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When the White Whale Becomes a Theatrical Dream: The Destabilization of Anthropocentric Perception in Robert Wilson's Moby Dick

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Abstract:
Robert Wilson's Moby Dick, premiered at the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus in 2024 and presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2026, radically condenses Herman Melville's novel into a visual, acoustic, and choreographic event. This article examines how the production relocates theatrical agency from plot and psychological character to relations among light, sound, bodies, images, and duration. It combines close performance analysis with a comparative reading of Melville and the Daoist parable of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream. From this encounter, the article introduces the original concept of mutual dreaming: a theatrical condition in which human and nonhuman positions are reciprocally constituted through perception, projection, and embodied imagination. The concept does not attribute a realist psychology to the White Whale. Instead, it describes how Wilson's scenography allows the whale to acquire agency across media: as sound, image, scale, light, spatial pressure, and an object of compulsive human projection. Captain Ahab's wounded body becomes a visible sign of this unstable relation, while dispersed narration and codified ensemble movement weaken the sovereignty of the individual dramatic subject. The production's acoustic dramaturgy and cinematic organization of stage space further transform spectatorship into an encounter with uncertain boundaries between hunter and hunted, observer and observed, dreamer and dreamed. By bringing Wilson scholarship on visuality, postdramatic form, and scenography into dialogue with Zhuangzi and posthuman thought, the article argues for Chinese philosophy as an analytical method rather than a cultural analogy. Wilson's Moby Dick ultimately emerges as a late theatrical work that destabilizes anthropocentric perception without resolving the ethical and imaginative tensions between humanity and the nonhuman world.

Keywords:
Robert Wilson; Moby Dick; scenography; mutual dreaming; Zhuangzi; anthropocentrism; posthuman spectatorship

1. Introduction

Robert Wilson's Moby Dick emerged from an extended period of development. The project was first conceived in 2017, later developed through the Watermill Summer Institute, and premiered at the Düsseldorfer

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Schauspielhaus on 7 September 2024 [1-3]. Wilson directed the production and designed its stage and lighting; Anna Calvi composed its songs and lyrics, with additional music by Chris Wheeler and Dom Bouffard [1,2]. The work reached the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) from 29 April to 3 May 2026, where it was presented posthumously after Wilson's death in July 2025 [4,5]. This chronology places the production at a consequential point in Wilson's career: it belongs to his final completed body of stage work while also extending a five-decade relationship with BAM and a long practice of translating canonical texts into distinctive theatrical systems.

The production is readily recognizable as Wilsonian. Sculptural light, frontal composition, durational rhythm, precisely scored movement, and the separation of sound from dramatic illustration all recall formal principles established across works such as Deafman Glance, Einstein on the Beach, and The Black Rider. Yet Moby Dick should not be understood as the routine repetition of an established signature. Its concentrated duration, extensive video environment, and unusually direct emotional access give familiar devices a changed pressure. The work condenses Wilson's visual grammar while exposing its capacity to address ecological scale, interspecies violence, and the instability of the perceiving subject.

Scholarship on Wilson has long emphasized the autonomy of stage images, the architectural organization of time and space, and the displacement of literary hierarchy. Arthur Holmberg reads Wilson's theatre as a system in which visual communication acquires an authority conventionally reserved for language [8]. Bonnie Marranca's influential account of a theatre of images situates Wilson within an American avant-garde that makes composition, media, and perceptual structure central to performance [9]. Hans-Thies Lehmann later placed Wilson among the artists through whom postdramatic theatre could be understood as a shift away from dramatic totality toward image, sound, duration, and event [10]. Studies of visuality and scenography by Maaike Bleeker, Rachel Hann, and Arnold Aronson further clarify that stage design does more than furnish a setting: it organizes looking, positions spectators, and actively produces the event perceived [11-13]. Erika Fischer-Lichte's performance aesthetics, meanwhile, foreground the material co-presence of bodies, spaces, sounds, and spectators [14].

