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### Discourse analysis

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# PERFORMANCE RESEARCH METHODS

Interdisciplinary Methods  
for Theatre, Dance and  
Performance Studies

EDITED BY  
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AND LAURA KARREMAN



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# 8. Discourse Analysis

*Sruti Bala*

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## Summary

This contribution presents a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis as a framework that is suitable for analysing the connections between performance and its political dimensions. The case of a performance that is cancelled due to accusations of it being blasphemous is used to broadly introduce both the concept of discourse as well as the basic tenets and points of departure of a Foucauldian discourse analysis. The contribution then contextualises the discipline's approach to the methodology, by highlighting the role of discourse analysis in shaping the way the concept of performance is currently used in theatre and performance studies, referring to the work of Jon McKenzie and Judith Butler. Following an elaboration of the working principles and practical steps in conducting a discourse analysis, the contribution demonstrates how the author adapted and implemented these in her own research on participatory art. The contribution concludes with a discussion of Edward Said's *Orientalism* as an instance of expanding discourse analysis.

## Introduction

Consider the following situation: a performance by an experimental theatre collective is cancelled because of its purportedly inappropriate content, resulting in fierce debates on freedom of expression and state repression, expressions of support for the artists as well as protests

outside theatre venues. The controversy concerns the portrayal of a mythical religious figure in the performance as an ordinary human with flaws and desires, making use of satire and exaggeration in its depiction of this figure. Critics accuse the performance of being blasphemous and offensive to the religious sentiments of one of the powerful demographic communities. Ruling party leaders join the condemnation of the performance, using the occasion to mobilise their own constituency as victims, thereby invoking a sense of threat from and animosity toward members of other religious communities. The theatre group and its director in particular face online attacks targeting their personal lives and religious backgrounds. Cultural institutions remain either silent or extremely cautious in their responses to the cancellation.

This is a hypothetical but nonetheless realistic instance of a theatrical problem that could potentially lend itself to a discourse analysis. It is fundamentally concerned with questions of power. It invites connections between performance and its political dimensions. It requires paying attention to not only what occurs on stage or during the broader production process, but also and especially to what is left unsaid and remains invisible, by following its traces and reading between the lines. It calls for an inquiry into how something came about, what created the conditions for it to be such and not otherwise. It suggests that there is more to the event than what is self-evident or immediately perceptible, and that making sense of it requires attention to how power is manifested and materialised in dynamic ways. When it comes to disentangling controversies, grappling with differing interpretations and viewpoints or contested claims on truth, discourse analysis can be a useful methodological framework. It engages with the ways in which meaning is produced and contested in society, shedding light on the processes by which something comes to be seen as true or meaningful or is mobilised for specific ends.

The term 'discourse' has been theorised in different ways by scholars in various disciplines. Common to these conceptions is the rejection of a literal or descriptive understanding of language and communication and an emphasis on how language in all its facets is part of the construction of social life (Gill 2018). Subsequently, there are several distinct approaches to discourse analysis, ranging from a sociolinguistic understanding of discourse, which is broadly interested in linguistic

interactions between communities, as well as rituals and modalities of text, speech and communication (van Dijk 1985), to a media studies approach to discourse analysis which adopts a multimodal and multimedia engagement with language in relation to image, sound and interactive media.

In the present contribution, discourse analysis refers to a methodology derived from Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, honed through his life-long interest in the history of ideas and the sciences. The Foucauldian conception of discourse is an epistemological and simultaneously a political one, i.e. it understands discourse as inseparable from the process of creating or gaining knowledge, which is in turn inseparable from power struggles. In this sense it can be distinguished from the common, linguistic definition of discourse, which refers to a particular, ordered mode of speech or a unit of conversation (e.g. as evident in the phrases 'holding a discourse' or 'media discourses').

In his studies on madness, on sexuality and the prison system, Foucault puts forward an understanding of discourse in terms of being "an institutionalised way of speaking or writing about reality that defines what can be intelligibly thought and said about the world and what cannot" (Longhofer and Weinberg 2023). He further elaborates discourse as "a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning" and, in doing so, masks itself as objective and stable (Adams 2017). Following this, we can argue that the discourse of the body that circulates in the field of performance studies is significantly different from theological discourses of the body. This implies that an idea, such as that of a divine body, may make perfect sense within theological discourses of the body, yet not be intelligible in the discourse of artistic performance. This unintelligibility might become evident when, for instance, the costumed or visually embellished stage appearance of a holy figure evokes contradicting responses among audiences who bring to the performance very different associations and emotions related to 'the body', shaped by social, cultural or religious factors.

