THE LANGUAGE OF STAGE SPACE (I)

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ABSTRACT. As the visual aspect is essential to the configuration of a performance, this paper will give an account of the conditions and theatrical means used in representing on stage the spatial relations described in the dramatic text.

1.0. A very broad definition of context would be “the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation, etc.” Applied to theater and drama, this implies two things: on one hand, the circumstances surrounding the theatrical event, the performance of a play, and, on the other hand, the circumstances that surround the dramatic action of a play. As the visual aspect is essential to the configuration of performance, this paper will give an account of the conditions and theatrical means used in representing on stage the spatial relations described in the dramatic text.

According to Michael Issacharoff (1981), there are three main types of space in theater, architectural, scenographic, and dramatic, i.e. theater space (=the architectural design of theater buildings), stage space (=the stage and set design), and dramatic space (=space as used by an individual dramatist). The first two types concern spatial possibilities and are relevant to the theatrical (i.e. performance) aspect of the play, whereas the last corresponds to the dramatic aspect of a play. The theater building itself is important as it conditions the possibility of theatrical representation, while its architecture influences the meaning of any given performance.

Jon Whitman (1994) points to two extreme examples of theater spaces: the proscenium theater and the environmental theater. Whitman describes other modern arrangements of space for performance: apron stage, thrust stage, arena stage which bring the spectators in view of one another allowing for greater intimacy; surround stage which places the audience in the center of the space;

1 Cf. Webster’s Universal College Dictionary, 1977, New York: Gramercy Books
2 One of the specific features of live theater is that it takes place in three-dimensional space. Although the theater history reveals a constant shifting and evolution for theater space, there have always several basic (visual) elements which influenced the theater event, i.e. which constituted its context. These are space, setting, costumes, properties and lighting: “A performance is a visual art: viewing its components provides an aesthetic experience in and of itself. Mood, location, historical or geographic context, style, and emotion are communicated through the visual sign system of the theater” Whitman, (1994: 31)
3 The proscenium theater (i.e. the traditional one) is characterized by the fact that the audience is separated from the performer by the so-called proscenium arch, which allows for little intimacy but offers a deep and broad visual perspective. In an environmental theater, on the other hand, spectators are mixed in with the performers: they are within the scenographic environment, they share the same space
found space, i.e. any existing place that is taken over and used for a performance event without alteration, and converted spaces which are found spaces transformed by adding designated seating and/or architectural or scenic pieces that help locate the action performance.

It is very important that directors and stage designers make the right decision when they choose or create space arrangements for a particular play. The main issue here would be ‘whether the design serves the play’ (Kalb, 1989: 81). In order to do that, they have to examine the information regarding dramatic space both in terms of stage directions and as a result from the dramatis personae’s discourse. The two sources of creating and focusing dramatic space, i.e. meta-discourse and characters’ talk, as well as the type of dramatic space they generate are worth a deeper investigation.

1.1. Issacharoff (1981:214) defines dramatic space as ‘the study of space as a semiotic system in a given play’. There are two major forms of dramatic space: mimetic and diegetic. Mimetic space is that which is made visible to an audience and is represented on stage. Diegetic space, on the other hand, is described, i.e. referred to by the characters. In other words, the mimetic space is represented directly by the spatial arrangement itself, while the diegetic space is mediated by the discourse of the characters, and hence communicated by verbal language.  

Issacharoff (1981: 216) further distinguishes between two modes of discourse which refer to dramatic space but have different functions. These are auditory language (the spoken text or discourse of the characters) and non-auditory language (the stage directions or meta-discourse). The function of meta-discourse is to refer exclusively to what is visible (i.e. what the producer has intended to make visible to the audiences), whereas the function of discourse is to refer both to what is visible and to what is not, and thus, for example to aspects of space described but not represented on stage.

When the dramatic discourse refers to non-visible (diegetic) space, its function is to fill in such ‘missing’ aspects of space (it is similar to space in the narrative in the sense that it created); when, on the other hand, discourse is focused on mimetic space, it acquires an indexical function. In this process of reference between codes, language is the dominant code: language points to another sign system and in doing so it establishes its own semiotic pre-eminence. In other words, it is a case where the referent is both visible and explicitly referred to. Herein lies a feature, unusual in other art forms, and an element special to drama.

