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'Now on tour': evaluation, persuasion, and multimodality in Late Modern English theatre posters

Marina Dossena

ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon collections of late-nineteenth-century theatre posters currently available at the National Library of Scotland for an investigation of the main linguistic strategies employed for promotional purposes. These posters are both descriptive (indicating for instance the names of the actors and the number of days on which the show can be viewed) and evaluative (stressing novelty, uniqueness, or indeed both features simultaneously). Accompanied by important paralinguistic and extralinguistic tools, such as the use of images, choice of typeface, and poster layout, such strategies are selected to make the posters striking and consequently memorable. My analysis highlights some typical traits contributing to the persuasiveness of the texts under analysis, focusing in particular on the features that appear to have been most popular.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, any reference to the West End of London immediately evokes a glittering image of theatres, high-quality productions, and movie stars who appear equally at ease onscreen and on well-known stages. However, this is a very modern image. An informative summary provided by Bratton (n.d.) on the website of the British Library[1] reminds us that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, only two West End theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, were licensed to operate over the winter season, while a smaller establishment, Haymarket, operated in the summer only. This was soon to change as a growing population enabled smaller theatres to acquire at least temporary licences to stage plays with music, though not the grandiose Shakespearean canon. Rather, other forms of entertainment were developed: silent or musically accompanied action, physical theatre, animal shows, and acrobatics, from which melodramas and pantomimes arose. In 1843, licensing laws were changed to enable all theatres to stage actual plays, in an attempt to educate audiences and encourage new playwrights, but this development only resulted in a further growth of music halls and other 'popular' shows, such as circuses. Especially in the first half of the century, audiences were far from socially homogeneous, silent, still, or indeed passive: the theatre was a place of socialisation and even business, although not always of the respectable kind, and performances catered for all classes of society. It would not be till the last decades of the century that new, more 'middle-brow' dramatists, such as Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, would emerge.

In Scotland, the Kirk's censoring role did not quite stifle the very well-established tradition of popular entertainment, which continued through 'geggies' (see Cameron n.d.), which were often staged adaptations of familiar texts, and other more low-brow shows. 'Legitimate' theatre performances became increasingly dependent on tours of London-based productions. Even so, geographically marked uses both in performances and in promotional material were inevitable, not least on account of the huge success of Sir Walter Scott's novels and the impact that they had on perceptions of Scotland itself both at home and abroad.

In this context, I have taken a sociohistorical pragmatic point of view in order to study how theatres appealed to their audiences, encouraging them to attend performances amidst fierce competition. Theatres relied on powerful multimodal messages on their playbills and posters, in which texts and images coexisted and interacted to convey persuasive promotional content. My investigation will rely on a digitised collection of late-nineteenth-century theatre posters (TPs) currently available on the website of the National Library of Scotland. The aim is to assess TPs as a promotional genre in the nineteenth century, with a focus on persuasion strategies that can be analysed through their cognitive or affective features. This research question will be addressed according to theories of multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Held 2005; O'Halloran 2008; White 2010; O'Halloran & Smith 2011; Hiippala 2012, 2013, and 2015) and appraisal theory (Martin & White 2005; White 2007 and 2015; Hommerberg 2011).[2] My assumption is that their simultaneous application may highlight the temporal dimension and reveal communicative strategies which nowadays may almost be taken for granted.

It should be noted, however, that at this stage, the primary focus of my analysis is not on the interaction of different semiotic modes, that is, on how space is allocated or how artwork was produced and mediated and how different typographical choices were made. That kind of analysis would require a much larger data set. Instead, I intend to pay attention to linguistic features, such as the use of quoted speech, captions, and humour. The decision to focus on Scotland is dictated by an interest in instances of socially and/or geographically marked usage in the material at hand, in which representations of dialogue may or may not reflect the continuum existing between Scots and Scottish English, emphasising distinctive traits for humorous purposes or anglicising them for stylistic reasons.

This pilot article is meant to be a starting point for a larger project on multimedia discourse in Late Modern times,[3] currently in its initial stages, that is designed to help develop a broader overview of how popular culture contributed to knowledge dissemination in the long nineteenth century (see Dossena & Rosso 2016).[4] For the time being, however, only some aspects will be taken into consideration, paying special attention to methodological issues, on one hand, and potentially promising topics of investigation, on the other, as far as pragmatic choices are concerned.

