Martin Middeke (General Editor)

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Drama and/after Postmodernism
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Edited for the society
by Christoph Henke and Martin Middeke
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General Editor’s Preface

Over the last fifteen years the regular publication of scholarly articles and monographs has been one of CDE’s central objectives apart from the organisation of annual conferences with contemporary playwrights, actors/directors, drama critics, academics in the field of theatre and drama, and teachers of theatre and drama in secondary schools. The present volume on “Drama and/after Postmodernism” is the fourteenth volume in our series of conference proceedings. Our second book series, CDE-Studies, to the present day comprises thirteen volumes, as two more volumes are in preparation and will be published later this year.

Whilst, thus, both book series are thoroughly thriving, I am delighted to announce that with the present volume the outward appearance of both series has slightly changed in order to give both series a fresher and more contemporary design. As the General Editor of CDE, I can only wish that the spirit catches on and means further motivation for more inspired work in the field of contemporary theatre and drama in English.

Martin Middeke
The articles contained in this publication are based on the papers and workshops presented at “Drama and/after Postmodernism,” the 15th annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE), which took place at the University of Augsburg (Germany) from 25 to 28 June 2006.

The idea of convening an international conference on the topic of postmodernism arose out of various research projects over the last decade and numerous, often collaborative, seminars on literary theory, cultural theory, contemporary fiction and film. Although diverse theoretical approaches in philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, gender studies and literary studies have outlined postmodern culture or expressed a postmodern zeitgeist, comparatively little interest has been directed specifically at the influence of postmodern discourses on the theory and practice of drama. This was reason enough for us, as the organisers of this conference, to address the broad question of drama and/after postmodernism.

Both the conference and the collaborative effort of this volume would have been impossible without the generous support and dedicated help of many institutions and individuals. We wish to express our thanks to the generous support we received from the University of Augsburg, particularly Vice-Chancellor Prof Dr Wilfried Bottke, Chancellor Alois Zimmermann, and Professor Bernhard Fleischmann, head of the standing commission for research and international relations. We have also been amply endorsed by the “Gesellschaft der Freunde der Universität Augsburg e. V.” For the funding of travel expenses of various international guests we are indebted to the German Research Foundation (DFG). Many thanks also go to the British Council, especially to Marijke Brouwer for her long-standing and unbureaucratic support and help.
We are very thankful to all the speakers, international guests and keynote speakers who contributed to the conference. Special thanks go to Aleks Sierz for an additional essay on Martin Crimp and for making contact with Richard Bean, who agreed to join the conference at shortest notice. Special thanks go as well to John Binnie for his practitioners’ workshop and for bringing a joint venture of Clyde Unity Theatre (Edinburgh) and BandBazi (Brighton) to Augsburg. With regard to memorable theatre productions during the conference, we also wish to express our gratitude to Ute Legner and everybody at the Anglistentheater Augsburg, to Alex Mangold and his Insight Theatre troupe, and the staff at Kulturhaus Abraxas. We are extremely grateful to Christopher Innes for bridging a gap in the conference proceedings by contributing an essay on Robert Lepage. Finally we wish to thank our Augsburg team: Christine Bomball and our student assistants Leonie Ernst, Andrea Heigl, and Alke Stachler for their dedication; Klaus P. Prem for graphic design work; Johannes Kleindienst and his whole staff at the Haus Sankt Ulrich, our conference venue, for excellent service.

The editors also wish to thank Dr Christina Wald, Laura Strathmann, and Veronika Wolff at Augsburg University for their most valuable help with and diligent work on the editing and formatting of this volume. Many thanks, as always, go to our publisher Dr Erwin Otto and WVT.

Christoph Henke
Martin Middeke
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Introduction:
Drama and/after Postmodernism

As yet the issue of postmodernism has not lost much of its zest. It is generally acknowledged, on the one hand, that postmodernist discourse has had an enormous impact on virtually every area of contemporary life and culture: philosophy, critical theory, fine arts, music, literature, architecture, design, life-style, lifeworld. Postmodernist thinking has thereby stamped a lasting mark on the interpretation of history and culture especially since the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, however, postmodernist thought has always been extremely controversial. An aloofness towards postmodernism is particularly grounded in the belief — which some scholars, critics, and artists regard as being consubstantial with postmodernism — that ‘modernity’¹ and its basic prerequisites, assumptions, and cultural values have come to an end, have failed, broken down, or become outdated.

In this respect, the condition of Western societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries paradoxically seems as clear as it is opaque. Post-industrial western society has turned into a technology-governed global world which is at the same time abstract and transparent.² Contemporary society and such related phenomena as warfare,

¹ For its ‘project,’ see Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.
² For a detailed discussion of this paradoxical observation, see Zijderveld, Vattimo, or also, in a slightly more optimistic vein, Brin.
raremament, consumer goods, mass media, data-processing, etc. appear as extremely present and visible in our lifeworld while the processes of specialisation, segmentation, and differentiation, which spawn the multifaceted structures of post-industrial society, inhibit the feasibility of a universal understanding of them. Even the identifiable spectres of in-humanity of the 1930s and ’40s have disappeared in the mist of a technology-ruled and over-bureaucratised, over-organised society. The term ‘postmodernism’ hence gives expression to the economical as well as technological conditions of our age and to a pluralistic media-dominated society. Moreover, communication and transportation technology have decentred modern life, giving rise to a globalised vision, and, by doing that, have blurred dominant centres of (political) power and fixed standards of ethical, moral or intellectual conduct in the public consciousness.

This process of globalisation, pluralisation, and de-centring has by no means met ubiquitous and unlimited approval. A quick glance at the major premises and philosophical positions which define postmodernist thought will make this clear. Taking the cue from such figureheads of late nineteenth-century philosophy as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who challenged the notions of objectivity and shared a scepticism concerning a universally applicable set of social morals and norms, postmodernist philosophy has cast doubts on the validity of clear-cut boundaries expressed by dichotomies such as, for instance, ‘either/or’ or ‘subjective/objective.’ At work here is a de-stabilising or de-constructing of what had hitherto been considered a matter of course. Particularly the post-Enlightenment myth of modernity (and the subsequent confidence in rationality, historicism, causality) since the late seventeenth century has been in the line of fire of postmodernist argumentation. Notwithstanding the fact that the utopian potential of the myth of modernity had already become stale by the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of human progress via rationality is certainly still being fetishised today. By scrutinising the myth of the Enlightenment, therefore, post-modernist thinking most of all equals a loss of faith in a stable, coherent, and knowable self. Truly most of twentieth-century art as well as much of twentieth-century philosophy (let alone psychoanalysis or psychology) have severely assaulted the idea of the conscious, rational, and autonomous self, which by means of reason is
able to know itself. Neither is science (as the mode of knowing produced by the rational self) seen any longer as the epitome of ‘objective’ truth, nor can science and the knowledge it produces bear comparison with progress, perfection and a ‘reasonable’ guiding line between right and wrong. Along with it, the idea of a universal ethics seems equally unavailing.

Not only does postmodern thinking affect these ontological and epistemological basics of subjectivity and objectivity: Language itself as the medium and mode of giving expression to knowledge and disseminating it has been revealed to be not as transparent as the rational mind would have it. Structuralist and poststructuralist philosophy of language has contradicted the idea of language as a mirror-like representation of a ‘real’ world which the rational self observes. Rather than establishing a ‘natural’, objective connection between the real outside world and the representation which the perceiving rational mind chooses to employ — a connection that would go towards ‘healing’ the wound smitten by the unbridgeable gap between subject and object (of perception) —, signification within language is characterised by the arbitrary relationship and interplay of the signifier and its signified.

This leads us directly into the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, whose work constitutes a re-examination of the fundamentals of writing and its consequences on philosophy in general. His most elementary starting point is the presumption that every structural phenomenon has a history and that the structures therefore cannot be understood without understanding their genesis. Such (temporal) origin, however, cannot be some pure unity, but must already be complex in order to enable a diachronic or historical process to evolve. Accordingly, this originary complexity must not be understood as the positing of an a priori beginning — like, for example, in the famous opening of St. John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God” (John 1:1). Rather than that, Derrida refers to this originary complexity in a much more de-centring, evasive way as ‘iterability,’ ‘inscription,’ ‘trace,’ or ‘textuality.’