Discourse is thus knowledge that is formed not only through spoken or written language, but also through material realities that are systematically organised with their own constraints and regularities and have specific histories. There are thus conditions and criteria for a body to come to be regarded as 'divine' or as 'offensive'. Foucault's

conception of discourse thus emphasises the power relations that govern the relationship between discourse and social reality.

The analysis of discourse should not be reduced to a linguistic reflection or representation of reality. Rather, it considers discourse as a material reality of its own kind (Jäger and Maier 2016, 112). Foucault speaks of 'discursive practices or formations', indicating that discourse is not a sign or language system with abstract grammatical rules, but rather the conditions and effects as well as the material manifestations of sign or language systems (Leezenberg 2021, 68). Discourse analysis is therefore based on a constructivist epistemology. This means that it is not simply about analysing how meanings are allocated and interpreted through sign systems, but rather about the generative and constructive dimensions of discourse, i.e. how discourse produces and generates reality and diversifies knowledge. Some scholars thus refer to it as 'critical discourse analysis', whereby 'critical' refers not only to a criticism of power in relation to discourse, but also to an analysis of its effects and how it materialises and manifests itself (Foucault 1997, 58–59).

Although Foucault neither uses the term 'discourse analysis' nor prescribes how to conduct such an analysis, his influential, cross-disciplinary conception of discourse offers valuable principles and directions for the study of the systems of thought and material practice that shape and enliven a particular field. The present contribution thus approaches discourse analysis as the study of underlying patterns and power relations in terms of how they are manifested in language, objects, practices and other expressions. Discourse analysis often departs from that which is declared as self-evident or taken for granted and destabilises this object of study through processes of historicisation and comparison and contrast. Rather than aiming to uncover some ultimate universal truth, discourse analysis sheds light on how something comes to be regarded as true or significant, and what this reveals or implies.

## Context

Discourse analysis includes divergent approaches and has been adapted in different disciplines of the social sciences and humanities, such as in sociolinguistics (Blommaert 2005), communication studies

(Fairclough 2010) and political theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The present contribution suggests possible avenues for adopting a discourse analytical framework in studying theatre and performance, departing from Foucault's conception of discourse, especially as outlined in his inaugural address at the Collège de France in 1970 (1981), and subsequently developed by scholars of media, migration and social-political conflict, such as Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier (2016).

Discourse analysis is relevant to the theorisation of theatre and performance at two interconnected levels. It seeks to understand on the one hand the conditions under which a particular field (a genre, a practice, any kind of theatrical activity) came to be formed, what Foucault refers to as discursive formations. On the other hand, it examines the conditions under which it is transformed, challenged or discarded. This is what Foucault terms discursive ruptures. Take the case of the cancellation of the music theatre performance *Aïsha and the Women of Madina* by Rotterdam's Independent Theatre (Onafhankelijk Toneel) in 2001 because of protests and fears of violence around the stage depiction of the Prophet and his wife. A discourse analysis of the politics of the cancellation of a performance would ask what factors influenced the choices in the staging of the mythical religious figure, what factors led to the call for its cancellation, and what were its direct and indirect effects in the aftermath of the cancellation. An inquiry into discursive formations and ruptures might include a discussion of how certain kinds of representations of religious figures came to be associated with obscenity or sacrilege. Lonneke van Heugten's discourse analytical study (2013) examines how perceptions of the play were entangled with public debates on 'multiculturalism' and growing hostilities toward Muslim Dutch citizens.

In this sense, discourse analysis is intrinsically interested in historiographical questions. A discourse analytical view of theatre fundamentally approaches it as a historically and geographically contingent and fluid object of study. In terms of its etymological roots in Greek, theatre is 'a place of looking' that is intrinsically tied to theory, 'contemplation and speculation'. The fact that the term theatre was used with reference to a space such as an anatomical theatre ('*theatrum anatomicum*') in the sixteenth century is not only relevant as a historical fact, but also invites us to probe into how theatre became

shaped as a means of producing and disseminating knowledge, a means of speaking about, perceiving and presenting bodies, and how this knowledge ties to power struggles. The analysis of discourse probes its fault lines and contradictions. It reflects on how this meaning-making changes, sometimes assuming radically different forms across times and geographies. This refers not only to language usage and the linguistic aspects of discourse, but equally also to the institutions, practices, objects, subjects, architectures, infrastructures and material manifestations of discourse. The web of relations connecting all these aspects of discourse are also called 'dispositives' (Foucault 1980, 194; Jäger and Maier 2016, 113–14). In the example introduced earlier, the dispositive would include the web of relations connecting theatre, religious communities, the state, political parties and local or regional histories.

