the forest'. Now, in the real world we do not get from one part of the forest to another by going through doors, but doors on the stage do not have to be literal. They become signs of passage, and as such take on a life and function of their own, different, to a degree, from the way they function in real life.

In our homes, doors separate one room from another, or the inside from the outside; in the theatre they represent the passage between the onstage world and the off. On Shakespeare's stage, for example, there were, in all likelihood, one or two doors in the upstage wall. Almost all entrances and exits were made through these doors. Sometimes this would be logical in terms of reference to the real world: when Hamlet enters Gertrude's chamber, it makes perfect sense to come through a door; when Falstaff enters

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mistress Quickly's tavern, of course he enters through a door. But look at Act IV, Scene iv, of *King Lear*, for example: 'The French camp; enter, with drum and colours, Cordelia, Doctor and Soldiers'; or the very opening of *Macbeth*: 'Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches.' They entered through a door.

The door is a theatrical convention. In Restoration England the theatres were built with a pair of doors on either side of the forestage through which actors entered and exited; and so making an entrance or exit became the epitome of an actor's vocabulary. Throughout the eighteenth century, managers, in order to accommodate more patrons (and make more money), kept reducing the depth of the forestage, first eliminating one set of doors and finally both sets. The actors protested vehemently; they wanted their doors. At Covent Garden in 1810 the management relented briefly and had the doors restored, but they were soon taken away again. The theatre went from the theatrical to the realistic. The only doors to be found now were within the scenery, which more often than not depicted drawing rooms. If the door is part of the architecture of the stage we are in a theatrical environment; if it is part of the scenery it is illusionistic.

Dialectics of Outside and Inside

The door is a threshold, it is a liminal space that marks a boundary between two spaces yet belongs to neither. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, discusses the 'dialectics of outside and inside'. 'The door', he explains, 'is an entire cosmos of the half-open. In fact it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings.'[4]

Thresholds carry magical significance. As children, and perhaps secretly as adults, we exert great effort not to step on the door sill because of the ancient superstitious belief which somehow lives on in us that suggests a great misfortune will follow. Since ancient Egyptian times, many cultures have maintained the practice of carrying the new bride across the threshold. This was done in part to protect the bride from the spirits guarding the house, since she was a stranger coming into her husband's domain.

Many cultures had threshold gods that protected one's comings and goings; in some cultures amulets or good-luck charms are buried beneath the door sill; and many Jews today still have *mezuzahs* on door jambs to remind them of the presence of God who, in turn, will protect the house and those who enter, recalling Psalm 121, 8: 'The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.' Doors, of course, are symbols of salvation. In the New Testament, in the Gospel of St John, Jesus says, 'I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved.'

The passage between two spaces – two worlds – that the door signifies is a dangerous place. That is why, for instance, evil spirits are often depicted as living beneath bridges in fairy tales. The Bible is replete with instances of sinners or non-believers who die as they cross a threshold; of evil waiting outside doors; of rites of purification at doorways; of guardians or keepers of the threshold; and so on. The doorway is often a place of sacrifice, or a place to deposit items for safe-keeping.

Almost all cultures believe in a heaven, other world, underworld, or some such abode for spirits and the deceased. In almost all cases, the passageway between the world of the living and the dead is marked by a door or gate. The Egyptian other world had twelve doors; Valhalla had 540; the Duchess of Malfi in John Webster's play says, 'I know death hath ten thousand several doors / For men to take their exits' [IV, ii]. Heaven, Hell, and Eden all have doors or gates. Book IX of Dante's *Purgatorio* is devoted to the Gate of Purgatory, in which the Angel of the Lord sits upon the sill of adamantine stone and presents the traveller with two keys that would allow him to pass through.