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4 Although Issacharoff does not mention it, the non-verbal language of the characters can also have an important function in ‘communicated’ diegetic space (e.g. gestures)  
5 Issacharoff overlooks the importance of non-verbal language which may be linked to either of these two modes of discourse: the body language of characters can refer to both mimetic and diegetic space.  
6 Issacharoff means by indexical “that form of reference that is in fact peculiar in theater, whereby discourse may refer to a scenographic code (décor, properties, or lighting, for example) or to a costume code (including hair-style, make-up, etc. (1981:216)
2.0. The theater of the absurd deserves some special attention with regards to ‘space’. The conception of these dramatists concerning space is common to the literature dealing with existentialist problems in general, i.e. the idea of space conceived as closure, which at the same time might have the function of protecting the characters from the outside world. This semantic interpretation of the contrast between interior and exterior space is given a central role in these works and they often make considerable play of archetypical notions of space such as *uterus, caves* and *labyrinths.*

The same semantic contrast between the interior and exterior places is also present in the Theater of the Absurd. The very titles of such plays as Pinter’s *The Room* or *No Man’s Land* reflect the central importance of this spatial opposition: ‘Two people in a room – I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: what is going to happen to these people in a room? Is someone to open the door and come in?’ (Pinter, 1981:10). They are all plays with a single locale, i.e. the entire dramatic action develops in one place: a country road with only one tree or almost empty interiors in Beckett’s plays, a room in Pinter’s drama, more or less cluttered rooms in Ionesco’s.

These spaces look quite familiar, but they are not. In Beckett’s plays, for example, the space off-stage (i.e. the world outside) is often left so vague and underdetermined that the locale presented on stage seems to have been sealed off and isolated from every kind of narrower or broader spatial context and the events therefore take on the features of the existential model. In Pinter’s plays, it is generally the interior or stage space that is interpreted in positive terms as a place of escape, while the off-stage area sends all sorts of vague and anonymous threats triggered by every knock at the door, telephone call and the appearance of each new figure. His early plays (*The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache*) have acquired the name of “comedies of menace” because of the terror which constantly threatens their interior world.

Ionesco structures his space as a set of contradictions between the unusual, fantastic and banal (Schechner, 1964:232). Thus, the corpse is growing in Amedee’s *apartment*, the pupil is murdered in the professor’s *study*, the Smiths and Martins explode in a middle-class English *sitting-room*, and Choubert is pursued and tortured in his own *living-room*.

Consequently, the use of space in these plays reflects either the sense of unreality (as in the plays of Ionesco and Pinter) or it is very abstract and stylized (the deliberate exposure of the artificiality of stage sets as in Beckett). There is only one tree

7 Thus, in Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the main character makes his permanent residence (and refuses to leave) his office on Wall Street. Later in the development of the short story, he changes this space with the Tombs, the New York City Jail, where he stares completely motionless at a wall. E.A. Poe sometimes chooses closed spaces (dark pits, tombs, prison cells), ‘enclosures within enclosures’ and some other times, open ones: streets, squares (*The Man of the Crowd*) which, nonetheless are connected in a labyrinthal structure. Kafka’s work is also obsessed with offices, rooms and other types of claustrophobic places (*The Bug, The Trial or The Castle*).
on the country road which serves as locale for *Waiting for Godot*; there are two small windows, two bins and a wheelchair in *Endgame*; a table with a tape recorder and a few tapes in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. As Manfred Pfister puts it, what is characteristic of a stylized conception of space is the fact that “the locale has a *reflective* rather than a deterministic function. […] space is used predominantly as a way of projecting certain levels of inner awareness and only provide a rather rudimentary image of real space (1988:266).

The space Beckett presents is intended (at one level) as the symbolic reflection of general definitions of the human condition: “It is exactly because the events are situated in a kind of abstract ‘nowhereness’ …that they are elevated to the status of a universally valid model of human existence” (Pfister, 1988:267). This leads to another question: How can these plays be discussed within their dramatic context, i.e. their fictional time and space?