Viewed in this manner, discourse analysis helps us comprehend 'performance' as a dynamic set of organising principles rather than as a fixed object of study, thus steering our attention to the conditions under which something comes to be regarded as performance or is excluded from the category. To view performance not as a stable object of study but as a 'lens' through which social practices may be understood, is to thus signal the possibility of a different kind of knowledge emerging from a particular shift in discursive formation, an insight that has been foundational to the field of performance studies (Taylor 2003).

Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else* (2001) is one such instance of the use of discourse analysis, inquiring into what distinguishes the discourse of performance in the artistic and cultural context (with its focus on experimentation, creativity, aesthetic experience) from discourses of performance in neoliberal business and technology (emphasising efficiency, normativity, output). In doing so, McKenzie pays attention to those elements that coincide between discourses of performance in business, management or technology on the one side, and cultural performance on the other. It de-objectifies performance as a stable object of study by comparing and contrasting it to other domains wherein performance has an entirely different valence.

Following Foucault's approach to discourse, the methodological framework of discourse analysis is important not only as a diagnostic tool, i.e. to offer an incisive analysis of the effects and mechanisms of discursive activities, but also as a tool of critique, resistance and thus

social transformation (Hook 2001, 522). By revealing the socially or historically constructed nature of a phenomenon, it becomes possible to develop ways of transforming what might otherwise appear to be given and thus unchangeable.

Judith Butler's foundational work on gender is an outstanding example of a critical deployment of discourse analysis as a tool of resistance to the seemingly all-powerful mechanisms of the gender binary. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" they argue that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (Butler 1998, 520). Butler decodes gender here in terms of enactment, thus mobilising theatre and performance into a consideration of philosophical conceptions of the body. In doing so, they lay bare the social mechanisms of sanctioning or admitting certain kinds of gender transgressions. In a telling example, Butler analyses how the act of cross-dressing may well be welcomed and applauded when it is practised on stage in the framework of an artistic performance, but nevertheless ostracised and punished when it takes place in a day-to-day social situation, such as a transgender person who is ridiculed and discriminated against while walking down the street (1998, 528). In fact, what Butler does here is to identify what Foucault describes in "The Order of Discourse" ([1970] 1981) as the external procedures of discursive formations, in this case gender discourses. These include procedures of exclusion and prohibition, such as those determining when gender cross-dressing is acceptable and when it is penalised, procedures of dividing and categorising certain gendered behaviours as 'decent' or 'transgressive', as well as procedures that make it possible for subjects to be imbued with authority or privileges, such as through being seen as 'respectable' or 'proper'. Butler's reading of gender, however, pushes beyond describing how gendered performance plays out in daily life. They instead use the analysis of gendered discourse to argue that "there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given" (Butler 1998, 531). This should not be misconstrued as implying that everything about gender is relative or a matter of perspective. In fact, following a Foucauldian approach, Butler argues that gender discourses are constructed in specific and historically situated ways that cannot simply be altered by will or by swapping interpretive frameworks.

However, by understanding the complex web of conditions that make gender both restrictive as well as generative as a discursive practice, Butler offers a good example of using discourse analysis to not only capture the historical 'formations' of gender discourse but also, in doing so, challenges its foundational categories—in this case gender binaries—revealing them in their contingency, thereby paving the way for their potential 'rupture' and transformation. In their recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024) they extend this critique to the category of sex as well.

## How to

Although there are no formulae or fixed steps for using the discourse analytical method, Foucault identifies four abstract principles, namely the principles of reversal, discontinuity, specificity and exteriority ([1970] 1981, 67). These principles challenge widely accepted epistemological norms in a counter-intuitive fashion.