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[2]It would also of course be possible to discuss evaluation on the basis of other theoretical approaches – see for instance Hunston & Thompson (2001) and Hunston (2011). Indeed, the comparison of findings based on a broader range of materials and different theories is already envisaged as a valuable addition to the current project.

[3]An overview of the history of TPs and sample materials are equally available at the website of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/theatre-posters/). These, however, will be considered at a later stage in the project.

[4]For example, an analysis of the differences between British and American TPs would be a worthwhile line of study for the future.

2. The corpus under investigation

The Weir Collection of playbills, programmes, and photographs mainly of Edinburgh theatres includes the Theatre Royal, the Lyceum Theatre, the Princess's Theatre, and other miscellaneous venues.[5] Spanning the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the collection also features some pictorial posters, with scenes from the plays or portraits of the leading actors and actresses. Finally, there are black-and-white photographs of characters from pantomimes. This collection is part of a much larger set of resources hosted by the National Library of Scotland, the potential of which for linguistic investigation at a crucial time in the history of Scots and Scottish English still appears to have been mostly untapped.

From the point of view of textual organisation, these TPs may or may not include text beyond titles and the names of characters and/or actors, and when they do, this practice may or may not be explicitly promotional. In many cases, it is merely informative about the dates of performances.[6] Images thus acquire special value for the appeal they may have for potential audiences. Indeed, it could be argued that like in present-day advertisements or even in the stained-glass windows of medieval churches,[7] it is images that draw the attention of the audience and then the text provides more specific content. When content is more obviously promotional, its links with images need to be investigated in depth, so as to assess how the two communicative strategies interact with each other, either as mutual reinforcement or through the addition of connotative values at the verbal or visual level.

The collection of TPs analysed here is set up as shown in Table 1. Naturally, the number of years in which the establishments were (or have been) active varies. As a result, attempting to identify a correlation between this and the number of TPs available in the collection would be misleading. That kind of quantitative investigation would require much more data on how many shows the theatres actually presented and for how many of these TPs were produced and then preserved. Such an investigation, however, is beyond the scope of the current analysis, for which quantitative data are only provided to enable a general assessment of the greater or lesser presence of one establishment over the others in the collection. Nor would it be appropriate to look for a correlation between these numbers and the features found in TPs, as TPs were not necessarily printed for one theatre only – quite the opposite, in fact. The TPs in the collection were printed in various British cities or indeed in the U.S.A.,[8] as shown in the following examples:

(1) *Cloches des Corneville* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74557234][9] [. . .]. Printed by David Allen & Sons in Belfast.

(2) *Erminie* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74634592] [. . .]. Printed and published, March 30, 1886, by Clement-Smith & Company, Lithographer, London.

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[5]These include Free Masons' Hall, Queen Street Hall, Albert Hall, and John Henry Cooke's New Royal Circus, among others which are not named; see http://digital.nls.uk/83973665.

[6]In this sense, TPs differ from the magazine covers discussed by Held (2005) and the advertisements analysed by White (2010), despite obvious contiguities in relation to modal density and the interaction of visual and verbal rhetoric.

[7]On multimodality in medieval texts and on the impact of the invention of the printing press on the decrease of text and image integration, see Waller (2012: 239).

[8]Although TPs could be authored by figures who would leave an indelible mark on art history, such as in the case of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Mucha, and Aubrey Beardsley, at this stage, there is no evidence that any well-known artists were involved in the production of the TPs under discussion here.

[9]IDs refer to the permanent URLs at which the posters can be seen.

Table 1. Overview of TPs collection.

Theatre	Est.	No. of TPs	% within the collection
Royal Lyceum/Lyceum	1883	63	40
Theatre Royal[10]	1769–1846	35	22
Miscellaneous venues		35	22
Princess's Theatre	1889	23	15
Total		*156*	

TPs: theatre posters.

(3) *Jo* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74553984] [...]. Printed by Mackenzie & Co Litho. Studio, 83 Renfield St., Glasgow.

(4) *Adam Bede* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74517934] [...]. Printed by Stafford & Co., Netherfield, Nott[ingham].

(5) *Miss Adelaide Detchon* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74560332] [...]. Paterson & Sons, Music sellers to the Queen, 27 George Street, Edinburgh.

(6) *Japan in Edinburgh* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74553968] [...]. Printed by Andrew Reid, Lith., Newcastle; Carnegie & Company, Bazaar Decorators, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

(7) *Hoodman blind* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74550392] [...]. Printed by Forbes Co., Boston, U.S.A.

