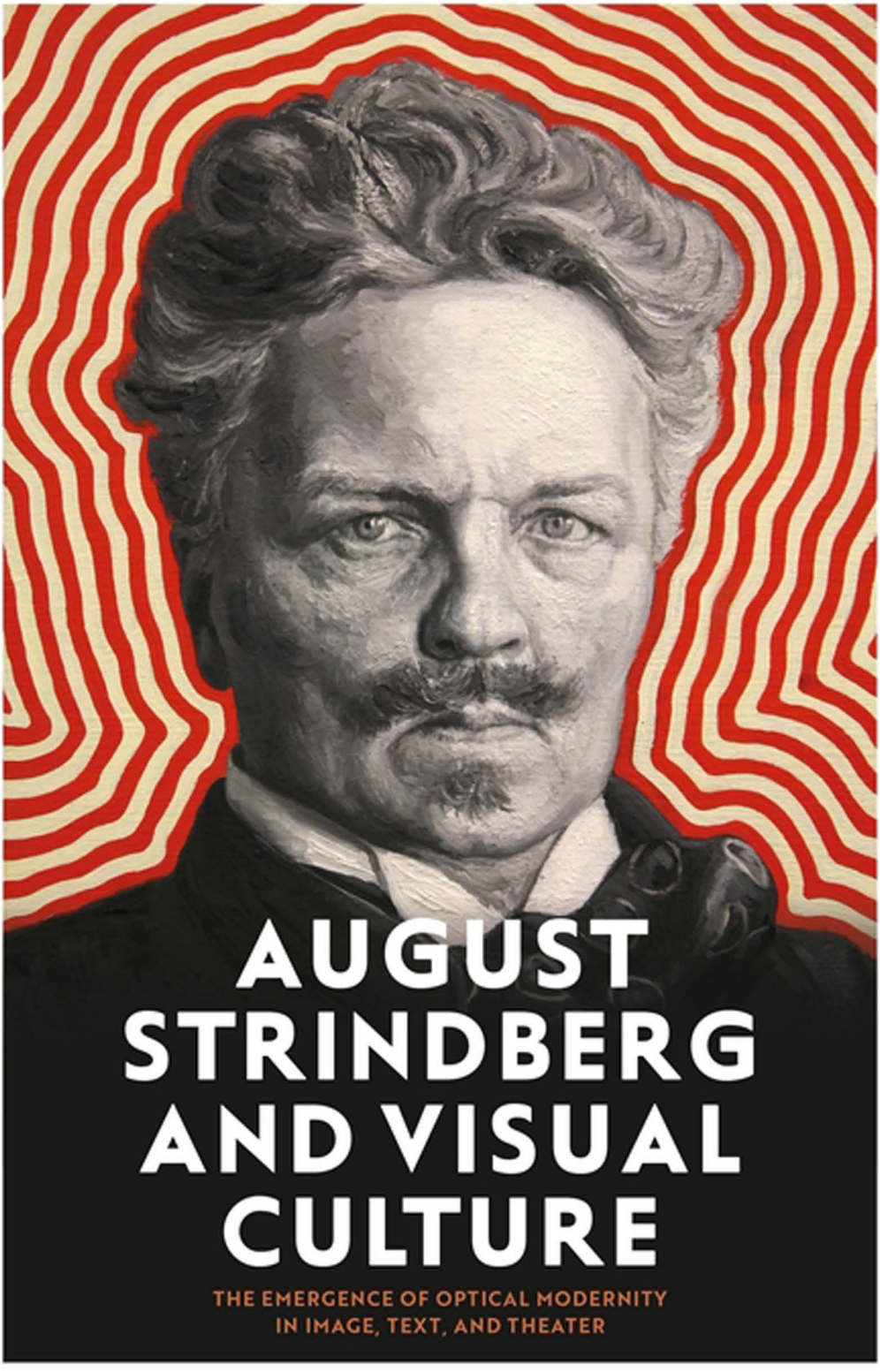
JONATHAN SCHROEDER, ANNA WESTERSTAHL STENPORT & ESZTER SZALCZER



AUGUST STRINDBERG AND VISUAL CULTURE

THE EMERGENCE OF OPTICAL MODERNITY IN IMAGE, TEXT, AND THEATER

BLOOMSBURY

August Strindberg and Visual Culture

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The Emergence of Optical Modernity in Image, Text and Theatre