The analytical principle of 'reversal' refers to looking beyond the level of the individual text or authorial voice to the broader undercurrents and operations of power. Foucault reverses the widespread assumption that subjects produce discourses, instead proposing that it is discourse that produces subject positions. Such a view would, for instance, reject the idea that an incident such as a performance cancellation was motivated by ill intentions or moral flaws, instead examining how religious conservatism, sexism, liberalism and political authoritarianism crystallised into conflicting positionalities and identities. The principle of 'discontinuity' rejects the idea of the stable and linear origins of discourse, instead studying discourse as a moment, an event, a slice of history, as it were. In van Heugten's study of *Aïsha and the Women of Madina*, directed by Gerrit Timmers, it is not the performance itself that forms the focus of analysis, as it was cancelled prior to its premiere. Rather, the discourse analysis emphasises the public perceptions and discussions of the performance and the way in which the cancelled performance became the site for a public debate on free speech and censorship. The principle of 'specificity' similarly rejects the idea of there being a universal or general explanation for discourse, instead preferring an analysis of the specificity of a discursive moment or event.

A core challenge from a Foucauldian standpoint is that “the effect of discursive practices is that it is virtually impossible to think outside of them; to be outside of them is, by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension, and therefore beyond reason” (Hook 2001, 522). Discourse analysis therefore doesn’t presume a neutral or objective standpoint, but rather departs from the assumption that the work of analysis consists of tracing the contours and limits of discourses. The epistemological attitude of discourse analysis is thus not one of unveiling a truth that is internal to a discourse but one of charting the external conditions of the possibility for truth on the one side, as well as the effects of this discourse on the other. Foucault refers to this as the principle of ‘exteriority’ ([1970] 1981, 67). Doing discourse analysis is thus about exploring what kinds of realities are made possible, and significantly, not possible, by a specific discursive formation. In researching a performance deemed as blasphemous or offensive to particular communities, it is thus the task of the discourse analyst not to judge audience responses from the standpoint of artistic freedom or morality, but rather to unpack how notions of freedom and morality become attached to a particular scene or act.

In terms of practical guidelines, the steps proposed by Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier (2016) provide a useful and flexible starting point, though care should be taken not to adopt them in a formulaic manner. Jäger and Maier visualise a discourse as subdivided into strands, fragments and knots. The first step in analysing discourses is to identify and specify one or more ‘strands’. These are “flows of discourse that centre on a common topic” (Jäger and Maier 2016, 121). This could be issues such as the discourse of victimisation or the discourse of blasphemy in performance. Jäger and Maier suggest limiting the discourse strand in terms of diachronic and synchronic dimensions, i.e. identifying which historical period will be covered in the study and which geographical region or linguistic group. Researchers may decide to narrow down the study to one single performance or expand it to a comparative exploration of various instances of performances that were cancelled due to their allegedly offensive content around the same time, in other parts of the world, such as Habib Tanvir’s *Ponga Pandit* in the 1990s in India, which was accused by right-wing groups of offending

religious sentiments for its portrayal of a morally corrupt Hindu priest (Deshpande 2005).

The next step is to identify the discursive ‘fragments’ that are relevant to a particular discourse strand. According to Jäger and Maier, these can be texts, objects or expressions in whole or part (122). In the case of the cancelled performance, examples of discursive fragments could include social media posts related to the cancelled performance, reviews, panel discussions, but also rumours or gossip. Advertisements or news items, though unrelated to the performance, may reference the topic of victimisation or religious offence in ways that enrich the analysis. Costumes may be equally relevant as a discursive fragments as they may suggest or offer commentaries on how members of a religious community perceive issues such as decorum, sacrilege or ‘proper’ behaviour. Paying attention to one’s own discursive position and attitudes toward the topic is also part of this process of linking various discursive fragments and strands. In her study of theatre censorship in Turkey, Burcu Yasemin Şeyben investigates changes in theatre legislation in the wake of performances that satirically depict politicians. Extracts from legal and cultural policy documents are treated here as discursive fragments that reveal modalities of censorship and surveillance (Şeyben 2021).

Having identified the discursive strands and fragments that are pertinent to the research, the next step is to analyse the strands in-depth. Jäger and Maier identify three dimensions of analysis: a structural analysis of the discourse strand, a detailed analysis of fragments and a synoptic analysis (128–31). The structural analysis involves capturing the overarching characteristics, based on the frequency of their occurrence or the conspicuousness of their absence. For instance, it could be noteworthy that there is a correlation between the portrayal of religious or mythical figures on stage and societal conflicts or tensions between (religious) communities.

Jäger and Maier propose the concept of a ‘discursive knot’ as a way to describe the detailed analysis of discursive fragments. A discursive knot is the entanglement of different discursive strands or fragments into one event, moment or utterance (122). For instance, religious sentiments of offence often carry implicit gendered dimensions, as in the case of the public controversy around the play *Behzti* (2004) by British South Asian

playwright Gurmeet Kaur (Ahmed 2020). By unpacking references to women's bodies or gender relations in the performance, a researcher might be able to elaborate on how religious discourses employ gender categories, such as the honour of women or the duty of men to justify the adherence to religious norms. The woman's body on stage may thus serve as the contentious discursive knot through which power struggles over religion, race and representation are enunciated. In a synoptic analysis, the findings from the broader structural analysis are interpreted and compared with the findings of a detailed analysis.