(8) *Night off* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74521534] [...]. Printed by A. S. Seer's, Union Square Print, New York, U.S.A.

This set of examples suggests that it would be difficult to associate the kind of usage found in TPs with a certain geographical variety and/or within a certain cultural framework, more or less distant from London or other cultural centres. Indeed, we may already be witnessing the onset of some globalising trends in these forms of promotional communication, where stylistic traits could be shared among documents originating and being accessed in different parts of the English-speaking world.

3. Methods

Given the potentially significant degree of interaction between texts and images, the methodological approach followed in this analysis has to rely on a composite framework in which tools may be selected according to the primary research questions meant to be addressed, while ensuring that these tools may offer compatible results, albeit from different perspectives. In this sense, images will be discussed in the light of multimodality, while texts will be analysed according to the main tenets in appraisal theory. The assumption is that both approaches, though addressing different aspects, may contribute to a synergic study of cognitive pathways in persuasive discourse, since both take into consideration how persuasion may be achieved through connotation, evocative locution, and (non-)verbal textual structure and organisation. In this sense, TPs can be shown to rely on a two-tier kind of semantic prosody, in which what is textual is supplemented with para-textual and even non-verbal features which appear to be employed consistently.

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[10]This was the first establishment to be granted a theatre licence in Scotland; in 1822 George IV visited it for a performance of *Rob Roy MacGregor* (Baird 1964: 42).

3.1. *Multimodality*

While most scholars (e.g. O'Halloran & Smith 2011) discuss multimodality as an eminently present-day phenomenon, its time depth is worth investigating in earlier texts (see also Tyrkkö, this volume). Twenty-first-century readers appear to be more accustomed to multimodal genres than their earlier counterparts, whereas nineteenth-century readers were more familiar with a higher degree of textual density.[11] Attention is paid to the coexistence of verbal and non-verbal features on the same page – a field in which several studies have appeared and in which theoretical reflection is growing (see, among others, Waller 2012; Bateman 2014; Thomas 2014).

Starting from textual structure and organisation in relation to the multimodal quality of the collection at hand, it is immediately to be noted that its compositional metafunction is realised in less standardised ways than in the typical distinction between what is 'given' and what is 'new', what is 'real' and what is 'ideal', based upon a top–bottom and/or a left–right dichotomy. For instance, the name of the venue, which according to the traditional grammar of visual design outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) would fall into the 'given' and 'real' categories, may be found at the top or at the bottom of the TPs. A similar reversal of expected textual distribution concerns the title of the show and/or the names of the protagonists, be they of characters or performers, while captions or projected speech may be placed at the centre of the page or next to relevant images. Page structure thus reflects the information value attributed to the contents and the place where they are perceived by the composers of the TPs to be more striking for the viewers.

As a result, the representational macro-function of the TPs under discussion adopted narrative strategies in which text and images supplement each other like in the shows of street-performing storytellers. From the communicative point of view, the textual density of playbills which could only rely on different typographical choices is clearly less effective than images in which content is represented, making it more salient for recipients (a phenomenon on which PowerPoint presentations also rely today). Indeed, in the collection at hand, space distribution appears to vary considerably. For instance, images can be centred, though not necessarily framed by text on all sides, or they can be presented as sequences of individual scenes. This flexibility in space allocation can be explained with the authors' wish to surprise their viewers with memorable novelty and originality. In this sense, the interpersonal meta-function of multimodality is seen in the constant attempt to involve viewers, not only inviting them to participate by attending the show, but also eliciting their emotional participation before the event through the enjoyment of a colourful set of images, an elegant portrait, an amusing caricature, or a humorous or dramatic set of verbal remarks. As a result, social distance is reduced through the affective involvement elicited by the TPs, while the TPs flatter the audiences' supposedly higher status or intellectual standing or even general knowledge, since they may invite them to laugh at 'clever' instances of eye-dialect and jokes, or recognise and thus enjoy well-known literary texts.[12]

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[11]This is immediately obvious when nineteenth-century textbooks, newspapers, and magazines are compared with current ones. In the former, there could be long sequences of pages comprising nothing but text – something which would be unthinkable in present-day materials.

[12]On superiority theory in humour, see Morreall (2016).