These approaches provide essential accounts of Wilson's formal practice, but they do not fully explain the human-nonhuman relation generated by this production. The central question of this article is therefore: how does Wilson's Moby Dick transform Melville's pursuit narrative into a theatrical structure that unsettles the human subject's authority to see, name, and master the whale? I argue that the production constructs a condition of mutual dreaming, in which Ahab, the crew, the whale, and the spectator are constituted through reciprocal acts of projection and perception. Light, sound, bodies, and images distribute agency across the stage rather than concentrating it in a single protagonist. Read through Zhuangzi's butterfly dream, this distribution makes the whale perceptible as more than a passive object without converting it into a human-like psychological character. The analysis proceeds from theoretical method to close readings of interspecies gazing, directing, bodily codification, sound, and scenographic space.

2. Research Approach and Theoretical Framework

This article is based on close performance analysis of Wilson's Moby Dick at BAM in 2026, supported by a

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comparative reading of Melville's novel and published production information. The method attends to recurring images, movement scores, vocal and environmental sound, lighting transitions, spatial frames, and the redistribution of narrative functions among performers. It treats the performance as an event whose meanings arise through relations among heterogeneous theatrical materials rather than through plot alone. The analysis is interpretive; it does not claim access to Wilson's private intentions, nor does it assume that every stage image possesses a single decipherable meaning.

Zhuangzi's butterfly dream, which closes the second Inner Chapter, the 'Discussion on Making All Things Equal' (Qiwulun), provides the central comparative lens [7]. The parable leaves unsettled whether Zhuang Zhou dreamed that he was a butterfly or whether a butterfly was dreaming Zhuang Zhou. Scholarship has variously interpreted this episode through Daoist transformation, self-alienation, perspectival instability, and the philosophical problem of selfhood [19-21]. These debates show that the story cannot be reduced to a simple question about whether waking life is real. Its greater theoretical force lies in the transformation of positions: dreamer and dreamed, self and other, do not remain stable terms, and each becomes thinkable through the other. Applied to Wilson's production, this logic shifts analysis away from a simple allegory in which the whale represents nature for a human observer. It asks instead how theatrical perception makes human and nonhuman positions emerge relationally.

I use mutual dreaming to name this relational process. The phrase is not borrowed from existing Zhuangzi scholarship; it is introduced here as a performance-theoretical extension of the butterfly-dream parable. It does not suggest that the whale literally dreams in Melville's novel or possesses a theatrical psychology equivalent to Ahab's. Rather, it describes a performance condition in which the human subject projects fear, divinity, violence, and desire onto the whale, while the whale's scenographic presence reorganizes human bodies, attention, temporality, and action in return. The relation remains asymmetrical: the hunters possess weapons, language, institutions, and a narrative of conquest. Nevertheless, the production prevents those instruments from securing perceptual mastery.

This account intersects with posthuman thought while retaining a distinct Daoist emphasis. Donna Haraway's work on species relations challenges fantasies of autonomous human identity, and Rosi Braidotti describes subjectivity as relational, embodied, and embedded within more-than-human networks [15,16]. Mutual dreaming shares this resistance to self-sufficient humanism. Its specific contribution is theatrical: it identifies how reciprocal constitution becomes sensible through rhythm, scale, light, sound, and embodied composition. Zhuangzi is therefore used here as a method of reading, not as evidence of direct influence on Wilson and not as an ornamental East-West analogy.

3. Interspecies Gazing, Theatrical Dreamscapes, and the Unstable Subject

Melville's Moby-Dick organizes its central voyage around Ahab's attempt to turn a commercial whaling expedition into a private campaign of revenge. Moby Dick has taken part of Ahab's leg, and the captain converts bodily injury into a metaphysical grievance that absorbs the ship and its crew [6]. At the same time, the novel repeatedly complicates the human desire to classify and comprehend the whale. Its encyclopedic descriptions accumulate knowledge without exhausting their object. Wilson's production intensifies this unresolved struc-

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ture by reducing exposition and allowing the whale to appear across multiple sensory registers.