Edited by
Jonathan Schroeder, Anna Westerstahl Stenport
and Eszter Szalczer

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Thomas Waugh, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013); *Film Manifestoes and Global Cinema Cultures* (University of California Press, 2014), *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic* (with Anna Westerstahl Stenport, Edinburgh University Press, 2014), *Arctic Environmental Modernities: From the Age of Exploration to the Era of the Anthropocene* (with Lill-Ann Körber and Anna Westerstahl Stenport, Palgrave, 2017) and *The Cinema, too, Must be Destroyed: The Films of Guy Debord* (forthcoming, Manchester University Press).

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Robert Wilson is an internationally renowned artist and theatre director. Since the late 1960s, Robert Wilson's productions have decisively shaped the look of theatre and opera. Wilson's numerous awards and honours include an Obie award for direction, the Golden Lion for Sculpture from the Venice Biennale, the third Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize for Lifetime Achievement, the Premio Europa award from Taormina Arte, two Guggenheim Fellowship awards, the Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship award, a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Design Award for Lifetime Achievement. He has been named a Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres by the French Minister of Culture.

Foreword:
An Extraordinary Transdisciplinary Artist

Daniel Birnbaum, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

It is a relatively recent phenomenon that when there are big art shows somewhere in the world today, in Paris or Germany or elsewhere, and one wants to say something about early modernism in Scandinavia, August Strindberg is key. He is no longer mentioned only as a major writer but he is now also fully established as a transdisciplinary and experimental artist. His great relevance not only for the theatre and the novel, but also for the other arts, is being recognized.

Although some viewed him as an amateur painter, he accomplished aspects that are hard to understand that they could be done in those early years when there was no abstract art yet. His visual work looks very much like an invention of abstraction. Of course, most of the time one could also see in his paintings that there was a sea, or a storm, or another figurative element there. But his paintings verge on abstraction in very interesting ways. I know that some contemporary German painters, such as Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer, have shown interest in Strindberg's painterly activity. He has been an important but perhaps unexpected source of inspiration for contemporary art.

For Strindberg, photography was akin to a mystery – how could one make photographs of things? He had great occult interests and wrote a strange thesis on phosphorus. He was a person who took interest in almost everything. I think that his photography is possibly even more interesting than his paintings. As part of his interest in alchemy, he made photographs without the camera and without optics, simply with chemistry. He would put photographic plates outside on the snow or on the ground and make photos of the sky. They were called celestographs. Of course, they were not photographs – they were simply grainy images, at least as far as I'm concerned. But they *seem* to depict the starry skies. And they are also anticipating many later developments in visual arts.

The experiments of Man Ray – or more recently a photographer such as Wolfgang Tillmans – are evocative of Strindberg's photography. Tillmans can be seen as having two primary interests. On one hand, he captured a non-normative social life of the gay scene and other ways of living together. He produced a portrait of his generation – people living in London and other places in the 1990s. And on the other hand, he was very much interested in pure photography – simply the possibility of creating interesting imagery without chemistry. I know that Tillmans has been interested in Strindberg's experiments. So, I believe that Strindberg's early work is an important source of inspiration for practitioners who come to the discipline from different fields.