### 3.0. Fictional vs. real.

Traditionally, the time and space represented in the performance are only fragments of a time-place continuum referred to in the dramatic text: A play is an abstract of a larger action – the events onstage are but portions of all events embracing the play, and the locales presented are but fragments of a broader panorama” (Beckerman, 1970:170). It is the audience’s job to work out this wider context from the goings-on in the performance as “conventionally, the stage depicts or otherwise suggests a domain which does not coincide with its actual physical limits, a mental construct on the part of the spectator from the visual clues that he receives (Elam, 1980:67). This is obvious adds Pattie (2000:384), because “in most pieces of theatre, the relation of space to time follows a standard pattern: the times-pace indicated in the play exceeds the time-space of performance, but the two are sequentially related. That is, the enacted events are themselves (abstracted) from a larger number of events, imagined as taking place offstage”.

The spatial and temporal hierarchy thus established will, if described in a manner that is internally consistent, allow the audience to accept the subjectivity of the characters presented; they exist in performance ‘time-space’ because they are firmly rooted in dramatic ‘times-pace’ – because they have a coherently and sequentially described existence outside the immediate confines of the performance. As critics have argued, it is precisely this conventional model that the ‘theatre of the absurd’ invokes and then frustrates: “The characters are simply present. All the characters exist in a dramatic time-space that is indistinguishable from the times-pace of performance. They cannot rely on a past history to confirm their existence, their own subjectivity; but they can define themselves, even if it is from moment to moment, in the actions and the words that they perform day after day and night after night”(Pattie, 2000:394).

Vladimir and Estragon do not know precisely what happened yesterday, but they do know their present existence is confirmed by their sticking together. Similarly Winnie in *Happy Days* seems to remember less and less from her past, but she confirms her own existence in the present time-space of the performance with every word she utters.
3.1. Dramatic space is equally neutral and indeterminate. Thus in *Waiting for Godot*, the “country road”, i.e. the space of the dramatic action, instead of fulfilling the usual function of linking places, comes from nowhere in particular and seems to lead nowhere, except maybe to an unspecified fair where Pozzo says he intends to sell Lucky; Hamm and Clov (*Endgame*) are extremely uncertain about the space outside the windows of their room; in Pinter’s *The Room*, Rose never leaves her room and is not well aware of what happens outside it. Similarly, Ionesco’s characters, Amedee and Madeleine (*Amedee*), never leave their apartment to eat; they haul up groceries in a basket suspended from the window in a rope.

According to Manfred Pfister, this tendency to preserve a locale and to equate the performance time with the fictional time-span of the play is characteristic to what he calls “closed structures of space and time” (1988:252). One of the purposes of the plays based on such self-contained and concentrated structures is to “achieve the greatest possible sense of immediacy in the dramatic presentation” (Pfister, 1988:252).

4.0 Case study: Beckett. Let us consider the following examples taken from *Endgame*, *Happy Days* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*:

Ex. 1

**Bare** interior.
Gray light.
Left and right back, **high up, two small windows, curtains drawn**.
Front right, a door. Hanging near the door, its **face to the wall**, a picture.
Front left, touching each other, **covered** with an old sheet, two ashbins.
**Centre**, in an armchair on castors, **covered** with an old sheet, HAMM.

(Beckett, 1986:92)

Ex. 2

HAMM: Take me for a little turn. [*CLOV goes behind the chair and pushes it forward*] Not too fast! [*CLOV pushes the chair*] **Right round the world!** [*CLOV pushes the chair*] **Hug the walls, then back to the centre again.** [*CLOV pushes the chair*] **I was right in the centre, wasn’t I?**
[... ] Back to my place! [*CLOV pushes the chair to the centre*] Is that my place?
CLOV: Yes, that’s your place.
HAMM: **Am I right in the centre?**
CLOV: I’ll measure it.
HAMM: More or less! More or less!
CLOV: [*moving chair slightly*] There!
HAMM: I’m more or less in the centre?

