



Guest Editors' Introduction: Scenographies of Absence, Scenes of Disappearance

Adrian Kear, Jane Collins & Jazmin Llana

To cite this article: Adrian Kear, Jane Collins & Jazmin Llana (2025) Guest Editors' Introduction: Scenographies of Absence, Scenes of Disappearance, *Theatre and Performance Design*, 11:3-4, 116-120, DOI: [10.1080/23322551.2026.2638614](https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2026.2638614)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2026.2638614>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 31 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Guest Editors' Introduction: Scenographies of Absence, Scenes of Disappearance

Adrian Kear ^{a,b}, Jane Collins^a and Jazmin Llana^c

^aUniversity of the Arts London: Wimbledon College of Arts; ^bWimbledon College of Arts, Merton Hall Road, London SW19 3QA; ^cDe La Salle University, Philippines

This special double issue of *Theatre and Performance Design: Scenographies of Absence, Scenes of Disappearance*, seeks to locate scenography as generative force in contemporary theatre and performance-making that calls into question the normative expectation that theatre operates as a site for the appearance of the figure of the human, given embodied form in the material presence of actors. It examines how scenographic practices have eschewed this dramatic (and even post-dramatic) *ür*-convention to create a scene in which the protagonist is displaced, dispersed, disappeared or in the process of disappearing. Our leading investigative premise has been to question whether this theatre of non-appearance occurs precisely because the scene presented is one of political disappearance. In this context, we examine how the scenographic apparatus itself performs, creating the sonic and visual score of the performance text. This special double issue explores how scenographic means are deployed to claim, contest, and re-mediate the meaning of the actor's absence whether considered as an intentional political action or a forced disappearance. In presenting the scene of disappearance as a site of performative construction, it investigates how an actor-less *mise en scène* enables the scenographic apparatus itself to appear as the lead actor in a political 'aesthetics of absence'.

The term 'aesthetics of absence' is used extensively by the contributors to this special double issue. Developed by the theatre-maker, Heiner Goebbels, to describe his practice of displacing the actor from the centre of the theatrical stage, this aesthetic strategy draws attention to the visual and sonic materials that counterpoint and combine in his theatrical compositions, allowing the audience to encounter and experience 'the imaginative space between sound and image, hearing and seeing' that opens up in the absence of a 'central protagonist pulling focus' (Collins 2015, xvii). *Scenographies of Absence, Scenes of Disappearance* interrogates how the emergence of a scenographic 'aesthetics of absence' effects a redistribution of theatrical presence, de-centring the actor in the construction of the *mise en scène* and drawing attention to the inter-animation of the material components, signifying elements, and operative dynamics that comprise it. It investigates how the slow 'death of the spectacle performed on stage by actors for spectators' (Rancière 2013, 184) has taken a decisive turn in the early twenty-first century, demonstrating how what began as a backhanded compliment to an actor by the designer

CONTACT Adrian Kear  a.kear@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

of one of Goebbels' productions during rehearsal—'it's absolutely fantastic when you disappear!' (2015, 1)—has become a generative framework for re-thinking theatrical logics of staging and the scenographic means of creation. More significantly, the special double issue aims to both extend and to historicise this *aesthetic* phenomenon as a paradigmatic shift in the configuration of theatre as the space of appearance of the figure of the human by examining the de-centring of the actor in an 'aesthetics of absence' as concomitant to the *political* disappearances that have characterised the coextensive *historical* period – the disappearance of actual people not only from the *mise en scène* of the theatrical stage, but from the lived reality of Post-War history.

Goebbels himself argues that the composition of an aesthetics of absence marks a shift from constructing a drama of representation, usually centred on an agonistic conflict acted out on stage, 'towards a drama of perception ... experienced in the act of watching' (82). The displacement, dispersal, and re-distribution of the figure and function of the actor is productive in enabling the appearance of a theatrical politics of spectatorship which activates the audience as co-composing the action and social significance of the performance. For Goebbels, the 'drama of perception' occurs through the combination and 'powerful confrontations of all the elements – stage, light, music, words – in which the actor has to survive, rather than act' (2). In other words, he sees the displacement of the actor from the centre of attention in favour of the aesthetic experience of the spectator as the effect of a profoundly scenographic operation. Accordingly, *Scenographies of Absence, Scenes of Disappearance* sets out to examine how the forms and modes of scenography are implicated in wider historical processes, and to elaborate how the scenographic operation contributes to the opening up of a politics of spectating.