The most intriguing aspect of Strindberg is his radical, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary approach in arts, writing, philosophy and life. He is one of the total artists. Beyond art, his experimentation includes new forms of knowledge production. It is fascinating that he is so broad in his interests. In that sense, he is a unique figure. One of the more boring and depressing aspects of modern art is its increasing specialization. People are either painters, or they are only interested in dance, for example. But sometimes there are examples of artists who branch out and create links between the disciplines. We can see certain moments in Dada, or in the 1960s, as represented by an interest in crossovers between disciplines. In the Bauhaus period, we can find examples of that, and in the Black Mountain College and the mix of Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and that entire group. We occasionally find individual people who in their own practice bridge all these different disciplines. Strindberg is a particularly extreme and important example of such crossover practices.

Strindberg also has an important place in fin-de-siècle Scandinavian culture. I participated as a writer in a show called Nuit Blanche at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris in the late 1990s. At that museum, they often did these great historical exposés, while at the same time foregrounding contemporary artists. This particular show included the great Nordic painters. The only Swedish participant in the more classical section was Strindberg. I remember thinking that he was in many ways more interesting than some of the other greats. I'm sure Edvard Munch is a greater painter than Strindberg, and in the development of painting, Munch would be much more influential and reaches a bigger audience. But as a figure, a uniquely explosive and weird persona, Strindberg is at least as fascinating.

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1

Introduction: Visual Culture, August Strindberg and the Double Image of Modernity

Eszter Szalczer, University at Albany, SUNY, USA, Anna Westerstahl Stenport, Georgia Institute of Technology, USA and Jonathan Schroeder, Rochester Institute of Technology, USA

In his essay 'A Glance into Space' (Un Regard vers le Ciel'), first published in the French occultist magazine *l'Hyperchimie* in 1896, August Strindberg writes

> [i]s the sun round because it looks round to us? And what is light? Something outside me or within, subjective perceptions? … Is it … the inside of the eye that the astronomer reproduces in word and image, and is it the lenses of the telescope that he photographs on the photosensitive plate? (2006a: 165–166).

These reflections exemplify the centrality of vision in August Strindberg's creative process. The exploration of the visual represents the common thread that links all of Strindberg's multifaceted oeuvre together, from drama and fiction through scientific and occultist studies to painting and photography. This book places the rich and heterogeneous oeuvre of this extraordinarily prolific artist within the framework of visual culture in an attempt to understand connections between modernity and visuality and the perceptual and representational paradigm shifts constituted through these connections.

August Strindberg and Visual Culture brings together scholars, practitioners, artists and public intellectuals in novel constellations to reassess a major literary figure from the perspective of visual theory and art history. In keeping with Strindberg's boundary-crossing, experimental and multi-modal strategies of making art, the book engages interdisciplinary approaches that inform the study of the works, practices and larger cultural context of his work.

Together, the chapters elaborate, for the first time, how August Strindberg's writing and artistic practice presage and influence key visual theories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *August Strindberg and Visual Culture* provides a new and ground-breaking perspective on a complex and prolific body of work by exploring how his radical conceptions of the visual led him to challenge the boundaries of such traditionally conceived literary and visual arts genres as drama, fiction, non-fiction, photography and painting. Beyond his own visual production, however, the

book explores his continuing influence on visual culture, by looking at contemporary connections to his work within photography, stagecraft and visual art.

The book charts vital intersections between theatre, aesthetic theory and visual elements in Strindberg's work that have been left largely unexplored. Thus, rather than following traditional genre-bound critical approaches, the contributors navigate through uncharted – and in Strindberg's case – extremely productive territory by focusing on the intermediality of individual works, the corpus as a whole, and their connections to a wide array of historical and contemporary artists, writers, photographers, film, theatre and museum practitioners. Our broader aim is to establish a new conceptual framework for integrating visual culture and cinema studies with theatre practice and modernist drama.

Visual culture can be described as a field of study 'concerned with visual events in which information, meaning, or pleasure is sought […] in an interface with visual technology', the latter defined as 'any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet' (Mirzoeff 1998: 3). It is precisely its ubiquitous and dynamic relationship to visual culture that makes Strindberg's contribution representative of the modern: the work of an artist confronted with a world that cannot be understood via traditional explanations; a world whose boundaries are constantly redrawn by a steady flow of visual information and visual technologies that seem to challenge received notions of inside and outside, subject and object.