3.2. *Appraisal theory*

As the object of this investigation concerns persuasive, promotional discourse, which   185
typically relies on seeking common ground, expressing shared views and evaluations, and
providing insiders' comments (which of course imply subjectivity), I chose to draw on the
analytical tools provided by appraisal theory (see Martin & White 2005; White 2007, 2015).

This approach provides a comprehensive and accurate framework for the study of
phenomena in which the interaction of semantics and pragmatics is particularly impor-   190
tant. Appraisal theory enables the investigation of style and stance in such a way that the
linguistic construction of authorial voices and textual personae may be studied, on the
presupposition that all texts interact with one another, no matter how implicitly or
explicitly, and respond to one another with the expression of *attitude* (e.g. emotional or
affectual responses), *engagement* (i.e. acknowledging, ignoring, or rejecting different   195
viewpoints, for instance employing evidentiality, concessive forms, and presumptions),
or *graduation* (i.e. strengthening or downtoning statements or their semantic focus).
Expressions of attitude comprise three subsystems: *affect* (relating to emotion), *judge-
ment* (relating to the implicit or explicit evaluation of behaviour with respect to social
norms), and *appreciation* (relating to the evaluation of objects). In TPs, all of these aspects   200
may be identified to varying degrees, and although these phenomena may be studied
individually, focussing on quantitative data in relation to the frequency of lexical choices
or syntactic features, such a limited approach would leave us with a rather narrow view of
textual organisation and pragmatic significance. What may be more fruitful at this stage is
a more encompassing methodology in which the complexity of the texts, also conveyed by   205
their multimodal qualities, may be taken into consideration. To that end, close readings
of the documents and overall qualitative investigations are indispensable for the purposes
of answering this project's research questions.

4. Analysis

The communicative aims of TPs are at least twofold: on the one hand, they aim to inform   210
about shows, that is, they are descriptive, indicating for instance the names of the actors and
the number of days on which the show can be viewed; on the other, they are persuasive,
aiming to encourage attendance, thus providing evaluations stressing novelty, uniqueness, or
indeed both features of the show simultaneously. TPs thus rely on representation, which
entails cognitive processes and emotion, an affective process in which the recipient is involved   215
in less rational ways than through fact-giving descriptions. Together with important para-
linguistic and extralinguistic tools, such as the use of images, choice of typeface, and poster
layout, these strategies combine to make TPs striking and consequently memorable.

From the pragmatic point of view, the main aim of TPs is to guide their viewers'
choices. These choices are (more or less) conscious processes, but they can certainly be   220
(more or less) subtly manipulated if discourse organisation is sufficiently skilful. In the
cases under investigation here, shows vie with each other for their envisaged audiences'
patronage amidst fierce competition on an increasingly crowded entertainment scene.
The creation of a positive image is absolutely crucial. In addition, identity has to be
outlined clearly and defined to the point of 'branding', so as to highlight uniqueness and   225
persuade prospective viewers that the show they select will not disappoint them.

This means that TPs need to maximise the shows' profitability by maximising the envisaged audiences' promised benefit. Such audiences will find that their money has been well spent if the show has been found to match their interests and even surpassed their expectations. Eliciting curiosity is of paramount importance. Viewers must be encouraged to buy tickets in the belief that what they will see is new, unique, and/or only available for a short period of time (implying that the experience may be exclusive), and that their status will increase as a result of their involvement and participation in an event from which others may have been excluded, or indeed may have excluded themselves having failed to realise the event's importance.[13]

This message works on different levels. The creation of an identity is meant to match the viewers' interests and elicit their curiosity functions on a cognitive level in which the representational macro-function of discourse is highlighted:[14] It is here that we find what is stressed as 'new' and as an 'ideal' picture of the world of entertainment. At the same time, the affective dimension, in which evaluations of other traits than novelty are foregrounded, expresses an interpersonal macro-function in which involvement goes beyond rational arguments and relies on the fascination with what may render viewers unique and exotic or otherwise extraordinary experiences. Even before taking their seats in the theatre, audiences could enjoy a vicarious experience of such an unmissable opportunity thanks to the communicative potential of TPs.

Caricatures and humorous remarks also aim to elicit an affective response meant to make the text (or the image or both) more memorable. Sharing fun is an excellent strategy to elicit the recipients' solidarity and ensure their emotional involvement. It is certainly no accident that satire has always contributed so significantly to political propaganda.[15] Humour has been a powerful tool employed by prescriptivists to make 'errors' sound like real blunders for centuries and, as a result, unforgettable in their comical quality, pointing to the readers' supposed linguistic superiority (see Beal 2009; Dossena, in preparation).[16]

In what follows, the most prominent attention-seeking devices employed in this collection of TPs are outlined. Textual features are discussed in their multimodal frame, where text and images function in synergy with one another.

