

# *The Sensory Turn and Representational Deconstruction of Nonhuman Subjectivity in Contemporary Theatre*

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**Abstract:** In contemporary theatre, non-human elements are undergoing a transformation from representational tools to stage actors. Props, installations, soundscapes, and natural materials are no longer merely serving the narrative needs of human characters but are acquiring an independent subject status through their materiality itself. This shift has led to a fundamental change in the way theatre is perceived. This paper begins by examining the functional evolution of objects, analyzing how their material properties and chance mechanisms endow non-human elements with agency and establish their status as participants in stage events. It then explores how non-human factors directly trigger bodily responses in the audience through the physical impact of soundscapes, the tactile suggestions of materials, and the pre-reflective operation of affective mechanisms. It further reveals the challenges posed by non-human logics to traditional dramatic conventions, including the disruption of causal chains, the failure of representational agreements, and the functional transformation of theatre from human stories to world scenes. The research indicates that the superimposition of non-human subjectivity and the sensory turn is driving theatre out of the human-centered narrative framework and into an open field that showcases the complex relationship between humans and non-humans. This transformation not only expands the aesthetic boundaries of theatre but also provides a new theoretical path for rethinking the subject issue in art.

## 1. Introduction

In the over two-thousand-year-old Western dramatic tradition, human action has always been at the core of stage narratives [1-4]. From Aristotle's assertion that "action" is the soul of tragedy to the in-depth exploration of character and emotion since the Renaissance, and then to the modern performance system's meticulous depiction of human psychological states, theatre has essentially been constructed as an art about human beings [5, 6]. Within this framework, non-human elements on the stage - props, sets, installations, sound effects, and even the natural environment - have always been in a subordinate position, with their existence value strictly limited to the instrumental function of serving human characters and advancing the plot. Non-human elements are silent, passive, and replaceable; they are the backdrop of human stories rather than participants [7]. However, since the mid-twentieth century, this long-standing dramatic order has begun to face

fundamental challenges. The rise of post-dramatic theater, immersive theater, object theater, and various cross-media experiments has gradually brought non-human elements from the background to the foreground, from tools to actors. Performances dominated by the logic of objects have emerged on the stage, and contemporary theatre is undergoing a profound paradigm shift [6]. Non-human elements are gaining a subjectivity that cannot be ignored, and this transformation, in turn, is reshaping the audience's perception and the traditional conventions of dramatic representation. This article takes the "sensory turn" as the core analytical concept, aiming to describe the process of the audience's perceptual focus shifting from semantic understanding to bodily experience, and to argue that this shift is precisely achieved through the intervention of non-human subjectivity. Starting from the functional evolution of objects, the article explores the basis for the establishment of non-human subjectivity; it further analyzes how non-human factors directly touch the audience's bodily perception through soundscapes, tactile sensations, and affective mechanisms; and then reveals the deconstructive consequences of non-human logic on causal chains, representational agreements, and human-centered narratives, and thereby discusses the theoretical implications of contemporary theatre's transformation from human stories to world scenes.

## **2. The Appearance of Objects: The Establishment of Non-Human Subjectivity**

### **2.1 The Functional Evolution of Objects**

In Aristotle's six elements of tragedy, the setting is placed at the bottom, with props and scenery merely serving as the physical carriers of the plot. Under this representational logic, objects are silent signifiers, and their existence value lies in "representing" some absent emotion or idea. The function of objects has always been instrumental; they are summoned onto the stage, perform their narrative tasks, and then exit, with their entire existence cycle determined by the needs of human subjects. Contemporary theatre, however, has undergone a fundamental shift. When Robert Lepage's stage features real ice, water, and sand, and when Romeo Castellucci's theater has mechanical devices operating on their own while human actors remain silent observers, the existence of objects is no longer entirely dependent on the needs of characters. This trend has more specific manifestations in contemporary theatrical practice. A typical case comes from the work of Belgian theatre director Jan Fabre, "Mount Olympus". In the 24-hour performance of this play, the stage was filled with a large number of real bone specimens, formaldehyde-soaked animal carcasses, and huge blocks of ice that were constantly melting. These non-human elements did not carry any narrative symbolic functions - the bones did not represent death, the ice did not represent cold, they were merely themselves. However, the actors' actions were forced to revolve around these materials: changing their walking postures due to the slippery ground, shivering due to the low temperature, and adjusting their breathing rhythms due to the smell of formaldehyde. The material properties of the objects directly reshaped the corporeality of the performance, making human actions a continuous response to the presence of the objects. These non-human elements exhibit independent rhythms and behavioral logics; they do not need to be interpreted as symbols, and their materiality itself constitutes the core driving force of stage events. Objects are no longer the background of human actions but participants that are juxtaposed with or even in opposition to human actions. In this evolution, a key transformation lies in: objects have shifted from "used tools" to "coexisting others" [8].