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*In Beckett’s later dramas the configuration of space undergoes further changes, i.e. it progresses to an even more radical stylization (Patti, 2000:398)*
CLOV: I’d say so.
Hamm: You’d say so! Put me right in the centre!
CLOV: I’ll go and get the tape!
Hamm: Roughly! Roughly! [CLOV moves chair slightly] Bang in the centre!
CLOV: There!
[Pause]
Hamm: I feel a little too far to the left [CLOV moves chair slightly]
Now I feel a little too far to the right [CLOV moves chair slightly]
I feel a little too far forward [CLOV moves chair slightly]
Don’t stay there [i.e. behind the chair], you give me the shivers.
[CLOV returns to his place beside the chair]

(Beckett, 1986:104)

Ex. 3

[…] CLOV goes and stands under window left. Stiff, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window left. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under the window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps [for example] towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain […]

CLOV: […] I’ll go to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me [Pause] Nice dimensions, nice proportions, I’ll lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle […]

(Beckett, 1986:92-3)

Ex. 4

A late evening in the future.
Krapp’s den
Front centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards audience. Sitting at the table, facing front, i.e. across from the drawers, a wearish old man: Krapp […]
On the table a tape recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes.
Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of the stage in darkness.

(Beckett, 1991:9)

Ex. 5

Tape: […] With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [Pause] In a way. [Pause] I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to …[hesitates]… me. [Pause] Krapp.
Ex. 6

**Expanse of scorched grass rising centre to low mound.** Gentle slopes down to front and either side of the stage. Back an abrupter fall to stage level. **Maximum of simplicity and symmetry.**

**Blazing light.**

[...]

**Embedded up to above her waist in exact centre of mound, WINNIE.**

[...]

To her right and rear, lying asleep on the ground, hidden by the mound, WILLIE.  
(Beckett, 1986:1)

Ex. 7

Winnie embedded up to neck, hat on head, eyes closed. Her head, which she can no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise, **faces front motionless** throughout the act.

Bag and parasol as before. Revolver conspicuously to her right on mound.

Long pause.

Bell rings loudly. She opens eyes at once. Bell stops. She gazes front. Long pause.  
(Beckett, 1986: 23)

4.1. **Positions and movement of characters.** As it has already been pointed out, the dramas of the absurd are plays with a simple locale. In this respect, Samuel Beckett distinguishes himself from the other playwrights of the same school by his constant use of very simple sets, spaces which are almost empty and whose arrangement of elements is of mathematical precision and symmetry. Nothing is redundant in the space his plays create, every single detail- element of the set, positioning or movement of characters, prop, etc. – has its own function. For instance, there are not many plays in the history of drama which illustrate better the sense of entrapment in a confined space as Beckett’s *Endgame* (ex.1): a “bare interior” with only two small windows (positioned high up), two ashbins covered by a cloth “containing” Hamm’s parents, Nell and Nagg, and an armchair – covered as well – “containing” Hamm himself. One cannot fail to notice in this stage arrangement the “enclosure within enclosure” image. The action of Clov revealing some of these spaces can function as a metaphor for theatre: he draws curtains, like stage props, on the windows, uncovers the bins and Hamm, suggesting that the play, their play, can begin.

In the design of the stage, Hamm is positioned in the centre, and so is the table Krapp sits at, or Winnie’s mound while she occupies the “exact centre of mound” (ex. 5). Thus, Beckett uses the potential of centre-stage to trigger particular semantic effects. As Manfred Pfister points out: “Even the presence of a single, motionless figure on an otherwise completely empty space creates a set of spatial relationships: a position centre-stage, for example, creates meaningful
opposition to one that is off-centre and, similarly, a position up-stage is related to one down-stage” (1988: 22).