Derrida’s method of deconstruction sets

3 Cf., in contrast, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s statement on the nature of the cultural crisis within (postmodern) Western society only some three weeks before
out to demonstrate the wide-ranging consequences of this in many fields. In exceedingly thorough readings of philosophical and literary texts, the deconstructive method outlines whatever runs against systematic or intended sense, especially against a reified authorial intention. Quite in contrast, deconstruction sets out to lay bare aporias and, by doing that, reveals the infinitely subtle ways by which this originary complexity is characterised — a constant deferring of ultimate, transcendental signifieds into ineluctable (temporal) difference, that is, différence.

Against the tradition of metaphysics, which is founded upon binary oppositions, deconstruction often starts with the very oppositions a text is based upon (for example: good/evil, centre/margin, male/female, subject/object) only to disclose that the seemingly stable ‘centres’ and ‘presences’ of such binary oppositions cannot hold. Instead, deconstruction argues that these oppositions are not god-given, but allowedly fluxional, Logo-centric, culturally and historically defined/constructed, and far from being as clear-cut as it would seem. Hence, no meaning can ever be stable, which Derrida has brilliantly shown in his deconstruction of the speech/writing opposition in Of Grammatology. Such oppositions are exposed as being as tyrannously hierarchic as the power structures which employ them. There is a thoroughly political and ethical side to Derrida’s argument which clearly envisions difference as a liberating

he became Pope Benedict XVI: “Christianity must always remember that it is the religion of the ‘Logos.’ It is faith in the ‘Creator Spiritus,’ in the Creator Spirit, from which proceeds everything that exists. Today, this should be precisely its philosophical strength, in so far as the problem is whether the world comes from the irrational, and reason is not, therefore, other than a ‘sub-product,’ on occasion even harmful of its development or whether the world comes from reason, and is, as a consequence, its criterion and goal. The Christian faith inclines toward this second thesis, thus having, from the purely philosophical point of view, really good cards to play, despite the fact that many today consider only the first thesis as the only modern and rational one par excellence. However, a reason that springs from the irrational, and that is, in the final analysis, itself irrational, does not constitute a solution for our problems.” (Ratzinger)

4 See Writing and Difference, Of Grammatology, Dissemination, Positions, Margins of Philosophy, Aporias.
force of a potentially greater tolerance towards any (cultural, political, racial, gendered) ‘other.’ Derrida’s own ‘ethical turn’ in writing on ethics and religion or his political commitment for Palestinian rights, against death penalty, or against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 show that his philosophy is far from political innocence, but also far from the charge of nihilism which many critics used to hold against Derrida’s work (see Borradori). The fact that deconstruction has elucidated complex interrelations, that it has set limits to a flamboyant belief in the capacities of instrumental reason in the search for (ultimate) truth and (self-)knowledge is the indubitable and also incontrovertible achievement of deconstruction. This estimation has been corroborated for decades now by the successful transfer of deconstructive thinking and practice to the fields of, to name but a few, literary studies, linguistics, women’s studies, and anthropology, and also art.

While Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction defines one direction of postmodernist thought, Jean-François Lyotard’s appeal to ‘wage war against totality’ and his, as he himself put it, sketchy and over-simplifying definition of postmodernism as the ‘incredulity of metanarratives’ (see The Postmodern Condition) establishes the second highly influential alignment of postmodernist discourse. Metanarratives (or master narratives, grands récits) denote a totalising way to give value, order, and shape to the experience and knowledge of a particular culture. Lyotard primarily targets the myth of Modernity and Enlightenment, the progress of history, the blind confidence in the benefits of science, and the possibility of absolute freedom, which he identifies as metanarratives that have collapsed. For Lyotard, the clinging to such metanarratives is incompatible with the plurality of perspectives in our lifeworld, especially with the diversity of aspirations, beliefs, and desires. Postmodernity, by contrast, is envisaged as being characterised by a virtual plethora of micro-narratives which are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, universal reason, or stability. Lyotard recognises two ways of coming to terms with this loss of universal values, two modes, or, to use

5 See, for instance, The Gift of Death and Politics of Friendship.
his own metaphor from music, two keys: the one is a characteristically modernist mourning, a melancholy feeling of powerlessness in the face of the loss of the (representable) real; the other a yearning for the sublime inherent also in the non-representable. Drawing heavily on the concept of Wittgenstein’s language games, Lyotard thus makes a virtue of necessity in that he postulates the celebration of the loss of unifying laws, rules, and norms for artists and scholars alike, which does not lead us into existential nothingness, for the very aspect of endlessly playing with the signifiers rather opens up an avenue of new sculptural and artistic possibilities. Lyotard sees this embodied in our anxious, yet keen interest in the sublime, that is, in the way the borderlines of our imagination are touched upon by works confronting us with unsettling and threatening sights. In order to illustrate this, Lyotard names Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Marcel Duchamp, but one might certainly think with equal ease of Antonin Artaud or the disturbing (mental) landscapes of ‘in-yer-face theatre.’

Arguably, the sublime in Michel Foucault’s early work is an anti-humanistic vision of a post-Enlightenment world, as expressed in the notorious ending of his landmark study *The Order of Things* (1966): “man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (387). Historicising the Enlightenment concept of ‘man’ (the autonomous subject endowed with reason and morals) as belonging to a comparatively recent ‘order of things,’ i.e. our current *episteme* established in the 17th and 18th centuries, he prophesies that, should this order be disrupted or simply give way, “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (ibid.). Foucault, like nobody else, is the postmodern philosopher of history, in fact an archaeologist of ‘history’ in its state of effacement. History to Foucault, as laid out in the introduction to his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), is no longer the linear, continuous march of Progress towards a better future, but a non-linear series of ruptures, contingent events, discontinuous sequences with rough edges. Events are no longer seen as the (un)intended effect of man’s free will, but as the result of historical discourses which narrowly

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6 We follow the argument brought forward in “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?”, *The Differend*, and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. 

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define the limits of knowledge and thinking, and thus predetermine meaning and action. It is only through the discursive processes of signification that a meaningful subject position is enabled. In other words: while we think we use language intentionally for our purposes, while we think we do things with words, in fact words do things with us, we are spoken by the discourses that surround us and that have already determined for us who we are, what can be said, what is true, what is reasonable — and what is not. Discourse, then, operates as a principle of exclusion, and as such is to be grasped as a mechanism of power, but one that is largely beyond the influence of individuals and exerts its power and control on all of its participants.7

Comparable to Lyotard’s dissolving of grand narratives into micronarratives, one way of writing history in postmodernity is to write Foucauldian ‘histories’ of specific discourses and the cultural practices they spawn. This is but a small step away from one of the most heated intellectual controversies concerning postmodernism in the 1980s and ’90s: the claim, voiced from within the academic discipline of history, that history is nothing but stories. To be sure, the relationship between history and postmodern culture had already been a troubled one before this provocation: Postmodernism had either leaned towards a Nietzschean ‘active forgetting’ of the past or, especially in postmodern art, practised a cannibalisation of the past in the form of quotation and pastiche, thereby reducing history to a Barthesian ‘echo-chamber.’ Now, the name of Hayden White and his 1973 study *Metahistory* became a synonym for postmodernism’s historical relativism and the target of many an indignant attack by traditional historians. As is well known, White maintained that historians produce “translations from fact into fictions” (“The Historical Text” 92) by concatenating events reconstructed from the historical record, i.e. naked ‘facts’ without any meaning per se, in such a way as to form a meaningful story inadvertently governed by a