In constructing this special double issue, we actively sought articles, visual essays and interviews that elaborate how geopolitically specific histories of disappearance have been visualised in theatrical, performative, videographic, sonic and participatory forms. Contributors examine artistic interventions from the UK, Germany, France, Russia, Palestine, Sudan, USA, Colombia, Chile, India, and The Philippines. In so doing they attend to the situated knowledges and indigenous ways of seeing and staging deployed in investigating and contesting the scenes, sites and political dynamics of disappearance and elaborate its manifestation in differently mobilised aesthetics of absence and experiences of critical spectatorship. The aim is neither to offer exhaustive coverage of national or regional contexts nor to present universalising claims about a global historical phenomenon, but rather to follow the logics of theatre in articulating the specificity of the historically lived and contextually imbricated aesthetics of absence and politics of disappearance which these works make evident.

In the first, framing article of this special double issue, 'The Missing Actor: The aesthetics of absence and the politics of disappearance', Adrian Kear sets out to relate the displacement of the figure of the actor from the theatrical *mise en scène* to the lived reality of the political disappearance of actual people from the stage of twentieth century European history. Through a case-study analysis of Heiner Goebbels' *Everything that happened and would happen* (2018), Kear offers a detailed illustration of how history and its theatrical staging are intertwined. The article argues that the scenographic operation enables the construction of a performative historiography which opens a locus of aesthetic-political encounter implicating and involving the audience in a co-creative practice of critical spectatorship. Sruti Bala and Shams Eldin Younis Nagmeldin's 'On

the Destruction and Salvaging of Scenographic Possibilities: Reflections from the College of Music and Drama in Khartoum, Sudan', provides an important account of the devastating effects of the war in Sudan and its impact on the cultural and educational infrastructure of the country. The article offers a salient reminder that the materiality of destruction and disappearance as modes of political violence often serve to foreclose aesthetic possibilities rather than opening them. It investigates the devastation of the College of Music and Drama in Sudan, explicating its significance as a site of scenographic practice whilst exposing the violent erasure of its history, identity and cultivation of imaginative and artistic possibilities. In bringing the story of the College and its inhabitants to our attention, the authors give voice to the grounded histories and lived experiences of those practising scenography within the material conditions of the scene of genocide, ethnic-cleansing, and societal destruction. Similarly, Abir Al-Laham and Rim Irscheid's timely article 'On the Presence of Others: Performing Palestinian Absence in *Bodies of Knowledge* (2024) and *For a Palestinian* (2022)' aims to redress the representational violence performed on Palestinians through the frame of war and the genocide in Gaza. In turning to the question of Palestinian self-representation in theatre and visual arts installations, the article explores how cultural memory is produced, performed and preserved in diasporic contexts. Foregrounding the work of contemporary British-Palestinian artists living through the diaspora, the article addresses the constitutive absence of Palestinian bodies and voices from within both cultural institutions and the repertoire of representations that sustain them. It demonstrates how this representational absence is turned into an aesthetic strategy making visible the apparent invisibility of Palestinian political perspectives and historical experiences.

Theron Schmidt's 'Traces of disappearance, disruptions of representation: the art and public action of Cassils' likewise demonstrates how the violence of representation—here manifested in the simultaneity of trans hyper-discursive mediation and effective everyday invisibilisation—might be made to appear in the context of performance. Through tracing the trajectory of Cassils' work—powerfully interleaved with a series of interrogative interviews with the artist—Schmidt demonstrates how their key visual and performative strategies have developed to contest the political disappearance of ideologically marked bodies and identities from the public stage, and the physical disappearances effected through transphobic gendered violence. Richard Allen's article, 'Scenario Machine: Aesthetics of Absence in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *45th Parallel*,' reflects on the film installation *45th Parallel*, and elaborates the artist's work in elucidating forms of social and state-sanctioned violence that the ideological and juridical apparatus is at pains to occlude or make disappear entirely. Allen's article demonstrates how the scenographic apparatus can bring into focus and expose these occlusions to public view. He offers a detailed exposition of his encounter with the work as a gallery installation, relating its narration of a story of cross-border violence—the extra-judicial murder of a Mexican teenager by a US border patrolman—to the scenographic affordances provided by setting the film in the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, a building situated on the US-Canadian border. Yana Meerzon's article on border violence and the politics of disappearance in the context of forced migration, exile, and asylum further elaborates the intersection of power, law, and representation. 'Building a Counter-Archive: Performing the Lost Histories of Migration and Exile,' offers a detailed analysis of a series of performative installations and events—Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013—17), Arkadi Zaidēs' *Necropolis*

(2019), and Marina Davydova's *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023). Following Goebbels' evocation of the displacement of the figure of the actor by scenographic means, Meerzon demonstrates how, in these works, human actors are replaced by other agents—objects, sounds, projected data—that evoke the absent presence of the missing, the lost, and the disappeared. She argues that these works constitute and counter-archive configuring absence as an ethical space of mourning, counter-memory, and the performative ground of future action.