4.1. Attention-seeking devices on the verbal level

Attention-seeking verbal strategies may feature individually or in combination with each other; a few examples are presented below from the Weir Collection.

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[13]This kind of promotional discourse centred on uniqueness and exclusivity may have been frequent since the Renaissance, if not before. See, for instance, the comically hyperbolic way in which Polonius introduces the company that will perform 'The Mousetrap' in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (II.2.1477–1482). Similarly, in 'Ma che aspettate a batterci le mani', a 1958 song written by Nobel Laureate Dario Fo – an expert in *Commedia dell'Arte* and early theatre performances – a chorus of travelling comedians invites villagers (i.e. prospective audiences) to celebrate the company's arrival and the enticing shows on schedule which even royalty is claimed to have enjoyed on several occasions (see www.archivio.francarame.it/scheda.aspx?IDScheda=8768&IDOpera=174).

[14]When macro-functions are concerned, reference is made to Halliday (1978) and to the tenets of Systemic Functional Linguistics more in general.

[15]See Dossena (2013) for a discussion of nineteenth-century Scottish ballads concerning elections and other issues.

[16]In this respect, the humorous quality of much dialect literature and of literary uses of dialect could also be considered. The mechanisms at work in the representation of supposedly distant yet comprehensible shibboleths rely on the fact that readers will be able to decode and enjoy them while acknowledging their relative unfamiliarity. Instances of such uses are also prominent in many periodical publications (see Donaldson 1986, 1989).

4.1.1. *References to novelty, previous success, and/or exoticism*

Textual elements in TPs may stress the novelty of the show and/or the fact that it is also proving (or has proved) a success abroad, ideally in locations deemed culturally prestigious such as France and the U.S.A., so that the potential audience may find the show attractive for supposedly sophisticated audiences, which the viewer is implicitly invited to join:

(9) Pepita [ID: digital.nls.uk/74570076] [...]. Lecocq's latest comic opera success, now the rage in France & America. Van Biene and Horace Lingard's celebrated Falka Co., in a new comic opera, 'Pepita'.

(10) George Ernest Cooke [ID: digital.nls.uk/87633504] [...] I laugh and grow fat at the delicious jokes and quaintnesses of George Ernest Cooke Edinburgh's favourite clown (just returned from a five years' tour in America).

4.1.2. *References to exclusiveness and/or uniqueness*

On a similar note, the show's worth is enhanced when the TP stresses that the show is running only for a limited period of time or even that these are 'farewell performances', flagging something final and impossible to repeat. This viewpoint automatically excludes any future audiences, as they will never have the chance to share the privilege of attending what is available to current viewers – see the examples below:

(11) Old soldiers [ID: digital.nls.uk/74601948] By Royal Letters Patent. Monday, May 11, 1885, for six nights only.

(12) All for her [ID: digital.nls.uk/74518870] Friday, October 30, for this night only.

(13) Caste [ID: digital.nls.uk/74601956] Farewell performances.

4.1.3. *References to stardom*

Shows often promote themselves by drawing the potential patrons' attention to the protagonists, (supposedly) well-known actors or actresses whose other successes are mentioned. This links the current act to other performances that the viewers may have seen or at least heard of, thus encouraging them to take advantage of the possibility of seeing (again) somebody they or their fellow spectators have already appreciated:

(14) Jo [ID: digital.nls.uk/74560346] Miss Jennie Lee [as] 'Jo'.

(15) *Dark days* [ID: digital.nls.uk/74536764]. 'Truly yours' Florence West as Philippa Lafarge in 'Dark Days' the great Haymarket success.

(16) Emigration [ID: digital.nls.uk/74550466] [...]. Hubert O'Grady as 'Hughey the Stowaway' in his great play 'Emigration'.