The figure associated with the walking cane is Captain Ahab, not an embodiment of the White Whale. This distinction matters. Wilson makes Ahab's damaged body immediately legible while refusing to treat the injury as a merely biographical explanation. The limp, cane, directional hair, costume, and exact bodily alignment turn the wound into a scenographic sign. Ahab's body records the prior encounter with the whale and carries that encounter through every subsequent composition. The hunter is visually marked by the object he seeks to destroy.

A sequence in which the whale's eyes glow red while human figures enter an illuminated zone makes this reciprocal marking especially palpable. The performers gradually lose ordinary flesh tones and acquire a pale, spectral appearance. Rather than signifying a straightforward purification, the change suggests that the human group is being absorbed into the perceptual field it attempts to dominate. The whale becomes a mirror for collective obsession, yet the mirror is active: it alters the scale, color, rhythm, and orientation of the bodies that face it.

The whale never settles into a single stage object. It is dispersed across vocal resonance, projected imagery, suspended or enlarged form, oceanic motion, spatial pressure, and the reactions of other bodies. This distribution gives the whale agency without humanizing it. Its presence consists in effects - in what it makes visible, audible, and possible - rather than in a stable dramatic interior. The production thus theatricalizes nonhuman agency scenographically. The whale is not a realist character; it is a force that reorganizes the event.

Narrative subjectivity is similarly dispersed. Ahab does not acquire the continuous psychological development expected of a realist protagonist. Ishmael's narrative function is redistributed among spoken voices, musical passages, and framing figures. The sailors frequently appear as an ensemble whose rhythmic formations exceed individual characterization. Even The Boy, who sometimes resembles a clown, narrator, or conductor, cannot be reduced to Pip or to any single figure from the novel. Wilson's adaptation works by separating dramatic functions from fixed identities and circulating them among bodies and media.

Mutual dreaming emerges from this circulation. Ahab imagines the whale as the material form of everything he opposes; the whale's theatrical presence, in turn, determines how Ahab can move, appear, and be perceived. The production invites spectators to experience this relation as reciprocal without claiming equivalence between hunter and hunted. Humanity appears to dream the whale into myth, while the scenographic whale seems to dream humanity back as a fragile, repetitive, and self-destructive species. A Daoist reading makes this reversal legible as a transformation of positions: the observer becomes implicated in the field of observation, and the object of pursuit becomes a condition of the pursuer's identity.

4. Directing as Scenographic Composition: From Narrative to Structure

Wilson's directing prioritizes perceptual organization over explanatory continuity. The production unfolds through waves, whale calls, ships, windows, trees, skulls, candles, rooms, illuminated bands, and collective bodies. These elements do not merely illustrate successive episodes from Melville. They form changing environments in which composition and duration govern attention. Lehmann's postdramatic framework is useful

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here because dramatic text no longer functions as the unquestioned center of theatrical meaning [10]. Speech remains important, but it enters a larger field of sound, image, and bodily score.

The opening image establishes this field with particular force. Blue-black darkness collides with red-gold illumination as waves and distant resonance fill the theatre. Scale arrives before explanation. The audience first encounters an oceanic pressure, then gradually identifies characters and narrative fragments within it. The production thereby makes sensation an epistemological problem: spectators must negotiate how they know what they see and hear, rather than simply receive a clarified story.

The recurring conductor motif exposes the construction of this world. Performers draw batons from their throats, direct scenic motion, and occupy positions from which they seem to conduct the stage. The Boy repeatedly mediates between the narrative frame and the machinery of performance. His actions are comic, uncanny, and metatheatrical. They also undermine the fantasy that the stage picture arises naturally. Movement, reset, repetition, and technical manipulation remain visible as components of theatrical thought.

