

Daniel A. Novak, “Caught in the Act: Photography on the Victorian Stage.” *Victorian Studies* 59. 1 (2016): 35–64.

From farces to comedies to melodrama, photography was more than a niche preoccupation in the minds of Victorian playwrights. Though many scholars have leveraged this phenomenon on the furthering of theories of photography, the topic of how photography on stage contributed to the advancement of theatre remains understudied. Daniel Novak’s article deftly challenges the forefronting of the camera by investigating the convergence of photography and theatre (roughly from 1854 to the end of the century) and reading it as being just as indicative of theatrical representations as it is of photographic ones.

Per Novak’s assertion, the overwhelming fascination with photography by Victorian playwrights and spectators is more than a giddy reaction to new technology. Rather, the entanglement of photography and theatre points toward the possibility of a greater understanding regarding theatrical form, as well as what Novak calls photographic ‘performativity’ (35). Novak constructs his argument in five sections, aiming to ground the reader in historical, cultural, and theoretical contextualization before venturing a conventional reading of Dion Boucicault’s “Octoroon”, and thereafter, breaking away from an interpretive approach based on photographic objectivity, by analysing a variety of other Victorian plays “featuring fraudulent photographers and failed images” (37). In his last two sections, Novak ambitiously attempts to configure differing conceptions of temporality, positioning the study’s contribution to discussions of permanence/impermanence in relation to theatre and photography.

Drawing on plays with titular references to photography in the Lord Chamberlain’s Play Collection in the British Library archives, Novak’s first section aims to situate the camera in theatre, foregrounding the deep influence of theatre on photographic craft, and in doing so, running countercurrent to the theoretical popularity of seeing photography’s impact on theatrical form and on focusing on its enmeshment with the theatrical arts. Novak illustrates this argument through various examples from plays. In this way, Novak departs from the approach of scholars like Barbara Lesák and Nicholas Daly who pose photography (emphasizing the technology of the camera as machine) as operating against the workings of theatre, repositioning this confliction as a “renegotiation” between the “representational limits and possibilities of [both] theatre and photography” (36).

Novak subsequently offers a reading of Boucicault’s “Octoroon”, citing its popularity amongst other scholars of this photo-theoretical overlap and particularly illustrating the Victorian perception of photography as possessing both “scientific and factual” capabilities as well as its association with “gothic, mystery, magic and the imagination” (45). This reading acts more as a preemptive defense and is set up as a foil to the litany of examples detailed in the following sections. Rather than separating the man from the photographic tool, Novak finds that a broader look at theatrical plays of the time (citing over a dozen) indicates a deep fascination with the photographer himself, and a decided turn away from *The Octoroon*-style attention to the machine toward one of subjectivity. Furthermore, Novak takes these numerous theatrical examples of photographic failure and fraud to claim that Victorian representations suggest the technological superiority theatre has over photography in “seeing and knowing” (37). This argument is demonstrated clearly and with more than adequate

textual evidence, though at times these analyses unwind almost too indiscriminately and linger on points tangential to Novak's through-line of argument without sufficient explanation for their inclusion. This particular organization also begs the unanswered question of how many plays actually followed in the theme of *The Octoroon*.

The fourth section moves into a discussion of how photography, when it is presented on stage, transforms and informs how different temporalities are conceived. Theatre, it is argued, illustrates how photography encapsulates more than just the photo outcome; a photographer must frame the image and, for these camera-themed plays, the theatre frames its capture. This section is particularly insightful for theoreticians of both photography and theatre, although it is much shorter than its counterparts. Novak concludes with a metacommentary on what performative photography subverts and upholds in modern scholarship. While the current consensus around the perceived attitudes towards the camera in Victorian culture is largely parochial, renewed attention to these relationships, as examined in this case through theatre, may provide new perspectives as well as generate new approaches for scholars of the modern day.

Though this article wrangles more with the cultural ramifications of new technology, much insight is gained regarding the limits of objectivity as well as the diverse capabilities of theatrical representation. Its close analysis of a wide variety of historically situated play material – from scripts to actors to contemporary critics – provides a convincing argument to return to our assumptions regarding human relationships and the differing capabilities of the camera and theatrical representation.

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