

Kari Nixon. “Seeing Things: The Dilemma of Visual Subjectivity at the Dawn of the Bacteriological Age in Strindberg’s *The Father*.” *Configurations*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2016, pp. 25-52.

Kari Nixon’s article on the role of visual perception in August Strindberg’s play *The Father* (1887) eloquently elucidates the intricate relationship between literature and science during the late nineteenth century by tracing the ways in which Strindberg used his playwriting to critique contemporary science. Nixon specifically points to how Strindberg, both mirroring and mocking the scientific rhetoric of the era, utilized the spectroscope and the microscope to satirize contemporary tendencies to overestimate the epistemological capabilities of scientific technology and methodology.

While previous scholarship on *The Father* has focused on Strindberg’s views on Darwinism and the dissolution of gender roles, interpreting the play as a naturalistic tragedy, less attention has been given to the role of science and scientific objectivity in the play. Apart from being a playwright, Strindberg wrote extensively about his own scientific endeavours, and his evolving views on the role of the scientist, in *Vivisections* (1887), *Antibarbarus* (1894), *Jardin des Plantes* (1896) and *The Blue Book* (1907-12). In light of Strindberg’s scientific interest, Nixon interprets the play as one that exposes the impossibility of “knowing” objective truth, as well as the dangers of blind reliance in any scientific axiom, knowledge system, or religious faith. For Strindberg, objective knowledge was beyond reach – one could only form opinions or beliefs, and all supposedly objective “facts” were merely derived from subjective perceptions of the external world.

Nixon seeks to situate *The Father* within a late-nineteenth-century scientific context characterized by vast developments in lens technology and microbiology, which simultaneously engendered epistemological disillusionment concerning the possibility of deducing objective truth from visual data. As Nixon posits, “this increased visual acuity ... instead for many exposed the ultimately subjective nature of visual evidence altogether” (26). Strindberg explores the ambiguity of seeing in *The Father* in the play’s suggestion that “The microscopic examination of meteorite samples indicates insanity, while the spectroscopic examination of the same equates to an important contribution to science” (40). The absurd element comes into play, as Nixon points out, when one considers the fact that it would have been impossible at the time to analyse meteorite samples with a spectroscope, and that using a microscope would have been the correct method – something Strindberg would have been aware of.

The play centres around the marital struggle between Captain Adolf and his wife Laura over their daughter Bertha, with Adolf’s failed attempts to gain true knowledge of his daughter’s paternity inevitably driving him insane which, Nixon suggests, stresses the absurdity underlying blind belief in visual perception as a mediator for objective truth. In the end, Adolf’s fixed idea concerning the uncertainty of Bertha’s paternity is condemned as a sign of insanity by the Pastor and the Doctor, whose own belief systems are equally “fixed” as, in Strindberg’s view, the ontologies of Medicine and God are as epistemologically unknowable as that of Bertha’s real father. By positing the play as a black comedy that “highlights the ultimate subjectivity of all perception and knowledge systems” (42), rather than the Darwinian struggle between sexes as has previously been emphasized, Nixon’s article contributes significantly to

growing research into Strindberg's seemingly ambivalent relationship with turn-of-the-century science (see, for example, Ulf Olsson's *Jag blir galen: Strindberg, vansinnet och vetenskapen*. Eslöv: Symposion, 2002).

One aspect which would add to Nixon's argument, in relation to visual perception, is Strindberg's experimental photography (see Olle Granath's *August Strindberg: Painter, Photographer, Writer*. London: Tate Publishing, 2006). Distrusting the epistemological ability of the optic lens, Strindberg used a lensless camera to create his "psychological portraits." Thus, one may argue that, rather than disregarding objective knowledge altogether, Strindberg merely viewed seemingly objective methods of detection (such as the optic lens, or even the eye itself) as distorting – not mediating – reality. Paradoxically, only by embracing his own subjectivity, could the scientist gain "true" knowledge; Strindberg does not descend into scientific nihilism, instead he offers an alternative grounded in subjectivity, what Nixon refers to as "a new, ostensibly 'true' way of knowing" (52). Strindberg's position can thus perhaps be described as a form of scientific perspectivism (one influenced by his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche) in which knowledge is mediated by, and dependent on, the situation in which it is received and interpreted. This is in line with Nixon's emphasis that "contingent circumstances can render images so situated within a particular time and place that they are inextricably ensconced in the subjective moment at which they were recorded" (33).

The body of work on Strindberg in Swedish is incredibly vast but, as less has been written in English, Nixon's article is of great importance, aspiring to internationalize Strindberg research in a way that has previously not been attempted. Nixon's contribution succeeds in situating *The Father* in a wider European scientific context, delineating Strindberg's ambivalent engagement with the age of bacteriology and microscopy.

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