Thus, entering onto the stage is not merely a passage but a profound – can we say life-threatening? – event. While western theatre has lost the ritual aspects of this entrance and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

much of the terror (although the elevated heart-rate of many performers just prior to their entrances and the phenomenon of stage fright may belie this ancient sense of mortality), the idea of onstage and offstage is so powerful an image that it has suffused the language. None the less, it is preserved in various classical Asian forms, notably in the Noh theatre of Japan, in which the story often involves gods and ghosts and recollected events. Here characters do not enter into an illusionistic space. Rather, they enter through a curtained door, proceed down an oblique runway, the *hashigakari*, and past three symbolic trees representing Heaven, Earth, and Man, before entering onto the rectangular stage where the story will be enacted. The entrance through the curtain transforms an actor into a character who is filled with a spirit. And the character remains until the actor once again passes through the door at the end of the play. There is almost a literal passage from one world to another.

The Japanese Kabuki theatre also uses something similar. But here the lavishly costumed lead actor makes a grand entrance through a door in the wall of the auditorium and then walks down a runway, the *hanamichi*, through the audience, stopping part way down for applause and, in earlier times, to accept gifts. Here, the entrance through the door signals the very theatricality of the presentation. Coming through the door is a way of saying, 'Look at me.'

Tragic and Comic Rhythms

The door can establish either a comic rhythm or a tragic one. French critic and sociologist Roland Barthes discussed the tragic implication of doors in his essay on the plays of Racine. Noting that when characters leave the stage in a tragedy they are often going to their death, Barthes described the door between the onstage and offstage space as 'a tragic object which menacingly expresses both contiguity and exchange, the tangency of hunter and prey'.[5] It is not just in Racine that exiting through the door is to confront death: Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus as already mentioned, Oedipus's wife and mother Jocasta, Baron Tuzenbakh in *Three Sisters*, Hedda Gabler – all exit through a door to their deaths. In Shakespeare, on the other hand, death, in the form of opposing characters, often *enters* through the door, leaving havoc on the stage, though we should remember that poor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit, to die in England.

In farce, doors are not gateways for death but for chaos. Here is a typical description from Georges Feydeau's *All My Husbands*:

> *The living room of Barrilon's house. There are French doors leading to the garden and an archway leading to the front door. There are several doors leading to various bedrooms, and to the rest of the house.*[6]

Behind these doors lovers, spouses, mistresses, bumbling crooks, and others will hide. Entrances and exits are timed with exquisite precision. We laugh because *we* know who has just exited or who is hiding in a closet, but a duped spouse does not. Honour, dignity, marriages are saved, or not, by the timely click of a door latch.

Perhaps no one was more adept at the ingenious use of a door than the great silent-film clown Buster Keaton. In many of his movies, rather as in the farces of Feydeau, everything depended upon the timely use of a door. For *The High Sign* (1921), for example, Keaton devised a house of doors (including ingenious trapdoors), and the climax is a madcap attempt by Keaton, the woman he loves, and her father, to stay out of the clutches of a gang of murderers who chase them through the house. The doors in this version of Keaton's world protect the good and destroy the evil. The threshold gods have been propitiated and work their magic well, if comically. Once again we are in a binary world: information is admitted through a passage or it is not.

Indoors and Outdoors in Chekhov

But despite the centrality of doors in early twentieth-century movie farces, and, I might add, despite the necessity of doorways and gatekeepers on the modern-day internet, the door is increasingly rare on the living stage. Something shifted in the twentieth century.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Symbolist artists and poets of the late nineteenth century are partly responsible, and Freud definitely is. Both began to question the absolute authority of external reality. There are perceived truths and inner truths that cannot be contained by walls and cannot be reached through doors. The dichotomy of inside and outside began to disintegrate as the two worlds melded together. I think another culprit is, in some way, Chekhov. Yes, he gave us houses with rooms and doors, but he also tried to break down the distinction between spaces, between the visible and the invisible. Strindberg may have given us locked doors, and Ibsen slammed ones, but Chekhov's stage directions are always telling us about the outside, even when we are inside.