In 'Anachronic Pleasure in Times of Authoritarianism: Deepan Sivaraman's Malayalam *Ubu Roi* (2023)' Ameet Parameswaran returns to the energetic dynamics of a stage still populated by the material presence of actors yet considers how their function changes in a contextually driven theatre of scenography. His reading of Sivaraman's production of *Ubu Roi*, performed in the South Indian state of Kerala, demonstrates how a redistribution of actorly presence into a vernacular task-based performance is deployed as a mode of representing resistance to populist authoritarian excesses. In mobilising the metaphorical theatricality of the stage to counter the rise of fascist theatrics, Parameswaran argues, Sivaraman's production re-casts the actor's material and immaterial labour as the catalyst to activating the audience's situated knowledge and collective politics of spectatorship. Key to this is what he calls, following Heiner Goebbels, the experience of anachronic time: enabling spectators to construct performative relations between different historical moments' encounters with the spectre of authoritarianism as the key to unlocking and re-animating modes of resistance to its current incarnations. This is followed by Jazmin Llana's visual essay which also investigates such a possibility by returning to the scene of political disappearances in the Philippines. In 'Rethinking the Escalante Re-enactment as Theatrical Incarnation of the Disappeared', Llana documents successive iterations of Teatro Obero's processual re-enactment of the Escalante Massacre. She argues that repetition and remembrance function as militant commitments to re-animating its politics of resistance to continuing state violence and community suppression. Like Parameswaran, Llana notes that the physical presence of community performers remains central to articulating the absence of those lost to forced disappearance. However, she observes that their role is not that of actors representing the missing, but of celebrants incarnating their absence in a form of ritual performative re-enactment. Whilst this 'impossible politics of appearance' does not bring back the disappeared, it enables the theatre of re-enactment to operate scenographically as a site and process for making the disappeared appear again through signs, symbols, artefacts and the re-vivification of collective cultural-political memory.

Marcella Oteiza Silva further demonstrates how scenographic objects can be seen to function relationally and performatively in embodying political protest and operating as sites of semiotic intervention. In 'The Scenographic Object as embodiment of social unrest: Baquedano Statue, Chile', Oteiza Silva argues that the statue became an active participant in the 2019-20 social revolution in Chile, providing a medium for mobilising the demands of protestors and for enacting governmental countermeasures. The article examines a series of performative re-articulations of the statue's appearance and the re-signification of it meaning as a marker of public space and political history, culminating in its removal which left only a vacant pedestal marking its absence as a sign of socio-semiotic struggle. We conclude with the regular journal feature *Report from ...* In 'Report from ... South Delhi: *Networks and Neighbourhoods*', co-editor Collins and visual

artist Sreejata Roy discuss a project involving young women from the Khirki area of the city in the construction of murals on local streets depicting their dreams and aspirations for more visibility and recognition. The murals draw attention to the gendered politics of the public sphere by disrupting the normative expectations of the girls (non) appearance, and their constitutive absence, on the streets. The report explores how their symbolic presence on the walls provoked a response and opened up a space for public debate. In concert with all the contributions to this special double issue, Collins' interview with Roy proposes scenography as 'a practice that determines, organises and refigures' the perceptual composition of the visible and the sayable, effecting a shift in the 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2004, 12), by continuously reframing 'who and what there is to be seen and heard' (Merx 2013, 54).

ORCID

Adrian Kear  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9317-7934>

References

- Collins, Jane. 2015. "Editor's Introduction". In Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre*. Ed. Jane Collins, vx—xix. London: Routledge.
- Goebbels, Heiner. 2015. *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre*. Ed. Jane Collins. Trans. David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao. London: Routledge.
- Merx, Sigrid. 2013. "The Politics of Scenography: Disrupting the Stage". *Performance Research*, 18: 3, 54—58.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. G. Rockhill. New York and London: Continuum
- Rancière, Jacques. 2013. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Trans. Zakir Paul. London: Verso