### **2.2 Material Properties and Chance Mechanisms**

Subjectivity does not necessarily equate to consciousness or reflective ability but can be

understood as an active state that generates differences and exerts influence within relationships. In the context of contemporary theatre, the agency of objects stems from two interrelated aspects. The first is the physical characteristics of the objects themselves. The weight of a rock forces an actor to change their movement speed, a coarse fabric restricts the smoothness of movements, and a cold wall reflects sound while blocking vision, etc. These seemingly neutral material properties are not passive in stage events but shape each interaction in an un-negotiable way. Actors must negotiate with these material conditions rather than unilaterally dominate them. These material facts are not blank slates that can be arbitrarily symbolized; they participate in the stage dialogue in their own language and refuse to be fully symbolized [9]. The second is the uncertainty and chance mechanisms of objects. The aging, malfunctioning, random movement, or unpredictable physical reactions of objects often create situations beyond the control of any creative team. A program error causing a robotic arm to repeatedly perform the same action, dust on the stage unexpectedly drifting towards the audience due to air disturbances, or a liquid solidifying faster than expected at a specific temperature, etc. Once these "mistakes" or "accidents" occur, they become an irrevocable and irreplaceable part of the performance, compelling human performers to re-establish relationships with them. It is in this sense that objects acquire their subjectivity: they are no longer entirely predictable and completely obedient to human will but are event participants with their own behavioral logics. Chance is not a disruption of theatrical control but precisely the essential feature of the live nature of the theater, and the agency of objects is most fully manifested in these unrepeatable moments.

### 2.3 Typical Manifestations of Non-Human Agency

The manifestation of non-human subjectivity in the theater can be observed from several interrelated dimensions. The first is the existence of objects as independent rhythm units. In traditional theatre, the presence time of objects is determined by human actions, but in many contemporary theater works, objects are given their own timelines [10]. A projector continuously plays images unaffected by on-stage events, a suspended object slowly changes its posture under the force of gravity, etc. These non-human elements coexist, interweave, or oppose the rhythms of human actions, forming a polyphonic stage time structure. The second is the phenomenon of "cold presence" of objects. Some non-human elements do not actively trigger events but redefine the meaning of space through their impenetrable materiality. A white wall can serve as a backdrop, or, due to its absolute flatness and silence, it can become an unfeeling rebuttal to all human emotional expressions. In this state, human performances recede into background noise, and the silent presence of objects becomes a more forceful statement. The power of this cold presence precisely stems from the inhumanity of the objects; their existence itself questions the dramatic tradition centered on human emotions. The third aspect is the inversion of the relationship between humans and objects. When the behavioral logic of objects dominates the stage process, human actors are pushed into a responsive position. In Castellucci's "Narrative on the Image of the Son of God", mechanical devices operate on their own, puppets and real people are indistinguishable, and flour pours down like an avalanche. Human actions become responses to these non-human events rather than initiators. Similar phenomena of reversing the relationship between people and objects can be found in many typical cases in contemporary theater. One example is a scene in the play "Beasts and Beauties" by British theater director Katie Mitchell and stage designer Vicki Mortimer: On the stage, there was a continuously running automatic loom, with shuttle rods moving back and forth and gears making sounds. The actors' lines and actions had to be interspersed within the fixed rhythm of the loom, and they were even forced to complete key plot developments during the intervals when the machine was paused. The loom did not serve to symbolize or create atmosphere;

instead, its unalterable mechanical logic cut into the human narrative time, reducing humans from the dominant narrators to coordinators of mechanical rhythms. The second example is the use of subtle body movements and the resonance of mobile phone screens by Toshiki Okada, the Japanese theater director, and the chelfitsch theater troupe in the play "A March of a Certain Assault" (\*A March of a certain assault). The actors' dialogues were occupied by seemingly trivial daily language, while multiple mobile phones on the stage vibrated, lit up, or played short video clips at their own independent frequencies. The random responses of these electronic devices and the actors' speech had no causal relationship. They seized the audience's attention in unpredictable ways, reducing human voices from information senders to a track in the electronic noise background. This inversion does not mean that objects "replace" humans, but rather reveals a long-concealed fact: the stage has never been purely human territory; the power of objects has always been present, only long concealed by the representational system.