The later Foucault, after his so-called ‘genealogical turn’ in the 1970s, is of course much more critical of the social institutions from which certain discourses emanate and through which they are regulated and channelled, and is thus more open to the possibilities of manipulating discourse and establishing ‘counter-discourses.’
pre-given mythopoeic plot pattern. Such plot patterns (e.g. Northrop Frye’s romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire) he called ‘modes of emplotment.’ Since narrative historiography is always emplotted in this way, White argued, history texts share more with literary texts than in any way desired and thus lose their claim to factual truth and objectivity; they are nothing but stories — fiction. Of course, White’s argument here seems an over-simplification: even if one concedes that there are structural parallels between prose fiction and historiographic texts, this does not prove that they are the same or that fact and fiction are altogether undistinguishable. Yet, as much as White’s provocative thesis has been contested, his broadside against historiography had a considerable impact on postmodern narrative fiction. For the latter Linda Hutcheon coined the generic term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to denote the seemingly paradoxical tendency in many novels of the later twentieth century to “reinstall[1] historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, [to] problematiz[e] the entire notion of historical knowledge” (89). A comparable impact of the historiography debate on contemporary drama is evidenced by the countless instances of the new history play. There is an impressively wide range of plays dealing with history: plays in the experimental wake of Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, which treat history and historiography in a postmodernist, revisionist way; such eminent meta-biographical plays as Michael Frayn’s *Copenhagen* and *Democracy*; and even plays which address (the writing of) history in a rather traditional fashion, as, for example, in Alan Bennett’s pathetic box-office hit *The History Boys.*

The writings of Jean Baudrillard represent a decidedly sociological branch of postmodernist thinking, and while Derrida’s, Foucault’s and Lyotard’s views can for the most part be described as being affirmative of what they diagnose, Baudrillard’s philosophy of culture is a rather bleak vision of post-capitalist and post-industrialist society. Baudrillard argues that the excess of technological communication has brought about a virtual proliferation of meaning. Different from Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the ‘global village,’ Baudrillard observes that the signi-

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8 For an exhaustive treatment of the issue, see Berninger, cf. also Middeke and Huber.
fiers in our culture have set themselves free from their signifieds and have assumed a self-referential status, replacing reality in such a way that they constitute a new reality of altogether self-referential signs — hyperreality. The best illustrations of this may be contemporary web cyberspace or the idea of fashion, which both reveal signifiers referring only to further signifiers ad infinitum. Such hyperreality infers a meaninglessness which is, first and foremost, but paradoxically so, generated by the very excess of meaning which in turn isolates the signifier only to multiply it, yet to make it refer to nothing but itself. In the course of the last few centuries, Baudrillard argues, the sign has neither constituted the reflection of a profound reality nor has it referred to an absent real any longer. Instead of that, the sign “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (“The Precession of Simulacra” 6). Hence, while societies adhering to a symbolic order (and gift exchange) lived on the common interpretation of their symbols as holistic interactions with the real, modern man has counterbalanced the loss of the symbolic order with the production of equivalent signs, simulacra. Baudrillard calls this process “simulation.” Beginning with the Renaissance, and in the course of the Industrial Revolution, human civilisation has moved through various stages of simulation, whereas Baudrillard views contemporary Western societies as having reached the level of third-order simulation. Here the simulacra have annihilated the borderline between copy and original, reality and illusion; in fact, not only has this borderline become blurred, the poles have actually merged. Reality is no longer “that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction,” but “that which is always already reproduced” (Symbolic Exchange and Death 73), which comes close to the death of the real. In this “desert of the real” (“The Precession of Simulacra” 1) human beings appear as an opaque mass in a state of all-encompassing inertia.

At this point, it must be emphasised again that Baudrillard himself — inasmuch as he is a keen observer of postmodern society and his work a major representative of postmodernist discourse — is extremely pessimistic, if not apocalyptic about the ways and aims consumerist western society is heading for. Hyperreality and simulation are processes he has
deeply delved into, but which he has considered as fatal developments. This critical stance somewhat resembles the neo-Marxist\(^9\) position Fredric Jameson advanced in his seminal and highly influential study *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In accordance with postmodernist thought Jameson turns against all dualisms because they suggest a simplistic choice of ‘good’ vs. ‘evil.’ However, it can hardly come as a surprise that his viewpoint of Marxist ideology bars him from endorsing the collapse of metanarratives. For Jameson, the idea that progress and (teleological) history have vanished is ‘impure’ due to the fact that it seems self-contradictory to him: “everything significant about the disappearance of master narratives has itself to be couched in narrative form” (xi). In this, Jameson diagnoses a certain self-immunisation concomitant with postmodernist discourse turning the postmodern condition “into its own theory and the theory of itself” (xii). In keeping with his Marxist orientation he thinks that a satisfactory theory of the postmodern can only emerge out of a dialectical process from within the culture in question. That is to say, what is needed is a skilful alteration between the modern and the postmodern which would save both the “celebratory posture or the old-fashioned fulminatory moralizing gesture from freezing into place” (66). The postmodernist merging of all discourse into an undifferentiated text or textuality-process is seen as a historically traceable stage of development of the conditions of intellectual labour imposed by the late capitalist mode of production. The result is a new ‘depthlessness,’ an obsession with mere surface, which dissolves the autonomy that the cultural sphere still had in modernist times and, instead, subjects this sphere to the organising principles of mass media, mass culture, and capitalism. The borderline between high and low/mass culture consequently does no longer exist.

The common denominator of all these theoretical approaches is the explicit or implicit demand for plurality, the contention of an all-embracing plurality of topics, forms, theories, methods, values, cultures that — often eclectically — co-exist.\(^10\) This vision of plurality affects

\(^9\) For a critique of Jameson that is based on the limits of his ideological confinement, see Bertens.

\(^{10}\) For an apotheosis of postmodernist plurality, see the introduction to Welsch.
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our view of our lifeworld as well as our knowledge and actions. The postmodern consciousness of plurality and difference, de-centralisation and de-familiarisation has given rise to new movements such as Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies.\(^{11}\) In the wake of a deconstructive spirit such indispensable methodological perspectives as Roland Barthes’s (early post-)structuralist semiology and the questioning of authorship, Julia Kristeva’s semiotics highlighting intertextuality and questions on the intersection of language, culture and literature, or reader response and reception theory (Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss) have emerged. Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicism and Clifford Geertz’s concept of a ‘thick description’ in cultural anthropology, which acknowledge the insights provided by philosophy and literary analysis as a major explanatory force in the social sciences, are plainly unthinkable without the postmodern deconstruction of history and the emphasis on cultural difference. Of course, all this plurality of co-existing, different discourses may, at worst, entail in-difference, arbitrariness, randomness, laisser-faire, in fact, it may entail all those epithets by which postmodernist thought has always been stigmatised. However, if one studies postmodernist theory and art very closely, one will find that the analysis of many a deconstructive reading, for instance, quite on the contrary is often (almost too) painstakingly precise, in any case far from advocating the notorious allegation of ‘anything goes.’ Indeed, as most of postmodernist theory and art shows, anything does not go.

\(^{11}\) The postcolonial paradigm, as a special branch of poststructuralist and postmodern discourse theorised in the writings of Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, to name the ‘holy trinity’ of main representatives, is something we cannot pursue here any further due to obvious limitations of time and space. Postcolonial notions of the Other, cultural hybridity, imperial hegemony and the like would deserve a full-blown introduction alone.
Christoph Henke and Martin Middeke

sometimes unconsciously — have proved to have many affinities with postmodernist thought.

ROBBIE. I think ... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by.
And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hand of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenments. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories.
Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we've each got one. (Ravenhill 337)

Mark Ravenhill's notorious *Shopping and Fucking* has received widespread attention and much controversial critical commentary. Numerous readings of the play have stressed its sexually-violent content, its peculiar black humour, and ideological interconnection with Sadean and Marxist philosophies, its concern with Western consumerism and such central images as the shopping mall, with pop culture, with the entire absence of moral absolutes, with the hyperreality of Thatcherite capitalism, and technology. To our knowledge Robbie's statement represents one of the clearest reflections of Lyotard's thesis of the collapse of metanarratives. And the critical stance the play takes on consumer culture, its superficiality, and its quasi-religious worship of simulacra entirely devoid of meaning seems to make *Shopping and Fucking* almost a repository for a Lyotardian, Baudrillardian, or Jamesonian reading. The play does not invite an entire rejection of the society it reflects upon, in fact, its genre- and image-hybridity does not explicitly exclude itself from being a part of the very capitalist society it describes, from belonging to the same cultural discourse that it sets out to investigate. High and low culture elements dissolve here, and the uneasiness that springs from reading and watching *Shopping and Fucking* does not entirely hearken back to its shock effects, but rather to the fact that the play itself is obscene, pornographic, and voyeuristic, and thus addresses the perhaps uncomfortable fascination we feel towards what we see precisely without the easy didactic imperative that we had better not, that we would rather not in order to turn our world and our society into a slightly better place. The play — much in the fashion of Baudrillard or Jameson — may feel the fatality of the direction consumerist society has taken, yet, at the same time and by all means, it does neither design nor
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actually see an alternative to this pluralistic world we inhabit. This is the essentially postmodern perspective of *Shopping and Fucking*.