## Demonstration

My own use of a Foucauldian-influenced discourse analysis is undertaken in a study titled *The Gestures of Participatory Art* (2018). The study grappled with conceptions of participation in different academic disciplines and brought these to bear on the analysis of participatory artworks. A Foucauldian discourse analytical approach primarily helped me determine what *not* to study. Following the principles of discontinuity and specificity, I chose not to attempt to trace a history of participatory art as originating from a singular moment, movement or artistic genre, but rather as emerging in response to or rejection of specific circumstances in the art world. I refrained from attempting to define or fix the characteristics or features of participatory art as a genre, but instead paid attention to the discursive formations and ruptures of participatory art, i.e. the ways participatory practices emerge as differentiating or distancing themselves from other genres. Foucault's discourse analytical principle of exteriority allowed for an expansive historicising of participatory art, attending to the external factors that made it possible for participatory practices to emerge. I applied this principle by investigating the objections that proponents of participatory artworks implicitly or openly raise about the insufficiencies of conventional theatre and performance forms, such as the absence of audience agency, or democratic deficiencies in performance creation processes, or lack of interaction between performers and spectators. These tend to be put forward as reasons necessitating the adoption of participatory methods or approaches, and thus serve as an indication of the external conditions influencing them.

I identified different discursive strands of participation, such as the deployment of the concept of participation in movements for grassroots democracy and citizen participation, in international development policy and practice, in museums and cultural institutions, in community theatre and in performance art. Each of these strands revealed different entanglements of the idea of participation with institutions, social tensions and disparities, as well as the transversal connections between political aspirations and how these translate onto the aesthetic register. I also compared and contrasted approaches to audience participation in the visual arts in a museum or installation setting, and in theatre and performance, such as immersive performance and community art practices. I delved into the contradictions and commonalities between these diverse understandings of participation. I paid attention to the concepts or ideas to which participation is implicitly tied, such as claims of democratisation or horizontality, examining how these effectively mask practices of pacification or manipulation and thus risk a co-optation of the concept into neoliberal governance models. These strands provided the basis for a broad structural analysis of discourses of participation in the arts.

One of the discursive knots I identified, although I did not use the terminology proposed by Jäger and Maier, revolved around the question of how people (audiences or communities at large) participate in artworks on their own terms, i.e. in unexpected and unscripted ways. The discursive fragments I chose for this purpose were wide-ranging: from site-specific installations to community theatre workshops to conceptual performance art. The focus on unsolicited or non-obvious forms of participation steered me toward the question of non-participation or refusals to participate, i.e. moments or aspects of performance that may not be at the centre of conventional performance analyses, such as what happens at the para-theatrical margins of a performance, during after-talks or audience reactions during a show that might be deemed as disruptive or disturbing.

This bottom-up focus on the terms and conditions of (non-) participation allowed me to analyse in detail forms of participation outside of the boundaries of genre and artform, forms that may not have been taken into consideration because of their peripheral or marginal status. To conduct a synoptical analysis, I interwove the structural

analysis of the discourse strands with the detailed analysis of the chosen fragments. This made it possible to centre power relations between artists, art institutions and their audiences or broader communities and to then assess contradictory positions or viewpoints, situating them in a broader historical perspective. To conclude, a discourse analytical approach to participatory art led me to challenge widespread assumptions about participation being a benign and necessarily socially impactful practice in performance. It stimulated me to re-examine the terms of participation, to challenge their neoliberal appropriation in the arts and to suggest how practices of participation may be re-politicised by foregrounding minor gestures of (non-)participation.

### Expanding the method

To conclude this contribution by broadening the horizon of what is possible with the discourse analytical methodological framework, I turn to one of the most widely cited and influential examples of Foucauldian discourse analysis: Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). This work is of relevance to performance studies, not least because of the detailed attention that Said pays to the question of the representation of 'the Orient' in Western iconography, travel writing, maps, poetry or paintings. Said argues that Orientalism is a discourse, i.e. it is an assemblage of theory and practice, which produces the pervasive idea of an Orient as an object of knowledge, and ultimately serves the project of imperialist expansion. By presenting the Orient as an imperial construct, Said highlights the discursive nature of Orientalism:

Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture (Said 1978, 6).