### **3. The Shift of the Senses: How Non-Human Elements Engage the Audience**

#### **3.1 The Migration of the Perceptual Center**

In the long-dominant representational aesthetics of Western theatre, the audience is presupposed as a rational observer. Whether it is Aristotle's catharsis theory or Brecht's alienation effect, there is an underlying trust and reliance on the audience's ability to understand. Even in theatrical practices aimed at evoking strong empathy, the premise remains that the audience first "understands" what is happening on stage. Within this framework, the value of non-human elements depends on their position within the symbolic system. The audience is trained as a decoding machine, and their perceptual journey is essentially an intellectual activity rather than a bodily experience. The greatest cost of this mode of viewing is the neglect of the audience's body. The rise of non-human subjectivity in contemporary theatre is a fundamental challenge to this tradition. When objects on stage no longer serve a symbolic system but are present in their materiality, the audience is required to participate in a completely different way. They no longer need to ask "What does this mean?" but directly experience "What does this do to me?" A real industrial fan blowing towards the audience brings wind pressure on the skin and low-frequency noise in the ears, without the need for any explanation. Ice blocks on stage slowly melt, and the water surface continuously expands. This process does not point to any external meaning but captures the audience's attention with its irreversible temporality. The perceptual center shifts from "understanding" to "experiencing", from the decoding of symbols to the alteration of the body's state. This shift means that theatre is no longer primarily about being understood but about being experienced. Non-human elements are the key medium of this shift because, unlike human actors, they do not inherently carry intentions or emotions. Their presence is pure, pre-symbolic, and cannot be reduced to information.

#### **3.2 Direct Physical Reactions Triggered by Non-Human Factors**

The core mechanism of the sensory turn lies in the fact that non-human factors can bypass all cognitive intermediaries and directly trigger physical reactions in the audience. These reactions are pre-reflective and instinctive, often occurring before the conscious mind has made a judgment. In traditional theatre, physical reactions essentially still rely on the audience's emotional identification with the characters, being the embodiment of psychological processes. In contrast, the physical reactions triggered by non-human factors are entirely different: they do not require the audience to first "understand" or "identify" with anything. The material properties of objects directly act on the audience's sensory system, generating an almost reflexive effect. This directness is one of the most distinctive features that distinguish non-human subjectivity from human performance.

From the perspective of the soundscape, the impact of non-human sounds on the audience is the most direct and irresistible. Low-frequency vibrations are not transmitted through the eardrum but are perceived through the resonance of bones and internal organs. These vibrations do not carry semantic information but can trigger clear physiological tension and unease. From the perspective of touch, although the audience usually cannot directly touch the objects on stage, visual and auditory information are sufficient to evoke strong tactile associations. From the spatial perspective, the reconfiguration of the theatrical space by non-human elements, such as blurring the boundary between the audience and the stage, creating oppressive close-range installations, or altering the local environment through changes in air flow and temperature, directly affects the audience's somatic boundaries. When the audience feels that an object is too close or that the temperature of the space suddenly changes, their bodies automatically respond with avoidance or alertness, a process completely beyond rational control.

## **4. Deconstruction of Representation: The Challenge of Non-Human Logic to Dramatic Conventions**

### **4.1 The Fracture of Causality and the Deformation of Narrative Time**

Traditional theatre is built on a solid causal logic. From Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" to Ibsen's "A Doll's House", the audience expects to see a chain of actions where "because A, therefore B": because Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, the queen commits suicide when the truth is revealed; because Nora exposed her husband's hypocrisy, she left with a slammed door. In this chain, each event is a reasonable result of the previous one and an effective cause of the next. The intentions, desires, and choices of human subjects are the driving force of this causal chain. The intervention of non-human logic fundamentally challenges this causal structure. The logic of things is not intentional but physical, probabilistic, and random. A stone does not roll down because it "wants" to, but because of gravity; a mechanical device does not move repeatedly because it "expresses some emotion", but because of a program malfunction or design. When these non-human logics become the main driving force of stage events, the psychological causal chain that traditional theatre relies on is broken. Accompanying the fracture of the causal chain is a profound deformation of narrative time. In traditional theatre, time is linear and teleological, each moment pointing to the next: the prologue to the conflict, the conflict to the climax, the climax to the resolution. This is an irreversible, directional time driven by the intentions of human actions. Non-human logic, however, brings about a completely different form of time. The time of things can be cyclical: a mechanical arm repeatedly performs the same action, with no concept of completion, only continuous movement; the time of things can be stagnant: a rock remains in the same position for a long time, unmoved by any event; the time of things can be unpredictable: the intermittent appearance of electronic noise follows no discernible pattern, with neither cause nor consequence. When these non-human temporal forms coexist with the temporal forms of human actors on the same stage, a polyphonic temporal structure is generated. Humans strive to advance the story's progress, while non-human elements interrupt, suspend, or dissolve this progress at their own rhythm.