The aesthetics of contemporary drama in English reveal all vital characteristics of postmodernist art. Indeed these characteristics are so impressively shaped in umpteen plays over decades that one cannot help wondering why the avant-garde representatives of Anglophone drama — quite differently, by the way, from the field of Performance Studies (see Birringer or Kaye) — have so relatively seldom been the subject of systematic theoretical analysis and research, especially if compared to the bulk of theoretical work being done on the contemporary novel.\(^\text{12}\)

Virtually all aesthetic characteristics of postmodern art (see Hassan) can be found in contemporary drama: a fascination for self-reflexive, meta-dramatic modes which reflect upon epistemological uncertainty, ambiguity, and blanks; a mistrust of totality which results in fragmented formal structures: collages, cut-up forms, paradox, pastiche, parody — signifiers that disperse unidirectional attributions of fixed meanings, intentions, or propositions. In the same breath, then, and quite eclectically too, one could mention such extremely different texts and issues as the intertextual playfulness of Caryl Churchill's deconstruction of historical truths in *Top Girls*; the text-archaeology undertaken in much of Tom Stoppard; the virtual rebuff of the ability to provide coherent knowledge of oneself let alone the ability to recount the life of others in much of contemporary (meta-)bio-drama, or the wonderfully crafted portrayal of mental landscape in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, and Sarah Kane’s unforgettable sublime yet nightmarish visions. One might point to the exploration of the dynamic between language and communication, performer and audience in Howard Barker’s work or in the multi-media images/performances of Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson, and Elizabeth LeCompte’s Wooster Group. The work of all of these artists reveals a denial of closure, a self-reflexive concern with dis-

\(^{12}\) Simard's early study *Postmodern Drama* is theoretically disappointing. Watt goes at least some way towards redeeming this; see also Innes. Important new work in the field comes from Wallace and Wald. CDE has published memorable theoretical work on contemporary drama in English, in the context of postmodernism perhaps most notably: Müller-Muth, Pankratz, and Berninger.
course(s), with the surface of the metonymic and synecdochic being privileged over the metaphorical. These playwrights and artists have presented memorable and highly intelligent experiments with dramatic forms and traditions. Their deconstruction of traditional ways of reception and the challenging, rewriting, and revising of canonised works and theatrical customs has sought to subvert power structures in order to give a voice to minorities and hitherto marginalised groups.

The sheer number of playwrights with this postmodern sensibility, by the way, counteracts the impression of an exhaustion of creative potential in contemporary drama. Quite on the contrary, one can observe an ambition for producing cutting-edge images of the un-presentable, abject, and disturbing which covers an extremely wide spectrum of plays. There is the ruthlessly cool and almost ultra-realistically glossy character constellation in Patrick Marber's *Closer*; and one of the true masterpieces of postmodern contemporary drama in English, Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*, is a playful deconstruction of the attempt to make fiction, stories, or self-fashioning and reality correspond. The metanarrative of (Irish) storytelling and memory lurking in the background of McDonagh’s play is rigorously destroyed; McDonagh’s chilling irony in fact supports the impression of indeterminacy and polyvalence of interpretation in our culture, reflecting, if anything, on the randomness and contingency of human life. *The Pillowman*, like much of contemporary Anglophone drama, is a genre-hybrid merging elements from Gothic fiction, Irish mythology, the Cold-War thriller, spy-movies, and Quentin Tarantino’s pulp-fiction aesthetics into a thorough kaleidoscope, a meta-image that first and foremost reveals an almost carnivalesque relish on McDonagh’s part to play with his material, to wallow in the abundance of associations which his signifiers touch upon and oscillate between. The same holds true, by the way, for such genre-mutations as the new history play, biofictional drama (fictional biography), or the various and highly-intertextual and metadramatic rewritings of ancient myths in plays like, for instance, Timberlake Wertenbaker’s prodigious *The Love of the Nightingale* or Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love*. Making excessive use of parody, pastiche, or travesty, these plays subvert objective history or historiography/biography, deconstruct a seemingly mythical stability of form and contents and, hence, intermin-
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gle continuity and discontinuity, past and present in order to provide revisionist innovation and change.

Much of postmodern contemporary drama indeed celebrates performance and performativity and, by doing so, transcends boundaries, pre-conceived notions, and conventions. In this context, the theoretical work on gender performativity by Judith Butler has turned out as one of the most debated areas within postmodernist thinking. Butler has challenged the coherence of the natural-seeming categories of sex, gender, and sexuality by exposing these categories as being culturally constructed in a process of repeated acts which have become habitual in the progress of history. Such stereotyped repetition of bodily acts may well have suggested the existence of an ontological essence of a gender-identity as based on a ‘natural fact’ of sex. Butler, however, ingeniously interprets these bodily acts as performatives which have artificially, and not at all wilfully, been imposed on men and women to produce a regulative discourse for a society — much in the vein of what Michel Foucault had before identified as disciplinary instruments of rationality which have accompanied the development of modernisation and western civilisation in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. It goes without saying that Judith Butler, like Foucault, aims at slashing the power structures and the attribution of ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ gender roles which have evolved out of such disciplinary actions. Even the *sexed* body, that is to say, biological rather than social gender, is no longer seen as a natural, unquestioned fact or entity, but rather as the medium to construct an alibi, a camouflage for power based upon binaries of male/female, sex/gender, etc. Not only does this affect the construction of what it is, or what it takes to be considered a (proper?) man or a woman; furthermore, not only does this illuminate the fact that preconceptions of male and female gender roles are to a large extent the products of discourse. More than all that: making reference to Freud and Lacan, Butler discloses in the very strategy to force the *heterosexual norm* onto the moral evaluation of social interaction the suppression of a potential homosexual side in each

13 See her seminal studies *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter.*
human being (see Gender Trouble 10–50). In the slipstream of feminist discourse and the deconstruction of gender roles and gendered identities (see also Nicholson), one of the most interesting and intellectually as well as aesthetically challenging plays is Marina Carr’s *Low in the Dark*. In a self-reflexive/metadramatic, farcical and entirely anti-realistic way Carr presents a dramatised world in which historical, temporal, subjective, psychological, physical, as well as linguistic traits and characteristics of gender roles break down and, thus, question the myths, respectively, the misconceptions of the sexes.

In consequence to the argumentation brought forward so far, the eighteen essays collected here investigate, in some way or other, how and to what extent the aesthetics of contemporary drama reflect the postmodern preference for difference, plurality, uncertainty, ambiguity, hybridity, fragmentation, or performativity; for the deconstruction of teleological history and the subject; for carnivalesque playfulness and irony; but also for the non-representable sublime in art.

The first section of the present volume consists of four essays that not only take very different approaches to a theory of drama in a postmodern media culture, but also look afresh at some of the traditional core elements of drama and theatre in view of postmodernist discourses and their repercussions in contemporary plays and performances. Those kernels of drama theory under scrutiny here are: the very concept of drama itself and its validity for contemporary theatre; the notion of plot as mimetic, structured, teleological action; the idea of character and its concomitant ideologies of subjectivity, individualism, intentionality, and ‘depth;’ and, finally, the dynamic of performance and its strained relationship with the hegemony of the dramatic text. Under postmodern conditions, these key elements have been subverted and twisted to their very limits. If the theatrical and performance practices of the contemporary avant-gardes have a common denominator at all, then it might be that they present the fragmentary, the ruptured, the visceral (rather than the cerebral), and thus forestall closure of meaning, understanding, em-
pathy, or even catharsis — in favour of an aesthetics of sensual, and often disturbing, impact.