In the above quote, Said firstly makes clear how Orientalism, as a pursuit of knowledge production about a place demarcated as 'the Orient', is not a disinterested pursuit, but is enmeshed in and buttressed by imperial interests. Second, it regulates how the Orient can be imagined

or depicted, thus generating stereotypes and fantasies about Arabs or Asians, which, while inconsistent with reality, nevertheless remained durable and hegemonic, i.e. it was a discourse that implicitly rendered certain representations admissible or thinkable and others unthinkable. Third, and following from this, it would be inaccurate to simply dismiss orientalist scholarship as a bunch of lies. It is rather a generative web of institutions and practices that effectively creates facts on the ground through its influence on imperial rule and foreign policies.

Said's discourse analysis reads the historical body of knowledge known as Orientalism not as empirically given, but as a discursively produced tradition of thought-practice, a "dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires" (1978, 15). One of the direct methodological implications of this approach is that the scope of the study is expansive, covering examples from philology, history, travel writing, novels, poetry, painting and cartography. However rather than attempting a comprehensive, encyclopaedic coverage, Said limits his study to the British, French and American empires and a selection of orientalist works dealing with Islam and Arabs. Another methodological choice in the study is to not analyse the contents or arguments of each text, but to focus, following Foucault, on "the text's surface, its exteriority to what it describes" (Said 1978, 20). For example, Said reads Aeschylus's play *The Persians* with a specific interest in how the play deals with Otherness and how it represents oriental figures. He peels away at the veneer of objectivity in scholarly writings about Egypt or Mesopotamia. He identifies recurring devices or common tropes used by orientalist writers and studies them in terms of what they reveal, less about the actual Orient and more about how power and knowledge intertwine in the discourse of Orientalism. Following Jäger and Meier, we might call these tropes discursive knots, which involve the entanglement of different strands. The trope of "the hyper-sexualised Arab" is one example of a discursive knot, where gendered and racial stereotypes are entangled with condescending geopolitical assessments of Arab defeatism and lack of political acumen (Said 1978, 311–16). Finally, Said addresses his own place as being a product of orientalist discourse, linking his observations on Orientalism in the nineteenth century to his own experience as a Palestinian-American scholar and the enduring legacy of Orientalism in the present,

including its influence on geopolitics and the longstanding occupation of Palestine.

Said's *Orientalism* deploys discourse analysis as a methodological framework, within which a number of methods are combined, chosen according to their suitability to the object of study, i.e. the discursive fragments, such as close readings of literary texts, commentaries on current affairs, inventories of cross-references and repeated citations of texts, as well as visual analyses of paintings. Such a bricolage is, more broadly speaking, a common feature of discourse analysis, which must be recalibrated in its methods according to the subject of inquiry.

Returning to the earlier stated examples of theatre censorship and accusations of blasphemy, Said's *Orientalism* offers a way to approach discourse analysis that is not reductive to identifying blame or morally right or wrong positions. Indeed, public discussions around what is representable or unrepresentable on stage, especially in the European or Western context, can often be traced to a legacy of Orientalist categories.

Said's study is an inspiring example of discourse analysis with the goal of not simply offering a diagnosis of orientalist practices but in doing so also offering a tool of critique and resistance. *Orientalism* is considered to be one of the founding texts of postcolonial studies, as it provided a model for scholarship that critically studies imperialism by reading against the grain and in between the lines of imperial documents and writings.

### Suggestions for further reading

Foucault's analysis of the prison ([1975] 1979) is arguably his clearest enunciation of the discourse analytical method. His inaugural lecture ([1970] 1981) lays out the principles and approach in the study of discourse. *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, edited by Wodak and Meyer (2016), provides an overview of discourse analysis across various disciplines (communication studies, sociolinguistics, media studies and other fields). Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else* (2001) offers a good entry point into a Foucauldian view of performance as a concept that cuts across the arts, media and neoliberal governance. Noteworthy in the Dutch context are two studies developed as postgraduate dissertations at the University of Amsterdam: Lonneke van Heugten's 2013 study of a

cancelled performance of *Aisha and the Women of Medina* by Rotterdam's Independent Theatre in 2001, cited earlier in this contribution, and Rosa van Kollem's 2024 study of the social value of culture in Dutch cultural policy, interrogating the grounds on which the notion of culture's social value gains legitimacy.

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