'Where does the self begin and where does it end?' Strindberg asks himself as he continues speculating on the shape of the sun in 'A Glance into Space'; '[h]as the eye adapted itself to the sun? Or does the eye create the phenomenon called the sun?' (Strindberg 2006a: 166). These are not rhetorical questions for Strindberg but ideas that serve as launch pads for experimentation, using himself – whatever that means to him at that moment – as the object and the instrument, inserting his body into visual technology, making his eye serve as both lens and photosensitive plate, in an attempt to penetrate the surface of the visible and push deeper into the invisible.

What can be visible is an overarching concern for Strindberg. On the title page of his *Occult Diary* (1896–1907), he includes his favourite line from the *Talmud* as a motto: 'If you wish to know the invisible, observe with an open gaze the Visible' (Strindberg 1977: 3), indicating a constant awareness and practice of double vision. Even when interpreting his own paintings, in which he attempted to imitate what he construed as nature's spontaneous way of creating images by chance, he saw both an exoteric and an esoteric meaning materialize in them simultaneously (Hedström 2001: 48–55). While working in varied genres and media, including fiction, poetry, theatre, non-fiction, illumination, sketching, painting, photography, linguistics and chemistry, among others, a pivotal impetus for Strindberg was what has been identified as the stated purpose of visual-culture research, namely, to problematize the visible, 'to interrogate dominant readings, to trouble singular meaning' (Campbell and Schroeder 2011: 1506).

W. J. T. Mitchell offers another influential definition of visual culture as '"the study of the social construction of visual experience", which represents a "pictorial turn" that permeates a whole variety of fields and disciplines' (Mitchell 1995: 540–541). This

'pictorial turn' has been described as 'the fascination with the visual and its effects that marked modernism', which indicates 'a growing tendency to visualize things that are not themselves visual' with the help of increasingly advanced visual technologies that have the 'capacity to make visible things that our eyes could not see unaided' (Mirzoeff 1998: 3, 5).

What could be more telling of this fascination than the figure of the scientist Captain in Strindberg's 1887 naturalistic play, *The Father* (*Fadren)*? The Captain boasts that with the help of a spectroscope – not a microscope, as his wife Laura would have it – he has 'been analyzing meteorite samples and found carbon – evidence of organic life', which means he is able to discern the past, 'not what's happening, but what has happened' on the planet Jupiter (Strindberg 1981: 30). What is at stake here is the question of visibility: the irony that the Captain might be able to peer into his spectroscope and *see* evidence of life on other planets, but the view of his own progeny is rapidly being obscured as the certainty of his – and indeed of all fathers' – paternity is brought into question.

Today, of course, DNA testing, a form of visual technology unavailable during Strindberg's lifetime, would resolve the matter, but modernity's questioning of origins remains, ever since the dawn of 'the age of mechanical reproduction' (Benjamin [1936] 1968). Strindberg continually embraced new visual technologies, including the X-ray, and incorporated photography and many other scientific, painterly, theatrical and cinematic techniques in his work. In part, Strindberg sought to unearth what he considered those lost origins – of language, of matter, of the world which, as the Poet says in *A Dream Play* (*Ett Drömspel*) (1901) is just 'a false copy' of the original – and to observe, capture, project, reproduce, mobilize and bring into dynamic relationships images, both textually and visually.