### **4.2 The Failure of the Representation Agreement**

As a representational art, theatre has long relied on an implicit contract, what Coleridge called "willing suspension of disbelief". The audience knows that the blood on stage is syrup, the door is a backdrop, and the death is a performance, yet they voluntarily choose to believe that all of this "seems" real. This representation agreement is the cornerstone of the entire dramatic communication mechanism, allowing the stage to maintain its fictional nature while generating real

aesthetic and emotional effects. Under this agreement, the safety and controllability of non-human elements are presupposed, providing the audience with a psychological guarantee that they can experience danger and passion from a safe distance.

The establishment of non-human subjectivity, especially when things are present with their true materiality and uncontrollability, poses an unprecedented challenge to this representation agreement. The increasingly common use of real materials in contemporary theater—water, fire, earth, ice, dust, real fragile objects, and even animals—do not fully submit to the logic of "seeming". The real material effects of these non-human elements cannot be fully incorporated into the fictional framework. The audience cannot tell themselves "this water is fake" because it is indeed flowing, soaking, and generating real physical reactions. The boundary of the representation agreement becomes blurred here, and representation seems to temporarily fail. Things are present in their raw materiality. This failure leads to a profound reconstruction of the relationship between the audience and the performance. Under the protection of the traditional representation agreement, the audience is a safe omniscient observer, superior to the stage, a bystander who will never be truly touched by it. When the real materiality of non-human elements enters the stage, the audience's superior position is shaken. When Castellucci uses real, potentially dangerous mechanical devices on stage, and when some immersive theater works bring the audience into close contact with real fire sources or sharp objects, the audience is no longer a safe spectator but an equal participant sharing the physical risks with the stage [11,12]. The "as if" of representation is replaced by the "as such" of presentation, and the distance between the audience and the stage is irreversibly compressed. The non-human elements, with their undeniable material reality, become the key catalyst for the failure of this representational agreement.

#### 4.3 From Human Stories to World Scenes

The ultimate consequence of the deconstruction of representation can be grasped at the most macroscopic level: contemporary theatre is undergoing a transformation from "telling human stories" to "presenting world scenes". This transformation is not an exclusion of humanity, but a reconfiguration of the relationship between humans and non-humans. When objects acquire their independent agency, when sensory shifts compel the audience to engage with the theater through their bodies rather than just their minds, and when the representational agreement fails due to the real materiality of objects, theatre can no longer comfortably confine itself to telling "human affairs". The stage begins to present a more complex picture: humans and objects entangle, restrict, and generate each other, with no party able to completely dominate the other. This is not an anti-human theater, but a post-human one - it acknowledges that humans are not the center of existence but one of many actors. In this sense, theatre is no longer primarily a carrier of stories but a live demonstration of the state of the world. What is the "state of the world"? It is not an abstract concept but a concrete, sensible, and immediate aggregation of events: the flow of water, the resonance of metal, the refraction of light, the movement of air, and how human actions and voices interweave with all of this. In this demonstration, meaning is not a pre-coded signifier but an emergent event generated in the encounter between humans and non-humans. This transformation poses a new understanding of the function of dramatic art. Theatre is no longer mainly a medium for "expressing" some pre-existing content but a cognitive tool for "exploring" the relationship between humans and the world. The significance of non-human subjectivity in contemporary theatre lies in its forcing theatre to confront this complexity, giving up the monopoly on human narratives, and instead becoming an open field for demonstrating the relationships of existence and the boundaries of perception. This is not the end of theatre but its rebirth - from the representational theater to the theater of live generation.

## 5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the paradigm shift brought about by non-human elements in contemporary theatre from three aspects: the establishment of non-human subjectivity, the operation mechanism of the sensory turn, and the deconstruction of the representational system. The research shows that objects gain an active position independent of human intentions through their material attributes and accidental logic, and directly touch the audience's bodily perception through soundscapes, tactile sensations, and affective mechanisms, thereby loosening the traditional causal narrative and representational protocols. This transformation is not a negation of human performance, but rather repositions humans within the theatrical event that coexists and entangles with objects. Contemporary theatre is shifting from the reproduction of human stories to the presentation of the scene of the world state. The function of theatre has also changed from expressing pre-determined meanings to exploring existential relationships. The theoretical value of non-human subjectivity lies in forcing theatre to rethink its relationship with the material world, providing new possibilities for theatrical practice in the post-human era.

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