

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



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**Psychology of Visual Perception: Exploring how  
Theatrical Space Influences Emotion and  
Perception. The Dual Role of the Ancient Theatre of  
Pleuron**

*Ioanna Markela Chalkia*

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**Psychology of Visual Perception:  
Exploring how Theatrical Space Influences Emotion and  
Perception. The Dual Role of the Ancient Theatre of  
Pleuron**

**Ioanna Markela Chalkia**

Faculty of Fine Arts, School of Drama, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

**Abstract**

Upon entering a building or a space, one does not instantly ponder on its emotional impact. Nevertheless, architecture consistently exerts a profound influence on one's emotional state and perception. A space is often intentionally designed to elicit distinct emotional responses: an office space may aim at energising those who work in it, while a museum may evoke feelings of calm and fascination. Such spaces outdo their role as mere physical structures, since by being uniquely designed to evoke specific emotional responses, each is transformed into a setting with an intrinsic psychological milieu. This research endeavours to delve into the intricate interplay between the architecture of theatrical space and perception, with a specific focus on the dual functionality observed in the ancient theatre of Pleuron. The primary objective is to understand the manner in which the design of this theatrical space incites perceptions that engender emotional responses, shedding light on certain aspects of its architecturally induced psychological impact. *Does the design of the space contribute to the emotional and perceptual experiences of the audience? And how does this happen in the ancient theatre of Pleuron?* This study employs a comprehensive methodology, integrating critical architectural analysis, and historical research. Specifically, this methodology will examine the spatial and architectural configuration of the ancient theatre of Pleuron through the lens of perceptual analysis. This theatre, originally built as a parliament building and later turned into a theatre, is interesting because of its peculiar spatial planning. Its stage structure abuts and forms part of the ancient city wall. The theatre space had a dual role depending on the needs of the society: artistic in times of peace and protective in times of war.

*Keywords:* visual perception, theatrical space, architecture, ancient theatre of Pleuron, performance space.

## Psychology of Visual Perception

Perception to the average person may be taken for granted as something that occurs to everyone automatically. However, "perception is not something self-evident, automatic and unmistakable but operates based on a series of principles and laws that have been investigated experimentally and which are likely to be subject to different interpretations depending on the theory used" (Potamianos, 2015, p. 7). Perception is an interdisciplinary field that requires the cooperation of many scientific fields in order to be investigated and understood. However, the result of this partnership is that there is not just one theory of visual perception but several theories with different starting points, assumptions, and goals. In the context of this work, the study of the double role of the ancient theatre of Pleuron it was considered more efficient to focus on the theory of Gestalt psychology.

The difference between "looking" and "seeing" is particularly crucial. The property of "looking" is equivalent to a camera that takes pictures and does not choose what to retain and what not to retain from an image. On the contrary, when someone "sees," their eyes work selectively, perceiving things differently and distinguishing images from the surrounding reality. And, of course, "seeing is equivalent to seeing something in relation to something else; and the relationships one may encounter in the senses are not simple" (Arnheim, 1969/2007, p.87).

Art, and especially theatre, should not be treated as objects but as an overall organised thought, since the whole is greater than the parts, the composition of things is more important than the parts that make it up, and the meaning is revealed in the whole, not in the details. This is an important principle of Gestalt psychology.

It is worth focusing on the German word "Gestalt" which means "shape" or "form." The basic idea of this theory, which focuses on sensory perception, is that the whole is greater than its parts. Moreover, "no object is perceived in isolation. To see something involves assigning it a place within the whole: a place in space, some degree on the scale of size, light intensity, or distance" (Potamianos, 2015, p. 24). To understand this, one can think about what happens when one sees a person's face. Synthesis is a natural process for a healthy perceptual system. It does not distinguish individual features, but a complex image of that person's face is formed in the mind.

In this light, this research endeavours to delve into the intricate interplay between the architecture of theatrical space and perception, with a specific focus on the dual functionality observed in the ancient theatre of Pleuron. The primary objective is to understand how the design of this theatrical space incites perceptions that evoke emotional responses, shedding light on certain aspects of its architecturally induced psychological impact.

## The Double Role of the Ancient Theatre of Pleuron

Looking at the ancient theatre of Pleuron, at first sight, it is a theatre originally built as a parliament building and later turned into a theatre. But if one tries to observe a little deeper, one will find a peculiar spatial planning. Its stage structure abuts and forms part of the ancient city wall.<sup>1</sup> The result of this particularity is that the dialogue that art and theatre have opened over the centuries in the context of society and the city («ἄστυ») – beyond the plays – is also visible in the theatre space itself. The social element here in the ancient theatre of Pleuron is even more intense, as the theatre space had a double role depending on the needs of the society: artistic in times of peace and fortification-protection in times of war.

This theatrical space, with its double role, embodies the essence of the Aristotelian definition of "reversal" («περιπέτεια»)<sup>2</sup>. When Aristotle speaks of "reversal", he refers to a movement, in which, conditions are reversed, and the balance is somewhat lost. He speaks of a conversion of a limbic transition from one state to another. It is, one might say, a transition from a state of complacency to a state of danger. Aristotle is essentially talking about adopting a different point of view that changes something in us and changes our perception of some situation, from which a new perception of the world emerges.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes clear that the ancient theatre of Pleuron had the double role of developing the critical ability and the intellectual side of a person alongside his emotional involvement, which can turn a person into a genuine "fortress" that protects the values he advocates both for his city and for himself. By unravelling this duality, the study contributes to a broader comprehension of the psychology of visual perception in a theatrical context. The findings not only enrich our understanding of ancient theatre architecture but also provide valuable insights into contemporary theatre design and its potential impact on emotional engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> "The theatre is in contact with the western side of the fortifications of Nea Pleuron (...) It is one of the most interesting theatres of Aetolia, both because of the unique view it offers towards the plain coastal zone to the west of Messolonghi, and due to an important structural peculiarity, that it presents. Specifically, its proscenium is arranged in front and in contact with the wall, the hollow faces west, while the functionality of the theatre stage is completed by Tower 3, which is in contact with it as well as the wings on either side of the wall. Tower 3, (...) should have been an auxiliary stage and backstage area, possibly actors' dressing rooms." (Kolonas, 2008,).

<sup>2</sup> "Reversal (Peripety) is, as aforesaid, a change from one state of affairs to its exact opposite, and this, too, as I say, should be in conformance with probability or necessity." (Aristotle, 1982, p. 56.).

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