And thus, whereas Strindberg is known primarily as a playwright whose name hallmarks modern drama and theatre, the intent of this volume is to bring into focus a wider spectrum of his boundary-crossing work that included – beyond, or rather along with, literary representations – painting, photography, scenography, chemistry, botany, alchemy, performance practice, as well as philosophical, theoretical and historical reflections on innumerable aspects of these diverse fields. Approaching Strindberg's work through the lens of visual culture helps us deconstruct artificial boundaries between the literary and the visual, between text and image, and between writer and artist. This approach, which is reflected in the individual chapters as well as in the structure of our book as a whole, seeks to respond to Strindberg's own transdisciplinary practices and aesthetics. It also helps us to contemplate the fruitful simultaneity of artistic, scientific and mystical-occult modus operandi that Strindberg typically engaged in.

Strindberg and visual media

Strindberg's work as a visual artist is usually divided into discrete phases of intense engagement followed by long periods of inactivity as painter or photographer. For example, after some early paintings in the 1870s, he would not return to the medium until 1892, the time of his divorce from his first wife Siri von Essen, while he was staying alone on the island of Dalarö in the Stockholm Archipelago. A new burst of paintings

ensued during courtship and marriage with his second wife Frida Uhl in 1894 while living in Dornach, Austria, and then again during their soon-to-be separation and his departure for Paris, for a stay that extended into 1896. He then would not take up painting again until the early 1900s, commencing his final period as a pictorial artist (Söderström 1972; Hedström 2001: 9–101).

Similarly, although Strindberg had been interested in photography since his youth and had already owned a camera by 1861/62 (Hemmingsson 1963: 16), his first significant photographic enterprises, which included an unsuccessful attempt at the photographic documentation of an ethnographic journey through France for the book that eventually became *Among French Peasants* (*Bland franska bönder*) (1889), and a series of 'impressionist' family photographs taken in Gersau, Switzerland, occurred in 1886, after which he would return to the medium in the 1890s when his work included, besides family and self-portraiture, some remarkable experiments by manipulating photosensitive plates without lens and camera. Over a final period in the early 1900s Strindberg experimented with photographic 'soul portraits' and cloud studies using his so-called wonder-camera (the Wunderkamera), which he designed and constructed with fellow photographer Herman Anderson (see Hemmingsson 1963; Rugg 1997: 80–131; Szalczer 2001).

Strindberg's theories, criticism, and practice of the visual arts, and his profound engagement with visual technologies were not simply a response to the currents of the times, with which he was intimately familiar. Rather, his own work with visual media often initiates a 'radical and bold break with the image making conventions [bildkonventioner] of the later nineteenth century' (Lalander 1999: 91, trans. by authors). That is especially the case with Strindberg's approach to self-portraiture, and the ways in which he describes himself in visual terms in his autobiography, which challenges any notion of a unified self and explores an ambiguous relationship between the perspectives of 'photographer and photographed, and photographing subject and photographed object' (Rugg 1997: 102). For example, in his major study of Strindberg's 'visual imagination', Harry G. Carlson presents Strindberg's preoccupation with visual media during his years of exile in Berlin and Paris in the 1890s as a self-healing process, where 'the coalescence of various forces in the fin-de-siècle climate of artistic renewal' not only influenced his 'personal renewal' but also 'enabled him to restart his creative engine and begin anew' (Carlson 1996: 3).

According to the classic biographical approach of Strindberg studies (greatly informed by the author's fictionalized autobiographies and numerous letters), his formidable contributions to visual culture have consistently been interpreted as the direct outcome of personal experiences and idiosyncrasies. It is true that some of Strindberg's own production of visual media, especially his painting, tended to occur in moments of severe crises or periods of intense expectations – such as marital stress, psychotic episodes, or the impending birth of a child – often associated with simultaneously occurring writer's block (Söderström 1991: 14). Biographical approaches have shed light on significant aspects of Strindberg's work in the context of visual culture, though these interpretations unnecessarily confine Strindberg's work to biographical matters.