Hamm constantly checks his central position: “Am I right in the centre?” (ex. 2). There is also a trace of irony in his asking Clov to take him “round the world” (ex. 2). He equates their “world”, the fictional dramatic space, with the real stage area and thus acknowledges their status as actors on a stage: whether they are motionless or they move about, they are still on the stage, i.e. they act, perform. As it has already been discussed as a feature of the theatre of the absurd, the characters exist in a dramatic space that coincides with the space of the performance. It is their very presence and actions within this space that define them: [The characters] presence is in itself enough to give the dramatic text a certain spatial dimension, and their positioning and movement are what brings this space to life – a space that is both created, sustained and restricted by the stage area (Pfister, 1988: 271).

4.2 In theatre, there are three basic movements within the stage area (cf. Pfister, 1988:271 and Keir Elam, 1980:18): 1. from (audience) left to right; 2. from front (stage) to back stage and 3. from ground to top (down-stage to upper-stage). All three axes (two horizontal, and one vertical) meet in the center-stage, the importance of which to Beckett’s drama has already been pointed out. The forth movement is from on-stage to off-stage: the exists and entrances of characters. For the examples above, several degrees of movement can be established: Clov – the most mobile character – moves on all four axes: on a vertical axis, up and down the steps to take a look out of the windows; on a horizontal axis, center-back and front-back to the windows and round the room with Hamm; and on-stage, off-stage to his unseen kitchen. His movements show complete mobility.

There can also be noticed different degrees of restricted mobility in these plays: Krapp moves from his table to the dark area and back; Hamm – round the stage (his room) space in his wheelchair pushed by Clov; Nagg and Nell can rise and sink in their ashbins; and Willie can crawl around Winnie’s mound. Finally, Winnie who is stuck in mound up to her waist in the first act (she can play with her bag and make gestures) and up to her neck in the second is a case of complete immobility. Consequently, Beckett exploits all possible movements in theatre in order to create semantic meanings, then shows that movement can be restricted or totally suppressed and the meanings are still generated. It is a unique experiment in the history of drama.

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9 As Keir Elam (1980:21) points out, in the contemporary theatre a sub-code has arisen, dictating the division of stage into definite zones: down-left/up-left, down-centre/up-centre, down-right/up-right, the so-called vocabulary of stage placement. This is particularly important when Beckett’s plays are staged.

10 The withdrawal of the potential for expansive movements from plays like Happy Days, Play and Endgame has the consequence that minute changes in position and minimal gesture will assume disproportionate importance (Hammond, 1979:36). In these plays, Beckett’s characters are “embedded in sand, neck-deep in funerary urns or buried in dustbins”.

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5.0 Diegetic space in Beckett’s drama. Michael Issacharoff’s model of dramatic spaces distinguishes between mimetic and diegetic space. Issacharoff describes (1981:215) this type of space as being mediated through the discourse of the dramatis personae (i.e. auditory language), and thus communicated verbally, not visually. He also argues that one of the characteristics of modern theatre is to generate dramatic tension precisely from the interplay between these two types of dramatic space.

Following a different route, Pfister (1988) reaches the same conclusion. According to him, it is often the case in a drama consisting of a single locale that the spatial contrast between the stage and off-stage (the performance counterparts of mimetic/diegetic space) is problematized: “Indeed, it might not be an exaggeration to claim that one of the great inner dramas of modern theatre is the need of both characters and audiences to determine and come to grips with apparently confusing, ambiguous, or indeterminate spaces and spatial relations” (Pfister, 1988:258). Thus the off-stage space in the plays of the absurd is generally unreal, mysterious and undetermined. Bu no other dramatist (absurdist or otherwise) has succeeded in theatrically “presenting the unpresentable” (Levy, 1990:48). It is the fourth movement in theatre that leads the characters off-stage: once they enter this area they disappear from the audience’s visual field. Levy (1990:49) argues that in theatre off-stage is “antispace”.

Alain Robbe-Grillet (1965:114) was among the first to emphasize the notion of being there in Beckett’s drama, and the first to contrast the stage with the off-stage as non-being: “Everything that is, is here, off the stage there is nothing, non-being”. As a concept and a technical device off-stage is closely related to stage space: “Movements, props, costumes, make-up and lighting define and are defined by stage space, but they are also manifestations of external intentions or power outside the stage” (Levy, 1990:50). The notions of there (beyond) and then (future and past) influence the here and now in different ways: they can assume the form of any “other” times, other places, other people, hope for the future, regrets or nostalgia for the past, eternal life or death, inner space or external space.