Such visibility supports a broader understanding of scenography. Bleeker's account of theatrical visuality emphasizes that looking is culturally and bodily organized [11]. Hann's concept of scenographics likewise treats scenic traits as forces that orient and situate staged events [12]. In Wilson's Moby Dick, light, video, costume, spatial frame, and performer do not occupy separate expressive layers. Together they determine what can appear, how long it can remain perceptible, and from where it may be seen. Directing becomes scenographic composition: an arrangement of relations rather than the illustration of a prior dramatic meaning.

The production's acknowledged artificiality is therefore not a withdrawal from truth. It becomes the means through which theatrical truth is generated. By revealing how images are built, moved, repeated, and interrupted, Wilson places spectators inside the labor of perception. Theatre appears as a process of construction, and that process parallels the article's central argument: the human and the whale are also constructed in relation, through acts of framing, projection, and response.

5. The Body as Structure: Toward a Codified Kinetic System

From a choreographic perspective, the performers' bodies are emphatically non-naturalistic. Their vocabulary includes staccato phrasing, prolonged stillness, frontal presentation, sharply redirected gazes, exaggerated facial scores, repeated gestures, linear pathways, and synchronized ensemble formations. Movement does not primarily reveal private emotion. It produces spatial and rhythmic precision.

White-faced performers in dark costumes traverse strict axes and establish geometric relationships with vertical or diagonal light. Groups enter carrying chairs in coordinated patterns while other clusters repeat independent scores. The coexistence of several movement systems prevents attention from settling permanently on a single dramatic center. Bodies operate as mobile lines, masks, durations, and interruptions within the larger scenographic field.

Eugenio Barba's account of the extra-daily body offers a useful vocabulary for this transformation: performance technique reorganizes balance, energy, and attention so that the body becomes distinct from everyday behavior [18]. Wilson's actors similarly submit ordinary gesture to a visible score. Yet their bodies remain

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materially present; they are never absorbed entirely into signs. Fischer-Lichte's distinction between the semiotic and phenomenal body helps explain the resulting tension [14]. A performer may signify a sailor, Ahab, or The Boy while simultaneously confronting spectators as a breathing, effortful, vulnerable body.

The movement system also invites comparison with codified forms of Chinese xiqu, where gesture, orientation, rhythm, and role convention can generate an expressive world without naturalistic imitation. This comparison is analytical rather than genealogical. Wilson's production does not reproduce xiqu role-types or claim direct derivation from them. The resonance lies in a shared understanding that stylization can intensify, rather than diminish, bodily truth. In Moby Dick, codification converts the body into an operative element within a dramaturgy of perception. It structures the spectator's encounter with the stage while retaining the possibility of affect, humor, fatigue, and fear.

6. Sound as Spatial and Metaphysical Structure

Sound in Moby Dick extends beyond semantic communication. German dialogue, English lyrics, amplified song, choral textures, instrumental music, waves, wind, and whale calls form a layered acoustic environment. Anna Calvi's songs do not function as detachable commentary; they alter tempo, scale, and collective energy within the production [1,2,4]. Language becomes one material among others, sometimes carrying narrative information and sometimes operating through timbre, repetition, volume, or breath.

The sonic presence associated with the White Whale is especially significant. It resembles neither ordinary speech nor a simple naturalistic animal cry. Distant vibration and sustained resonance make the whale audible as an environment that surrounds human action. The production invites spectators to hear the whale as if it were singing, but this apparent song does not translate the animal into human language. Instead, it suspends the boundary between voice and atmosphere.

This structure may be described as an acoustic dramaturgy: sound organizes space, duration, relation, and affect. A whale call can enlarge the stage beyond its physical architecture; a song can temporarily bind the crew into a collective body; a pause can expose the fragility of that collectivity. Sound crosses the human-nonhuman boundary without resolving it. The captain appears to dream the whale through repeated language and musical obsession, while the whale's resonance returns that dream as pressure upon the bodies and attention of the audience.