In this context, one of the seminal concepts in drama theory to have emerged within the last decade is Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theory of the ‘postdramatic.’ Since many contributions in this volume refer back to aspects of postdramatic theatre as envisaged by Lehmann in his 1999 study *Postdramatisches Theater* (trans. *Postdramatic Theatre*, 2006), it is only appropriate to have his essay open the book, and thus, as it were, start the debate. In his article presented here, just as in the keynote speech delivered at the conference, Lehmann sketches the growing rift between word and stage in postdramatic times, that is the incompatibility between a unified dramatic text, implying the primacy and originary status of text over its staging, and contemporary theatrical performances. Whereas dramatic form in the Aristotelian tradition suggests the “order, harmony, understandability of the world as a totality” (46), it has outlived itself and become unconvincing in our contemporary lifeworld that has seen the dissolution of all such unifying categories and given way, instead, to the awareness of an impenetrable complexity of reality. This diagnosis in itself is of course not quite new, and Lehmann himself makes it clear that there is a continuity between the modernist avant-gardes of the early twentieth-century, a Beckettian outlook on life, and the postmodern fragmentation displayed on the stage of, say, the past three decades — all of which, with different nuances, are based on a similar perception of a post-Enlightenment lifeworld. However, what Lehmann really argues is that the ‘postdramatic condition’ is indeed a condition, and not just “a collection of whims and oddities of a number of theatre directors” (44). What used to be a small theatrical avant-garde has become the norm of ‘serious’ theatre, i.e. theatre as an art form, and has found its expression both in various forms of Regietheater and a tidal wave of new plays. Lehmann here takes recourse to Sarah Kane’s ground-breaking plays *Blasted*, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* to exemplify how postdramatic plays challenge the stale notions of order, unity, representation, theatrical illusion, and didacticism, while leaning towards open forms of self-reflexive and non-representational performance.
What, then, in such a postdramatic era, is the status of plot and character? Can there be any value left in them other than signifying their own absence? Brian Richardson and Susan Blättès, in their essays, pursue the traces of plot and character remaining in contemporary drama, and take a slightly more balanced stand on these cornerstones of dramatic art. Richardson, for example, reviews anti-realistic plays by Amiri Baraka, Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp, Peter Handke, and Harold Pinter with an analytic approach informed by narrative theory and discusses the specific ways in which each of these plays strains, rejects, or disrupts the conceptual framework of sequential narrative plot. For all the cancelling out of linear, closed, unified plot in these plays, he comes to the not altogether invalid conclusion that “in many cases where these basic concepts of theater analysis are violated, their violation is best described by using the concepts themselves” (55). However, Richardson is well aware of the pitfalls of defining contemporary dramatic art in terms of mere deviation from a realistic-mimetic norm; instead, he regards the development of new and more expansive concepts of story, plot, and temporality as one of the pressing aims of a state-of-the-art theory of drama and narrative.

Already in her article’s title, Susan Blättès asks the intriguing question whether ‘character’ is still a relevant concept in contemporary drama. After all, if we read a dramatic text, even in most of Beckett, Crimp, or Kane we will find names or descriptors denoting personae or speakers, preceding the lines they speak (or the actions they perform). With the proclaimed ‘death of the author’ in postmodernism, the ‘death of character’ has been equally celebrated especially in the realm of narrative fiction (cf. the long history of self-referential experimentation with character from Laurence Sterne, to Flann O’Brien, Samuel Beckett, Christine Brooke-Rose, and beyond), but also to a lesser extent in drama (Luigi Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author or much of Beckett’s dramatic work spring to mind). Blättès, however, argues that ‘character’ is a concept in the analysis of drama which should be held on to even when most other traditional analytic categories have long been done away with — albeit with a few necessary modifications. Her analysis of the precarious state of ‘characters’ in contemporary British plays as diverse as Pinter’s Moonlight and Ashes to Ashes, Churchill’s
Blue Heart and Far Away, Kane’s Crave and 4.48 Psychosis, and Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life, leads her to a conclusion similar to Richardson’s: While obviously the personae or voices in these plays do not come across as ‘finished,’ coherent, or round characters in the traditional sense, they all the more invite the audience to ‘construct’ character out of the fragmentary voices and movements presented — “paradoxically, Blattès argues, “this reinforces rather than undermines their vitality” (79). As Richardson does for plot, Blattès argues for an expansion and redefinition of the concept of character in a postmodern environment.

The last essay of the first section offers a foray into a truly post-dramatic, if not even post-theatrical future — of theatre in its ‘post-medium condition’ — as much as a workshop report from the forefront of digital performance art, written by one of the leading critics and practitioners of this medium, Johannes Birringer. Once among the first to describe the impact of postmodern theory on the stage from the perspective of performance studies (in his 1991 study Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism), he has long since shifted his interests away from the theatre to choreography and new ‘dance technologies,’ embracing and exploring the possibilities of digital media for innovative forms of dance and performance. Quite in line with this, Birringer turned his keynote speech at the conference, which was presented on a theatre stage, into a multimedia performance with a fireworks of video clips and stills, with an underlying Industrial soundtrack by the Slovenian group Laibach —, so self-reflexively giving an ironic twist to Marshall McLuhan’s old dictum that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (8). In his present essay, Birringer consequently propagates, in an almost McLuhanian fashion, a media change from theatrical to digital performance, arguing that the “theatre of the material archive, with its national canons of plays and technical pedagogies for acting and staging […], is now similar to the museum of the old masters” (89). Apart from such provocative proclamations of the death of not only drama but theatre altogether, Birringer’s essay gives a fascinating insight into a truly avant-garde form of performance art, which aims at the merging of man and machine, face and interface, senses and sensors, design and digitalisation, the visceral and the virtual, as well as culture and commerce. The example he presents for such commodified avant-garde art is the ‘wearable
performance,’ with the ‘wearable’ being a communication interface garment, which conceptually links the world of commercial fashion to that of postmodern hyperreality on the grounds of their shared principle of virtual self-fashioning: we re-invent virtual identities in/with fashion just as in cyberspace (in Internet chat rooms, multi-player network games etc.). It remains to be seen whether Birringer’s swan song to the theatre, in which he also includes Lehmann’s ‘postdramatic’ and its implementation of new media in the old medium (cf. 90, n. 6), will hold true for the future — it seems there is life in the old dog yet.

That this is the case is also testified by the ten essays that make up the large middle section of this volume. They show the sustained relevance and diversity of postmodern discourse to be traced in and applied to contemporary drama, and they do so by producing Baudrillardian, Derridean, Lacanian, or Lyotardian readings; by employing concepts of intertextuality, adaptation, or memory/identity theory; by making use of the interpretive frameworks of feminism and Queer theory; but also by evaluating criticism of postmodernism as presented in (the discussion of) contemporary plays.

In his article about Tom Stoppard’s early metadramatic play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Laurens De Vos develops a complex argument informed by Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of subject-formation and Derrida’s concept of ‘hauntology’ in Specters of Marx. He suggests that contrary to common critical opinion about the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not actually fear their inevitable demise at the end of the play, but in fact dread the opposite: having to live on interminably through every further staging of Shakespeare’s/Stoppard’s play. Here, being a character trapped in a play is tantamount to having what Derrida called a ‘hauntological status,’ i.e. living with the spectres of the past one cannot drive away. Instead, De Vos argues, Ros and Guil desire to ultimately exchange their hauntology for ontology, i.e. being with the consequence of ‘real’ death.

With the theory and study of (cultural) memory, Sarah Heinz’s article takes on board one of the most fruitful research paradigms in Cultural Studies of the past fifteen years or so, and applies it to a reading of Michael Frayn’s plays Donkey’s Years and Copenhagen. By focussing on the temporality of identity construction and its processes related to
memory, Heinz not only quotes Derrida’s concept of the ‘iterability’ of identity, but also adopts the psychological term ‘prospective memory’ to emphasise that memory does more than just relate the past to the present, but also connects the present (as the ‘future past’) to the future (as the ‘future present’). As she goes on to show, all three temporal dimensions play a vital role in Frayn’s presentation of memory/identity processes which are central to both of these plays.

Clara Escoda’s essay is the first of two contributions on Martin Crimp in the present volume, besides the numerous references to his seminal play Attempts on Her Life in many of the other articles. Escoda analyses the Crimp’s strategy in Attempts on Her Life to induce indeterminacy by means of the minimalist art forms of concrete poetry and linguistic ready-mades. Interestingly, she comes to the conclusion that such formal devices alien to conventional drama, while clearly signalling the vagaries of subjectification and bringing out a postmodern indeterminacy of character/identity, are the author’s ironic means to point to the difficulty, but nonetheless: necessity, of a moral position from which subject-identity and actions can be assessed. “The fundamental ‘attempt on her life,’ therefore,” says Escoda, “is […] that of the author him/herself, in his/her position to write about identities” (162).