5.1. Technically, off-stage is the space stretching beyond the visually perceptible part of three-dimensional stage: length, width and height. If we trace Beckett’s theatrical technique from Waiting for Godot to Footfalls, we see that stage space is constantly narrowed and limited; off-stage emerges larger and becomes more imposing. There is a tendency with Beckett’s characters to become less and less mobile. The more a Beckett character faces the audience, the less we see his body; this is evident in the progression from Waiting for Godot to Endgame, Krapp’s Last Tape, Happy Days, Play, Not I, etc. The bodies of the characters dwindle into off-stage until only a mouth remains visible.

An interesting use of the off-stage is made by Beckett in Endgame. Clov is a character who lives on the verge of off-stage: his exits are counterbalanced by Hamm’s
obsession with always being there, on the stage and right in the centre. In Endgame, there are two points on-stage which connect it with the off-stage. First, there is the narrow door Beckett calls “an aperture” (Worth, 2002:189) which leads to Clov’s kitchen. Then there are the two small windows positioned high up, which communicate with the world outside. Clov is the only character who has access to this space: he can freely go to his kitchen or look outside, while the other characters either immobile (Nagg and Nell) or blind (Hamm), as well as the audience have to rely on Clov’s description in order to get any information about the outside world.

During the play, Clov continually goes out of the door to his kitchen in order to get different things or simply to “look at the walls” and wait for Hamm to whistle him. This space is described in contrast with the desolate space on-stage: it functions as a refuge for Clov – he is the only character who has the privilege to leave the gloomy room – and it satisfies his needs for order and symmetry: “nice proportions, nice dimensions”.

A more problematic space is the one outside the windows. The first incongruity is that Clov sees “the earth” from the right window and “the sea” from the left window. Throughout the play, many conflicting descriptions are given of the world outside the two windows. The characters’ discourse refer to various unspecified, generic areas: a desert (Nell), the woods (Hamm), the ocean (Clov and Hamm), the steppe (Hamm), a current that leads south (Hamm), which are “each plausible to exist in itself, but unlikely to exist together” (Richardson, 2000:70).11

5.2. The characters also refer to specific locations connected to their past. Thus Nell and Nagg nostalgically evoke exotic-sounding places: Lake Como, the Ardennes, the road to Sedan, while Hamm mentions Kov in his story. As Richardson (2000: 71) argues, one of the most intriguing uses of space in the play is the reference to the geographical designation of the presumed homeland of the boy in Hamm’s story. Hamm’s words are entirely indeterminate: “Where did he come from? He named the hole. A good half-day on horse… I enquired about the situation at Kov, beyond the gulf. Not a sinner. Good.” The physical location is left unknowable, though it is teasingly proximate: “The measure of distance provided is as likely to confuse as to enlighten a spectator necessarily unfamiliar with horse travel, and indeed adds to the play’s chronological destabilization (i.e. premodern, postapocalyptic, or the temporality of a parallel world)” (Richardson, 2000:71)

In his practice of continually calling into question prior spatial statements Beckett reveals how effortlessly they ordinarily constitute the dramatic world. In

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11 However, there are from time to time undermined by statements like “there’s no more nature”, “there’s nowhere else”, or “outside of here is death”. As it has often been argued, statements like “outside of here is death” can also have a self-reflexive meaning, it can refer to the space on-stage which conditions the existence of dramatis personae: “characters qua characters can exist only on a stage, and that outside the performance space they are necessary non-existent, and in a sense ‘dead’ (Richardson, 2000:70).
the end, *Endgame*’s spatial setting remains enigmatic and indeterminate: Beckett draws on and then pulls away from virtually the entire range of possible spaces: historical, invented, parodic, futuristic, impossible, unknowable, and self-reflexive. He surveys, as it were, all possible types of theatrical spaces only to reject and negate each one.” (Richardson, 2000:73)

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