August Strindberg and Visual Culture, on the other hand, foregrounds contributions to aesthetic and intellectual history and visual culture while minimizing the chronological and biographical in favour of the thematic, multi-modal and transdisciplinary. The book offers insights into Strindberg as a multimedia artist, whose writing is inseparable from his visual imagination and from the visual technologies of his time. Some scholars have indeed explored Strindberg's interest in turn-of-the-century media technologies, including the laterna magica, the sciopticon and the panorama, from the perspective of media archaeology and media history (see, notably, Hockenjos 2007), informing many strands of this book. It is our contention that Strindberg epitomizes the modern writer precisely because his work is so deeply embedded in visual culture in meaningful and often anticipatory ways – as part of a ceaselessly ongoing and lifelong process. We do not believe that Strindberg's visual practices are by-products of his life or offshoots of his writing (or of any difficulties in writing, for that matter). Instead, we examine what questions he was drawn to and led him to explore visual media and produce a heterogeneous and multi-variegated body of work.

Another aspect of Strindberg's involvement with visual media is important to stress: a pronounced effort to fully explore the potentialities afforded by the specific medium at hand, especially in painting or photography. In other words, while image and text often appear combined, it seems that neither is there to merely serve or illustrate the other. Strindberg's paintings, for example, completely disengage from literary (narrative) representation and often from an attempt at referentiality. Instead, they bear marks of attention to the material technologies pertaining to the medium and attempts to achieve as much ontological immediacy as possible. That includes the remarkable materiality of Strindberg's paintings: he used a palette knife instead of a paintbrush and applied oil paint directly on wood or cardboard panel. This practice, moreover, has been described as displaying as powerful a presence of matter as the paintings of Anselm Kiefer, by which 'the tactile surface not only presents a *picture* of nature, but also gives the impression of *being* a piece of nature' (Feuk 1991: 11).

Double pictures and metapictures

'Looking at images across disciplines can help us to think about the interrelatedness of different kinds of visual media', observe Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright in their introduction to visual-culture studies (Sturken and Cartwright 2009: 2). This is precisely what this book undertakes. It explores the significance of intervisuality, that is, 'the simultaneous display and interaction of a variety of modes of visuality' (Mirzoeff 2002: 3) in Strindberg's work and legacy.

As an introduction to this approach across Strindberg's body of work, let us look at a few examples taken from different media he consistently explored and experimented with throughout his creative life: painting, drama and photography. The well-known 1892 oil painting *Dubbelbild* (Double Image), so dubbed by Göran Söderström (Lalander 1992: 26), in which one motif visible along two edges of the picture plane

encloses another as if in an odd frame, provides a compelling case study of Strindberg's playful exploration of the philosophies and practices of the visual (Plate 1.1).

The painting *looks like* a montage of two images: a dark and a light landscape (or seascape) superimposed. As our gaze keeps shifting focus between these two layers, it is uncertain whether we are watching the lighter image through an opening cut in the darker one, or the darker image threatening to throw off its cover, a mere theatre curtain, at any moment. According to Per Hedström, Strindberg might have painted the lighter image over the top of an older existing painting (Hedström 2001: 43). Be that as it may, the result is a picture-within-a-picture, which at the same time eliminates the viewer's sense of inside and outside. Since the picture frame is opened up, the compositional distinction between figure and ground is eliminated, and a new dialectics of perception is mobilized: the frame threatens to interfere and take over the image, while the image finds its way into the real. Like the famous duck–rabbit image, Strindberg's painting confounds onlookers' perspectives and thereby their perceptions, presenting them with incessantly shifting illusions. *Double Image* can be seen as a metapicture, a picture about pictures (Mitchell 1994: 35–82) that questions itself as a painting and comments on the nature of perception and representation.