The plays of Mark Ravenhill, one of the icons of ‘in-yer-face theatre’ are the focus of Margret Fetzer’s essay. She analyses Shopping and Fucking, Faust (Faust Is Dead), and the very recent The Cut with regard to their display of states of bodily pain and shock. Harking back to Jean Baudrillard’s diagnosis of hyper-real simulation and Elaine Scarry’s analysis of the language of pain, Fetzer interprets pain and shock in Ravenhill on two levels: First, Ravenhill’s characters, by inflicting pain on themselves or having it inflicted on them for sexual gratification or other purposes, establish their identity in this manner while at the same time desperately trying to break out of hyperreality and break through to the real. Second, even though it can be a shocking experience to the audience, the display of pain on stage can never escape being but a simulation of such pain, which not only stresses the empathetic distance between audience and characters, but also renders, in a metadramatic twist, the characters’ desire to escape hyperreality all the more futile.
Christopher Innes’s article on the plays and performances of the ever-versatile Robert Lepage brings in a most welcome perspective on Canadian postmodern theatre. An all-round theatre-artist and theatrical auteur, Lepage can be associated with many textbook features of postmodern art, such as stylistic eclecticism, intertextual borrowing and quotation, multimedia montage, non-linear arrangement of plot, forays into myth and pop-cultural realms, or a typically postmodern use of irony (as in intertextuality and pastiche). However, what Innes is able to demonstrate, with special reference also to the artist’s most recent *The Andersen Project*, is that Lepage’s affinities lie just as well with earlier forms of the modernist avant-gardes. A specific ‘authorial’ signature in his works, an elitist tendency in some of his intertextual references, an aesthetic leaning toward surrealism, a narcissistically autobiographical streak throughout his work — all these aspects make him an intermediary between modernism and postmodernism, an ambiguous, hard-to-pin-down figure in contemporary theatre.

Another aspect of postmodern art is the practice of adaptation, which features prominently in Robert F. Gross’s comparison of Franz Kafka’s novella *Ein Landarzt* with *A Country Doctor*, a recent adaptation for the stage by the New York playwright-director-novelist Len Jenkin. The transposition of Kafka’s haunting story to an American pop-culture setting directly confirms Jameson’s verdict of postmodernism’s ‘aesthetic populism,’ while the narrative reductionism in Kafka’s piece is stood on its head in Jenkin’s play through a hypertrophy of narrative cross-lines. Politically, Jenkin has smoothed out Kafka’s novella by disambiguating all homosexual overtones, in an almost paranoid way, into heteronormative stories. Accordingly, Gross arrives at a critique of Jenkin’s play as an instance of postmodern mannerism, thus largely testifying to John Barth’s famous dictum of a ‘literature of exhaustion.’

American feminist drama is the topic of Kerstin Schmidt’s essay about Rochelle Owens’s often neglected play *Emma Instigated Me*, and Schmidt’s special concern is in what way feminism’s political cause can be reconciled with postmodernism’s anti-foundationalist impulse. That this is possible is of course shown by Judith Butler’s anti-essentialist deconstruction of the sex-gender opposition; Schmidt, however, draws specifically on the Lyotardian critique of master narratives, which she
takes as feeding into feminism’s critique of the master narrative of patriarchy. Situated in the context of Schmidt’s larger study, *The Theater of Transformation*, about postmodernism in American drama, Rochelle Owens’s anti-mimetic, self-reflexive play serves her as a model example of how destabilising transformative practices in drama can be aligned with a feminist agenda. Besides the oscillating gender identity of some personae in the play, frame-breaks such as the abrupt change from one persona to the next, or, metatheatrically, from actor-as-role to actor-as-actor, are employed by Owens to defy closure and deconstruct (male) authority and fixed gender ascriptions.

Queer theory, another branch of gender theory, informs Wolfgang Funk’s reading of select plays from Bryony Lavery’s productive dramatic work. He proposes the concept of ‘queering’ to be applied not only to the level of dramatic action and their gender-related aspects, but also metaphorically to the form of her plays. Despite often carrying a rather strong and unequivocal message (which could be undermined by an overload of formal experimentation), Lavery’s plays exhibit a persistent queering of theatrical conventions in order to mildly suspend dramatic illusion and a linear time-frame of dramatic action. Furthermore, Funk coins the term ‘incidentity’ to denote the “continual re-evaluation of the individual self and its connection to its surroundings” (229) at work in Lavery’s characters, which keeps sexual (or other) identities fluid in her plays and prevents them from becoming rigid and ascribable with fixed meaning. All these aspects make Lavery’s work a fitting example for queer theorising.

The last two articles in the middle section present voices of criticism of postmodern theory and its tenets, albeit in quite different forms. Ines Detmers looks at David Lodge’s two plays from the 1990s, *The Writing Game* and *Home Truths*, in which Lodge’s discontent with poststructuralist and postmodern theory becomes manifest. Lodge, better known for his literary criticism and campus novels, diverts his satirical impulse in these two rare plays to the postmodern slogan of the “Death of the Author” (first pronounced in Roland Barthes’s eponymous article and further developed in Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?”). As regards their form, his pieces are anything but postmodern plays; they are highly conventional comedies poking fun at the philosophical notion of au-
thorical death, which here comes in the form of the rather practical problems of writer’s block and pernicious media campaigning.

In contrast to Lodge’s satirical criticism, Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie* does not imply a critique of postmodern aspects per se. Here it is the author of this section’s closing article, Harold Fish, who has embedded his analysis of O’Rowe’s award-winning Irish monologue play in a broad attack against postmodernist (or poststructuralist) criticism for its apparent loss of touch with the empirical linguistic basis of literary criticism. What Fish advances is a straightforward corpus-linguistic analysis of the colloquial language of *Howie the Rookie*, which helps to illustrate the difficulties readers and audiences alike (especially in a foreign-language context) may experience with the play. Fish maintains that some linguistic legwork is necessary before any valid interpretation of a literary text is possible, and defends such an approach against a postmodern ‘anything goes’ of interpretation.

The notorious ‘anything goes’ charge against postmodern theory makes a good transition to the complex and difficult relationship between postmodernism and politics (or ethics, in more general terms), which is the concern of the four essays in the third section of the present volume. Siân Adiseshiah’s analysis of Caryl Churchill’s bewilderingly experimental plays *The Skriker* and *Far Away* gives evidence to the intellectual trouble with having a political agenda in postmodern times. In her reading of the plays’ surreal, nightmarish scenarios, Adiseshiah works out the apparent impasse in Churchill’s plays between the postmodern deconstruction of truth and representation (through a fixation with language) and the problem of political agency, i.e. the necessity for political action in a world riddled with social, cultural, and environmental conflict. Churchill’s socialist inclinations are however traceable in both plays, even more so in the eco-critical *Far Away*, which to Adiseshiah represents a form of politically committed art that has been updated to the a-political aesthetic idiom of the postmodern condition — thus proving that in order to get heard you need speak the right language.

While a continued political agenda in Churchill is not surprising, it is at least far less obvious in the plays of Martin Crimp. Aleks Sierz, however, highlights the underlying socio-critical implications of Crimp’s
playlet-trilogy Fewer Emergencies, his “recent afterword to Attempts on Her Life” (294), as Sierz calls it. After In-Yer-Face Theatre, Sierz’s new full-length study on The Theatre of Martin Crimp has just been published to make him a pre-eminent expert on Crimp’s work. Applying Lehmann’s concept of the postdramatic to Fewer Emergencies, Sierz concludes that, while appearing to be perfect examples at first, the playlets — as well as Attempts on Her Life — are actually not. Firstly, Crimp himself demands fidelity to his texts when put on stage (violating the postdramatic principle of performance over text). Secondly, the language used in his plays, consisting of colloquialisms and discursive ready-mades (to use Clara Escoda’s term), is far from the Sprachflächen Lehmann deems typical of postdramatic theatre. As for traits of social criticism in Fewer Emergencies, Sierz quotes Crimp’s political views stated in interviews where he professes a critical agenda in his plays against the ‘culture of contentment’ in contemporary society, for which Sierz finds ample evidence in the playlets. While the collapsing narratives to be found in so many of Crimp’s plays correspond to a postmodern sense of fragmentation, there is hardly anything celebratory about them. Rather, Sierz argues, they are satirical — and thus critical — of various aspects of a mediatised postmodern lifeworld.