The integration of vocalization, instrumental rhythm, bodily action, and visual composition also invites comparison with the composite organization of Chinese xiqu. Again, the value of the comparison lies in method rather than influence. Sound is not an accompaniment added after the image. It is spatial and kinetic; it activates gesture, shapes temporal expectation, and produces a ritual intensity that cannot be reduced to verbal meaning.

7. Scenographic Space: Theatre as Real-Time Cinema

Wilson's stage repeatedly evokes a form of real-time cinema. The comparison does not depend on projection alone. Cinematic logic is absorbed into live composition: backgrounds recede like slow zooms, windows

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become apertures, scenic elements frame isolated bodies, and oceanic images dissolve into sky, birds, rooms, or architectural fragments. The spectator experiences transitions that resemble montage while remaining aware of the continuous time and material risk of performance.

One of the production's most striking images places human dwellings within or against the body of the White Whale. The image turns the whale into a surface upon which civilization is projected. Architecture, belief, violence, domesticity, and narrative occupy the creature they attempt to interpret. The scenographic relation is double: humanity inscribes itself on the whale, while the whale becomes the visual condition through which human civilization appears strange, miniature, and precarious.

Lighting is central to this perceptual reversal. Narrow beams cut through darkness; vertical columns alter color; horizontal bands establish thresholds among stage zones and between performer and spectator. Light does not simply illuminate. It structures. It determines the visibility, scale, and duration of bodies and objects, and it turns absence into an active component of the composition. Aronson's account of scenography as a visual organization of theatrical understanding is especially relevant here [13]. Wilson's lighting produces neither neutral visibility nor decorative atmosphere; it makes perception itself the subject of the event.

The result is perceptually immersive without being immersive theatre in the narrow spatial sense. The audience remains seated before a framed stage, yet image, volume, darkness, repetition, and scale envelop attention. Bleeker's emphasis on the locus of looking helps clarify this effect [11]. Spectators do not merely observe a represented ocean. Their own acts of seeing are directed, delayed, frustrated, and returned to them. The stage becomes a machine for testing the limits of human perception.

8. Conclusions

Wilson's Moby Dick transforms Melville's pursuit narrative into a theatre of distributed agency. The production fragments character, separates narrative functions from stable identities, codifies the performing body, and allows light, sound, video, scale, and duration to act as dramaturgical forces. Within this system, the White Whale acquires neither a human psychology nor a single representational form. It becomes perceptible through the changes it produces in human bodies, spatial composition, sound, and spectatorship.

The concept of mutual dreaming names this reciprocal constitution. Humanity projects obsession, violence, divinity, and fear onto the whale; the whale's scenographic presence then reshapes the human world that seeks to master it. Zhuangzi's butterfly dream provides a method for understanding this shifting relation without collapsing the difference between species. Dreamer and dreamed remain distinct, yet neither position is self-sufficient. The theatre makes their interdependence sensible.

Viewed within Wilson's career, Moby Dick can be understood as a work of late style. Edward Said cautions that late works do not necessarily offer harmony or serene culmination; they may retain contradiction and unresolved tension [17]. Wilson's production similarly condenses a lifetime of formal procedures without reconciling the conflicts it stages. Its beauty does not neutralize the violence of the hunt, and its tenderness does not dissolve Ahab's destructive will. The work's posthumous presentation at BAM intensifies its historical resonance, but its importance lies less in functioning as a final statement than in reopening the aesthetic ques-

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tions that animated Wilson's practice [4,5].

The article's broader contribution is methodological. Chinese philosophy enters the analysis neither as cultural decoration nor as a claim that Wilson's theatre is secretly Daoist. Zhuangzi becomes a conceptual instrument for examining contemporary performance, spectatorship, and nonhuman agency. Through this lens, Moby Dick challenges the anthropocentric assumption that the human subject stands outside the world it observes. The production draws spectators into a field where seeing is also being seen, projecting is also being transformed, and dreaming becomes reciprocal. Its theatre does not conquer the whale. It reveals how the desire for conquest has already been shaped by the object it pursues. In that unsettled relation, theatre dreams itself into existence.

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