4.1.4. *Virtual previews*

Data on venues, dates, times, and (less frequently) ticket costs are vital pieces of information concerning an event. This knowledge needs to be disseminated as widely as possible, but TPs may also include other text meant, through its dramatic quality or its humorous tone, to enhance the appeal of the performance. Even snatches of scenes,

including projected speech, may be offered with images. This strategy was later adopted in movie trailers, where apparently unconnected but theatrical scenes are presented in order to amuse, elicit curiosity, evoke drama, or suggest unexpected twists in the plot. In this sense, catchphrases and expressive speech acts are not infrequent on account of their concise yet powerful illocutionary force, though other instances of isolated yet striking speech acts are also found, where the apparent de-contextualisation enhances their attention-seeking quality. Instead of being detrimental to comprehension, such expressions function as micro-previews of the show and create expectations as to its development – something which favours the viewer's emotional participation, albeit cataphorically; see the following examples:

(17) Wronged, or Through the furnace [ID: digital.nls.uk/74601954] [...] 'Stand back! It is a question of your life!'
(18) Sophia [ID: digital.nls.uk/74601944] [...] 'Next please!!!'.
(19) Adam Bede [ID: digital.nls.uk/74517934] [...] 'I don't forget what's owing to you as a gentleman but in this thing we are man to man'.
(20) Jane Shore [ID: digital.nls.uk/74553706] [...] 'See with these dying hands I take off the Curse and place it on my Soul'.
(21) Lady of the lake [ID: digital.nls.uk/74555654] [...] 'The Combat. FITZJAMES - Now, yield thee, or, by Him who made The world, thy heart's blood dyes my blade! RODERICK DHU - Thy threats, thy mercy, I defy! Let recreant yield, who fears to die! Act III, Scene 4'.
(22) Crimes of Paris [ID: digital.nls.uk/74535340] [...] 'Would you kill me?', 'Angele! My wife!!', 'Child you have no mother now!', 'The Rescue', 'Jules, Jules, my poor husband!'.

In this context, curiosity is also elicited by potentially ambiguous or provocative statements:

(23) Rev. Robert Spalding [ID: digital.nls.uk/74560420] [...] 'I don't like London'.
(24) Magistrate [ID: digital.nls.uk/74592312] 'My Wife!'

Finally, eye dialect and/or stage accents occur in those cases where socially and/or geographically marked situations are suggested. Such usage is typically employed in literary texts aiming to represent elderly and/or uneducated and/or provincial subjects, often for humorous purposes. The tradition dates back to medieval times, when cultural representations had to rely on the most obviously salient traits of language use. It was employed in Elizabethan drama and was also a trait of nineteenth-century literature and expressions of popular culture (see fn. 15):

(25) Jo [ID: digital.nls.uk/74553984] [...] 'I am a movin' on'.
(26) My sweetheart [ID: digital.nls.uk/74585026] [...] 'Louisa your luvin husband is waitin fur you outside'.
(27) Erminie [ID: digital.nls.uk/74536356] [...] 'I can prove a h' alibi'.

4.2. *Attention-seeking devices in images and viewers' responses*

Earlier playbills showed textual density, as they only relied on written words, albeit with the
use of varying typefaces. In later TPs, most of the space is taken up by images, which are
often in colour, thanks to technical innovations and the advent of chromolithography at the
turn of the nineteenth century. Less complex items present portraits (or caricatures if the
show is a comedy or a farce) of the protagonists, while more complex TPs present one or
more key scenes with or without text (see Section 4.1.4). An interesting example of 'mise-
en-abyme' (i.e. a kind of 'Droste effect')[17] shows two characters commenting a poster
announcing the show, but the viewers themselves are actually looking at the poster, and
perhaps smiling at the humorous tone of the scene with the two characters presented as
hailing 'from the country', that is, being the stereotypically comical characters of 'super-
iority'-based jokes:

> (28) My sweetheart [ID: digital.nls.uk/74560244] [...]
> COUNTRY MAIDEN – Pa, look at that Scarecrow going about exhibiting his
> sweetheart. If I had such a beau I would object. Who can she be?
> FATHER – I don't know, but the sign on t'other side reads – Minnie Palmer is
> 'My Sweetheart'.

The text above shows a fictive response to a TP. A similar, though monological,
comment is found in (30) below, where a virtual commentator reports the uniqueness
of his experience:

> (29) My wife [ID: digital.nls.uk/87633666] I never saw such a genius, was there
> ever[18] such a man as George Ernest Cooke? The most original of clowns.