The last two articles in the ‘politics’ section of the present volume are particularly concerned with drama after postmodernism in that they register a growing backlash against postmodern language games, undecidability, indeterminacy, obfuscation of truth and the like. Michał Lachman’s analysis of the verbatim drama currently gaining currency on the British stage offers a thorough-going critique of the genre, emphasising its almost reactionary return to ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ as fetishised objects of presence. Instead of the discourse of art, journalism becomes the new master discourse in plays such as Guantanamo, The Colour of Justice, or Bloody Sunday, which seem to signal that as long there is no art in them there can be no artificial distortion of the truth. Is verbatim drama thus a special form of postdramatic theatre, is it truly post-postmodern? Lachman concludes laconically that it is “post-dramatic as much as it is post-literary, post-fiction and post-journalism,” and that it might be post-postmodern “because it innocently believes that the ob-
jective truth of facts can be reconstructed from the chaotic pool of rioting, subjective voices” (321).

Finally, Markus Wessendorf pursues the much-pondered question whether postmodernism has really come to an end with the political events of and around 9/11. Wessendorf first retraces the principal positions of the postmodern condition according to Lyotard, to then contrast it with calls by leading American journalists and intellectuals for an end of postmodern playfulness immediately after 9/11, as well as the spreading authoritarian grasp of the Bush administration on both world and domestic affairs in the wake of the attacks, which has been accompanied by a political rhetoric feeding largely on Christian fundamentalist and other pre-postmodern (not to say, anti-modern) discourses. In his analysis of Adriano Shaplin’s Pugilist Specialist and David Hare’s take on verbatim drama in Stuff Happens, Wessendorf manages to show that the postmodern deconstruction of master-narratives and authoritarian discourses — as well as the ensuing aesthetics of de-centring, fragmentation, ironic pastiche, etc. which both plays make use of in different ways —, is neither politically obsolete (strongly implying, on the contrary, that the current world-political development toward fundamentalism actually necessitates a postmodern political agenda of plurality and difference), nor is it aesthetically outmoded. In conclusion it must be argued that there is indeed postmodernism post-9/11.

As an appendix to the articles presented here, we have included a highly enjoyable interview with the English playwright Richard Bean, which was conducted during the conference by Aleks Sierz in his customary nonchalant fashion (accompanied by a scenic performance from Bean’s highly successful play Harvest). Bean is representative of a new generation of post-postmodernist/post-in-yer-face playwrights with quite different aesthetic concerns than those from the vibrant phase of British drama in the 1990s. It might well be that the pendulum is slowly swinging back to a more realist, less theoretical, often comic, but just as often politically concerned drama.

* * *

We shall conclude on a few remaining questions: What comes after postmodernism? What is drama after postmodernism? Will postmodern
sensibilities soon be done with? Is there no more value agenda in postmodern times? Should there be a value agenda? Is there anything like art/drama without ethics at all? In a strict sense these questions only make sense if, at first, one tends to reproduce the olden prejudices held against postmodernism: that it equals arbitrariness, randomness, anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism, meaninglessness, nihilism, or even epitomises or gives rise to an immoral unchecked license of our age. In fact, the wish for something after postmodernism can also only make sense if one makes the mistake of looking at postmodernism as something entirely resistant to change and as being immobile. This, however, would mean using the same defective optics as those with which many postmodernists have indeed looked at modernity. Perhaps, then, it is true that the difference of modernism and postmodernism is one of degree rather than of kind — with the incontrovertible distinction, though, that the one (modernity) harks back to concepts of cultural, psychological, epistemological, ontological identity while the other (postmodernity) is content with difference. On the one hand, the exact boundary between possible positions in this debate may, after all, seem rather blurred at times, if one compares Derrida’s deconstructive position, for instance, to the phenomenological hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. On the other hand, postmodernist philosophy and methodology and, for example, Critical Rationalism (Karl Raimund Popper) will forever remain oceans apart.

What modernist and postmodernist art definitely share is the powerlessness in the face of a desire for stable moral judgements, values, and fixed standards of conduct in this world. You will neither find any of their kind in Martin Crimp nor in James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, or, if we want to stay exclusively in the field of drama, in August Strindberg or in Antonin Artaud. Yet even though these works of art and their particularly sceptical view of human subjectivity may not have in stock any more clear-cut and handy moral solutions or guiding lines, their highly innovative and intricate aesthetic structures are nevertheless far from being un-ethical. Their ethics literally consist in their asking questions,

14 For but a few sources concerned with these questions, see Fekete, Ziegler, Schabert, and Bohrer.
in their entangling of readers and audiences in their reflective patterns, if only these are self-reflexive ones. Robbie's (and Lyotard's) view from Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* may well be recalled here: Indeed, 'we all need stories,' ‘little stories’ if needs be — no longer do we trust metanarratives, but rather micro-narratives. No longer also, it seems, do we have universal ethics, but rather micro-ethics, micro-ethics that spring from the intricate aesthetics of each dramatic experiment, each of them coming out in a different way.

No matter how postmodern or postdramatic a dramatic work of art will ever turn out to be, it will always retain its interaction with society and, consequently, there will be an ethical value arising out of this. By definition, and in this perhaps differently from prose fiction or poetry, drama is more than just the literary text. Drama is fundamentally characterised by its performative aspects which co-exist with the literary ones. Drama is thus distinguished by the demonstrativeness of its actions which take place in the theatre in direct interaction with the social world, to which it bears a definitive affinity. For Hegel this was reason enough to consider drama as the highest form of art. Furthermore, dramatic plot is interaction no matter if it is monologic or dialogic. Each drama, therefore, is a micro-society which interacts with the real one, albeit without being a simple reproduction of it. As stated above, the diversified micro-ethics of each postmodernist play defy providing universally applicable answers, but they do appeal to us. They do appeal to us to reflect upon ourselves and our responsibilities in a postmodern age if only it may be the responsibility to learn and to be intellectually candid enough to remain open to changing views, changing opinions, and changing readings. This is one of the most important ethical values of what postmodernist drama in particular and postmodernist art in general can do: to necessitate responses to themselves, to provoke our desire to produce new readings — “a response,” as it were, “to an irresistible demand” which at the same time is “free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my responsibility and for the further effects […] of my acts of reading” (Miller 43).

The micro-narratives and micro-ethics of postmodern art share the vision of a more tolerant, pluralistic society. Yet this tolerance implies and addresses our constant activity never to consider a single one of our
readings as finished. Neither the production of art nor our readings of it will ever be finished. The essays collected in this volume reveal how vital contemporary drama in English is in producing new narratives and new images which interact with our readings. We may desire to apply these images and our readings of them to the (last resort of) universal ethics of communicative rationality and reason (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*) in that we keep on pondering the claim of universal validity, measuring the validity of each conflicting statement against each other in the search for a compromise that goes beyond strategic action and functionalist reason or human emotion such as hate, love, jealousy and all the rest of such stuff as drama is made on. Perchance Jürgen Habermas is correct: it is perhaps our duty not to declare the Enlightenment cause as lost in order to change the world for the better. But maybe there are times and instances when the ‘little stories,’ the small advances made by the micro-ethics of a single work of postmodernist (dramatic) art seem just enough.