As we now turn to Strindberg's theatre, we discover an abundance of double images or 'metapictures' manifesting both textually and scenically. Thus, for example, the plot of *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) – one of Strindberg's late Chamber Plays – is framed by two images, suggesting a journey from image to image: it opens with a view of a modern urban house facade seen from the street and concludes with a projection of Arnold Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead* (*Die Toteninsel*) (1880) invading the stage. Rather than providing a background to the unfolding action as in traditional theatre, images in this play – and, as several chapters in our volume show, in other Strindberg plays as well – take on the force of dramatic action. The dialogue is composed of sequences that operate on the set, constructing and deconstructing images. The drama follows a trajectory from the exterior of an inviting, pleasant home bathed in sunshine to a dire vision of death, taking us on a journey beyond what is visible on the surface, towards something obscure, into the realm of the unknown. The same structure is reproduced by each of the play's three scenes: a beautiful image is presented only to be destroyed, and something unpleasant is exposed beneath the attractive facade, all the while challenging binary oppositions of exterior and interior, visible and invisible, objective and subjective, living and dead, reality and illusion.

A closer look at the play's scene-by-scene microstructure reveals the journey structure as a central plot-forwarding device, but it is a journey made by means of words that penetrate spaces, tear down facades and walls, tear off veils and masks, for the sole purpose of making the hidden images visible. As the curtain opens, an appealing image of the home of wealth and tranquility appears, but it is already punctured, revealing through its openings pathways into a quite different underlying reality. We catch sight of characters and objects in the windows, placed on the borderline between outside and inside. Our attention is drawn to these figures framed by door and window openings, like so many picture frames. The initial moments of the play are used to

induce the audience to look – to look long and carefully – establishing sight as the guiding principle of the play's dramaturgy. Such framing of the drama within the realm of the visual sets up *The Ghost Sonata* as a meditation on visual and theatrical representation, conflating the two and playing with the motif of infinite multiplication of images-within-images and plays-within-plays.

There is an interesting parallel between the elaboration of the opening scene in *The Ghost Sonata* and the visual technique of Strindberg's *Double Image*, where the two superimposed images are painted in different scales. In the painting, the tempestuous waves on the periphery appear closer to the viewer, whereas the image inside the frame seems more removed and in a smaller scale. This approach signals an interest in exploring the mode and range of visual perception, just as *The Ghost Sonata*'s set challenges assumptions of what was supposed, in drama and stage practices of the time, to be foregrounded or de-emphasized in terms of narrative and thematic development.

In later scenes of *The Ghost Sonata* we find ourselves inside an apartment and meet the figures we previously saw from the outside-street perspective. In a series of violent verbal attacks, the characters mutually 'unmask' one another, exposing decaying and unidentifiable bodies beneath the facade of seemingly distinct individuals. The play dismantles the human figure on the stage and presents it as an image whose referentiality is brought into question. *The Ghost Sonata*, like *Dubbelbild*, functions as a metapicture. The play questions the mimetic quality of the stage image and the actor's body on stage, challenging the conventions of the realistic theatre. Strindberg's play construes traditional theatre as a house of collapsing facades around the notion of the ghost as a figure of absence, anticipating such experiments of high modernity as Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, developed in the 1930s, in which the primacy of the drama text is replaced by deliberate assaults on the senses; the post-World War II, non-linear, non-sequitur and image-driven anti-drama of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco; or, in our own time, American stage director Robert Wilson's postmodern Theatre of Images, where fragments of text, sounds and images slowly unfold into a sensory landscape, inviting spectators to enter a world of altered consciousness and unknown dimensions.

Nature's pictorial urge and the distorting eye

In his aforementioned essay 'A Glance into Space', where Strindberg reflects upon the nature of light and visual perception, he also questions the eye's ability to convey accurate information from the external world to the mind. Looking into the sun at the time of the vernal equinox triggers his reflections on the nature of vision and he wonders if the sun might be 'the omnipresent primeval light, which my imperfect eye can only apprehend as that round, yellow spot on the retina' (Strindberg 2006a: 165–166). These speculations epitomize a radical departure from the prevailing naturalist aesthetics of the time, according to which photographic exactitude increased an artwork's ability to convey the truth of an observable reality. The essay questions both the existence of such an external reality and the objectivity of our perceptions of it.