Actual viewers' reactions to TPs can potentially be investigated in a range of docu-
ments, both personal, such as diaries and autobiographies, and more official ones, such as
courtroom depositions. A preliminary overview can be gained from the U.K. Reading
Experience Database,[19] in which comments on playbills and posters indicate that these
artefacts drew the attention of passers-by in a world where visual culture had a different
kind and degree of pervasiveness from what we witness today. Indeed, they are even
mentioned in reports in which crime scenes are described, as in the following quotations:

> Witness statement in trial for highway robbery:
> James John Streath: 'On the 18th of October last this man watched me in the Strand. He was
> looking at a playbill … This was about nine o'clock. I saw this man and another looking at a
> playbill at a small butter shop, the other side of Bedford-street…' (London, 18 October 1816, Old
> Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, 1 August 2006), 30 October 1816, Trial of
> Frederick Constable (t18161030-25)
> www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=1114

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[17]This refers to Escher's famous lithograph of a man looking at an exhibition in art gallery in which he appears looking
at an exhibition in an art gallery, etc. (see www.mcescher.com/news/mystery-of-print-gallery-solved-escher-and-the-
droste-effect/)
[18]This is obviously a catchphrase in this context, later used also in the lyrics introducing one of the most 'magical' cats
in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical based on T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*: 'Oh, well I never! / Was
there ever / A cat so clever / as Magical Mr Mistoffelees?' (see www.catsthemusical.com/characters/mr-mistoffelees).
[19]See www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/

Witness statement in trial for receiving stolen goods:
Robert Daniel Liddell: 'I am in Mr Marshall's employ. On the 10th of March he left me to bring these boxes home and when I got opposite St Sepulchre's church I was looking at a playbill, a man in a white great coat came up, tapped me on the shoulder and said I was wanted…' (London, 10 March 1828, Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, 1 August 2006), 10 April 1828, Trial of John Peters (t18280410-54)
www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=1088

The same database also includes a reference in an autobiography, in which the 'artistic' quality of the playbills is appreciated and in which the fascination they exerted on schoolboys is evoked, thus highlighting their attention-seeking function and the kind of response, that is, attitude, which they elicited:

As our roads home from school lay for a considerable distance in the same direction, Tommy Davies … and I generally walked home together, making numerous stoppages along the way to read, admire and compare the playbills of the different theatres. One afternoon in the latter end of the month of October we were going home, when our attention was forcibly arrested by a bill of an unusually attracive [sic] character. It was a very large, very highly coloured and very profusely illustrated bill…
(Thomas Wright, *Some habits and customs of the working classes,* London, 1867), pp. 155–156
www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=7838

5. Concluding remarks

We do not know for certain how successful these TPs were in their attempt to invite audiences to attend the shows. After all, performances could and certainly did profit from other publicity channels, such as reviews in newspapers and of course word-of-mouth comments exchanged among friends and acquaintances. However, they were clearly deemed to be very important for the dissemination of knowledge about shows. They had to convey information briefly and effectively, making the most of the few minutes in which potential patrons could skim the text and focus on an appealing image or set of images, including unusual typographical choices. This means that they had to be both informative and persuasive at the same time, neglecting neither aim of their communication, lest their contents should prove too scanty or not interesting enough.

The coexistence of appreciation and emotion, rational and affective appeals, in one and the same text makes TPs particularly interesting objects of study for an investigation of multimodal discourse. While in contemporary communication the study of multimodality is both frequent and valuable for an understanding of complex discursive features, the time depth of certain phenomena does not seem to have elicited the same kind of attention, despite the large number of documents available in archives, many of which can now be consulted in digitised form thanks to a growing number of projects launched all over the English-speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic.

The tools of appraisal theory, on the one hand, and multimodal discourse analysis, on the other, have enabled a preliminary assessment of the main strategies employed in nineteenth-century TPs for the presentation of shows meant to cater for a variety of audiences, from conventional drama to more popular events. These strategies appear to have centred around two main foci: the rational appeal to appreciate what is new and good

value for money, and the emotional appeal to enjoy what is unique, exclusive, and indeed ephemeral. The emotional connotations in the linguistic choices made, together with skilful use of evocative images, unusual typefaces of varying sizes, and striking colours whenever possible, make TPs a very modern genre, particularly from the point of view of present-day approaches to promotional discourse. It seems likely that such approaches would probably profit from greater attention to earlier text types so as to increase their awareness of how certain phenomena have developed. It is true that, as the proverbial phrase suggests, 'the past is a foreign country' and genres used to be different there, but it is a very worthwhile source of information on the roots of our own discourse types and strategies, the changes that have intervened, and the lines of continuity that may still be traced.

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