The opening stage direction of *The Cherry Orchard* marks a transition: 'A room that still goes by the name of the nursery. One of the doors leads to Anya's room.' But then he seems to lose interest in rooms. The directions continue, 'It is dawn and the sun will soon come up. It is May. The cherry trees are in flower, but in the orchard it is cold.'[7] Here, in 1904, in a few simple sentences, Chekhov has dissolved the separation of inside and outside. Once this happens, what use is a door? Andrei Serban directed a landmark production of *The Cherry Orchard* at Lincoln Center in 1977, designed by Santo Loquasto. There were no walls, and thus no doors – just furniture on a vast stage with ethereal trees in the background.

Early in the twentieth century European designers including Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig radically altered the look of the stage, using simple suggestive settings of platforms, steps, curtains, and fragmentary semi-abstract pieces instead of the detailed settings of the nineteenth century. Now the stage was not necessarily another place in the illusionistic sense. It was a stage. But a stage without doors.

In 1904, the same year that *The Cherry Orchard* was produced, Craig went to Berlin to design a production for Dr Otto Brahm, Germany's leading director at the time. The production was the English Restoration play *Venice Preserved* by Thomas Otway. Central to the action is a door; but Craig designed a set without a door. The collaboration of director and designer fell apart, but the death knell for the door was clearly at hand. Just as the actors at the start of the nineteenth century were bereft without doors – they did not know how to enter or leave the stage – drama as a whole lost a certain kind of theatricality. In what is arguably the most famous play of the twentieth century, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps wait by the side of a road near a tree. For ambiguous reasons they cannot leave: they are destined to wait. Several times throughout the play Gogo and Didi repeat the exchange: 'Let's go.' / 'We can't.' / 'Why not?' / We're waiting for Godot.' The final two lines of the play and the final stage direction are:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Much has been written about the metaphorical and philosophical reasons for their stasis, their inability to leave. But there is a very practical explanation as well: they cannot leave because there is no door! Of course, Beckett the ironist followed *Godot* with *Endgame* in which there *was* a room with a door; and still the characters remained trapped.

Our theatre has become, in some ways, like modern pop music that does not know how to end – it just repeats over and over as it fades out. Without doors, there can be no grand exit and thus there is no finality. The societies that produced theatres with doors as major elements tended to be strong, confident societies. We are living in a time of uncertainty, and that produces a theatre without doors.

The Unstable Image

But comedy cannot exist without doors. (Aristophanes, remember, emerged after the introduction of the door.) Both farce and domestic comedy rely upon doors for their comic rhythms. This leads to the final question: are the mediated doors of television sitcoms – the ones visible on a screen – and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the three-dimensional doors of live theatre the same?

Television exists in a different relationship to the spectator than does the stage. Not only do the spectators and performers in live theatre share a tangible space, but the objects in that space are, relatively speaking, fixed. Our spatio-temporal relationships to anything from a prop to a wall is kinaesthetically real, based upon our knowledge of the world. Even if we are confronted with moveable scenery, the mechanism is understood, at least in principle. And we can observe the spatiality of the stage transforming so that our relationship to any object (and its illusionistic implications) remains visible. Whether we are dealing with forced perspective, a box set, the poetic essentialism of the new stagecraft, or the visual pastiche of postmodern scenography, we are still confronting tangible, knowable space in the real world and it will obey the natural laws of optics, time, and space. It is, if you will, a Newtonian stage.

On an obvious level, the physical relation to the TV is different. The image is isolated in a box within a room within a house where it becomes one object among many. (This is even more true of televisions found in bars, waiting rooms, airports, etc.) Even with plasma screens and home entertainment centres, the human still tends to be larger than the image. The scale of the spectator and the scale of the viewed image is seldom unified. At the very least, the image becomes isolated. Like a painting hung on a gallery wall, it has no imagistic, architectural, or necessary relation to its environment.

But in most gallery settings the paintings are usually the visual focal points. Moreover, they are foregrounded against the wall. Television, because of its technology and its physical relation to the spectator's environment, tends to eliminate what Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* described as 'aura'. Distance is eradicated. If Stanislavsky wanted the spectators at *Three Sisters* to feel as if they were guests at the Prozorov household, TV is commonly described as bringing its characters into the viewer's home. We do not project ourselves into the apartments of our favourite sitcom characters; rather, we sense them as somehow part of our living space. Television is not something contemplated at a distance; distance – crucial for aura – is generally lacking. (The stage, it may be argued, also creates an isolated image separate from the spectator, but the unity of shared experiential space and the implications of live presence contribute to a kind of transparency and the creation of an aura.)

Distance on television is dissolved in another crucial way – through the movement of the camera or the constant shifting of perspective. (*The Honeymooners* was a transitional show, as it were, and is in many ways closer to theatre than subsequent TV programmes. It is viewed from the single perspective of one camera, and any change in point of view is limited to panning and close-ups. *I Love Lucy*'s great innovation was the three-camera setup which allowed for multiple – that is, shifting – points of view.) The instability of the image not only eliminates aura, but in the case of the door reduces its historical, symbolic, and emblematic values and associations. The door's size, relative to the viewer, is subject to change. Moreover, the threshold aspect of the door is easily violated because the camera is capable of moving through it. We can peer through keyholes, move through open doors, glide into adjoining halls and rooms.

'Big Optics' and 'Small Optics'

It is arguable that Aeschylus had already done this. When the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra are revealed, are we inside the palace or outside? Aeschylus used the door for revelation, but also dissolved the Bachelard-like dichotomy of inside and outside. The door, at that moment, became a door *on a stage*, not a door in a palace. The system of references had changed, but not the relationship of the physical setting to the audience, nor the information value of the door. The door of Seinfeld's apartment may be a threshold for Kramer to violate, but it is not a real threshold for the spectator. We may easily pass through the door for a scene in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the hall, to move to another apartment, or to enter the larger city through which the characters move.

The new-media theorist Lev Manovich posits Paul Virilio as the Benjamin of the post-industrial age. Virilio creates two categories of 'Small Optics' and 'Big Optics', the former based on geometric perspective – that is, on human vision and world experience – and the latter based on real-time transmission of information at the speed of light. Big Optics, according to Virilio, is displacing Small Optics. The concepts of near and far, horizon, distance, and space – the geometry of human vision and art, to paraphrase Manovich – are dissolving, creating, as Manovich continues, a 'claustrophobic world without any depth or horizon'.[8]

This effect of digital technology has been described by the art historian Jonathan Crary as 'the process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates that which impedes circulation, and makes exchangeable what is singular'.[9] While Crary is focusing, of course, on the socio-economic factors, his notion of clearing away that which impedes circulation might be applied somewhat literally to the door. The door can be a useful impediment for comic purposes in the sitcom, but it can also impede the movement of the camera. But the audience of television or film expects – in a way it does not in the theatre – to be able to move through doors, windows, walls, and space in general. Television space knows no boundaries.

The door is necessary in television as an indexical sign; it tells us that we are in an environment analogous to the one in which we are sitting while watching. It is a convention – comic in sitcoms, melodramatic in cop shows – that establishes scenic and dramaturgical rhythms as it has since Aeschylus. But unlike the door of the theatre, which has seeming permanence, the door of the television is merely iconic and its solidity and Euclidean basis is ephemeral.

On the stage, a door is a sign of the liminal, the unknown, the potential, the terrifying, the endless. On the screen, a door is a sign of a door.

Notes and References

1. C. G. Jung, 'The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man,' *Psychological Reflections: a Jung Anthology*, ed. Jolande Jacobi (New York: Pantheon, 1953), p. 46.
2. Aeschylus, *The Persians*, trans. S. G. Benardete, in *Aeschylus II*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 151–3.
3. Translated by Bayard Taylor (1946).
4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1994), p. 222.
5. Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 5.
6. Georges Feydeau, *Five By Feydeau*, trans. J. Paul Marcoux (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 127.
7. Translated by Eugene K. Bristow (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).
8. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 172.
9. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, quoted in Manovich, p. 173.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000223 Published online by Cambridge University Press