Works Cited

*Primary Literature*


*Secondary Literature*


Introduction: Drama and/after Postmodernism


I. **Theorising Theatre and Drama and/after Postmodernism**
The relation between the text and the artistic practice of theatre has never been an easy one. Small wonder: the text is and remains a literary phenomenon, even if it is a drama, and the text proper literally disappears on the stage of the theatre. With the exception of devices for having written words on stage — from written scene indications to multimedia presentation of text in high-tech theatre — the drama as a literary linguistic reality all but vanishes and makes room for ‘something completely different’: for the paralinguistic dimension, for voices and intonation, rhythm, speed and slowness of speech, sexual and gendered auditory information, gesture and the expressivity of body language in general. Even if text in itself must be understood in the light of its “espace-ment” (Derrida), the staging creates yet another additional dimension of dissemination, dispersing and cancelling textual significance in a field of heterogeneous materials, structures and processes which in turn create new and largely unpredictable meanings. Furthermore: considered from the perspective of theatre the text is material, and worse: only one material among others. Even if words undoubtedly remain a very strong theatrical element, the reality of the written page is for the study room, not for the theatre. The latter deals with space, light, bodies, sound and music as much as and more so than with text. Moreover, it produces a social event instead of an essentially solitary act of reading. Considered from the perspective of the text, the theatre stage may in some respect
look like the winner who takes it all, but there is of course another side to the medal. *Verba volant, scripta manent:* the performance vanishes instantly and forever while the text continues to exist — a monument remaining untouched by the theatre just like a stone that is temporarily thrown into the water remains unchanged and dries afterwards, while the fugitive performance of the rippling water dies.

It is not such a new insight that the relationship between text and scene has rarely, if ever, been one of harmony, but rather one of clash and perpetual conflict. One of the best European theatre critics of the 1960s and 1970s, Bernard Dort, talked about the unification of text and stage never really taking place (cf. Lehmann 145). In his view the relationship remained always one of oppression and compromise. And it was no lesser authority than Edward Gordon Craig who claimed as early as around 1900 that it was impossible to stage the plays of Shakespeare at all (cf. Lehmann 49ff). The theatre, he said, would only ruin the poetic depth of these texts. Similar statements can be found by Paul Claudel or Maurice Maeterlinck, and even by Stanislavski and Max Reinhardt, whom nobody would mistake for a sworn enemy of the theatre of text. He stated explicitly that for the theatre the literal text is of little use — what counts is the sub-text. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that — for all its scepticism toward literary theatre — the so-called historical avantgarde of around 1900 also fought against the trivial ways in which theatre routinely dealt with text. A fierce demand that the practice of mise-en-scène should live up to the complexity and truth embedded in the great texts was a central motif of the endeavours of avant-garde theatre makers. It is true that they were moving away from the traditional presentation of drama, and some of the advocates of the ‘retheatricalization’ of theatre went as far as wishing to ban the text (in any traditional understanding of the word) altogether. But innovative radical theatre was from the beginning not motivated by a simplistic contempt for text but also by an attempt to rescue it. The emerging theatre of directors (*Regietheater*) was and is (in all cases worth of discussion) concerned with wrenching texts away from sheer convention, saving them from arbitrary, overly harmless, or culinary theatrical effects.
In the periodically recurring public debates about rescuing the text from the alleged crimes of irresponsible directing, these historical aspects should be remembered. The tradition of written text is under more threat from conventions that turn the texts into museum-pieces than from radical forms of dealing with texts. Without wanting to enter deeper into the seemingly never-ending debate about Texttreue (faithfulness to the text), two or three simple and basic aspects of the problem must be briefly indicated. First: theatre is not literature. It is an artistic practice sui generis and it cannot — even if it wanted to — but cancel important dimensions of the staged text and add other elements to it. Second: the demand for theatre which is true to the text nearly always turns out to be the demand for theatre as it used to be fifty or thirty years ago. Third: a text can be archived, but not a context. And since we have come to understand that the meaning of a text is constituted by its relations to contexts, it is obvious that the meaning of an old text must in one way or another necessarily be re-invented by theatrical practice. The attempt to produce a completely ‘true’ rendering of a text from 1806 in 2006 would only result in a grotesque puppet show, a tourist museum of theatre and would necessarily falsify the original text to the extreme.

Let me sketch some aspects of the notion of ‘postdramatic theatre,’ before I focus in on the changed position of the text within it. It has often been stated: it seems to have become increasingly difficult for drama and society to come together. Of course, dramatic theatre continues to exist, it even continues to dominate the aesthetics of most theatre institutions. But so many new theatrical languages have come into being — from Robert Wilson to Tadeusz Kantor, from Jan Fabre to Jan Lauwers, from Forced Entertainment to Rimini Protokoll, from Christoph Marthaler to René Pollesch — that we can hardly avoid the recognition that the impulse for drama and dramatic narration in theatre has been weakened while in turn other concerns have become foregrounded. Narration as such continues, new forms of it have surfaced — monologues, post-epic styles, multi-media narration among them. But
drama, as a basic structure of narrative, can no longer be conceived of as being the natural norm and rule of theatre. Considering the textual structure of much contemporary performance and theatre (let alone theatre without text) it does not make sense to keep widening the concept of ‘drama’ in order to be able to affirm its continuing central position. This would only result in emptying the concept of drama completely without gaining a better understanding of the development of theatrical practice.

On the level of dramatic literature the problem has long been identified. Peter Szondi’s analysis of the crisis of drama remains canonical in this respect. But on the level of theatrical practice (which Szondi explicitly excluded from his considerations), the development still has to be conceptualized in adequate ways. For theatre as a form of art which has its raison d’être in the capacity to problematize or even renew our perception and understanding of reality, it holds true that the pattern of drama somehow no longer seems to be able to grasp this reality. If we consider the principle of its form, drama is about conflict between protagonists and about decisions created in the sphere of dialogue. But it is beyond doubt that conflicts and decisions of relevance in contemporary society are less and less conflicts and decisions of personal protagonists. They result from tensions between anonymous blocks of power, economic interests, regional and global strategies, markets, shifts of balance of forces, and chaotic sudden implosions which are much less influenced by individual actors in political power than they themselves may imagine. Equally in everyday social life, conflicts have taken the form of the “prose of civic life” (Hegel: „Prosa des bürgerlichen Lebens“). Thus, in the absence of credible personal protagonists it becomes increasingly questionable to present socially and even individually relevant conflicts by dramatizing them. Would the technique of substituting a subjective personal dramatic conflict for the reality of these objective and widely anonymous fields of forces not severely falsify the world? An author like Heiner Müller explicitly stated that he found it increasingly impossible to write a drama. He is an especially interesting case — first, because of his rare historical knowledge, literary scope and intellectual brilliance; second, because he realized in the course of his own work a change of paradigm from more or less realistic drama to postdramatic
writing. At the same time, Müller could state that he believed only in one thing: in conflict. Obviously it is not the absence of deep conflicts as such which brings about the situation in which the dramatic pattern becomes problematic. There is conflict, but even the most conflictuous realities somehow seem to resist being shaped into dramatic form. Under these circumstances many authors today take recourse to presenting scenes from family life. There has been a real flood of family drama since the 1990s. But this retreat does not offer a real solution. As soon as the private sphere meets the general social context, the problem reappears. And it is a commonplace experience that even the individual life is lived less and less as a coherent drama or even story, but much more as a series of fragments, life-phases and episodes, so that expressing it in beautifully structured form misses the real experience and will create the impression that this may be beautiful but has nothing to do with how I experience life.

What can be the answer of theatre? A problem arises here, since there is undoubtedly something like a desire for drama. But it seems that, roughly speaking, this desire nowadays finds its fulfilment more in cinema and TV than in theatre. A book I came across recently (of little interest in itself) carries the telling title *Aristotle in Hollywood.*! The recipes for making successful entertainment movies obviously stand in the tradition of the basic categories of drama as first identified by Aristotle. But from entertaining movies we do not demand the articulation of reality in truthful ways. They aim at another — absolutely legitimate — telos that is entertainment: distraction from the serious world of everyday life, suspense, emotion — more compensation for than reflection of reality. But theatre considered as an artistic practice has to find answers in the face of the drifting apart of dramatic form and social reality. Therefore, we discover in the theatre practice roughly since the advent of media culture a richly varied spectrum of theatrical innovations which often repeat, quote, continue or revive the older avant-garde, but also present new ways of deviating from the path of established dramatic

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1 German title: Ari Hiltunen, *Aristoteles in Hollywood.*
The idea of a theatre beyond drama or beyond drama as an ordering structure and model may seem strange from the point of view of literary or drama studies — it is much less so from the perspective of theatre studies. It should not be forgotten that other theatre cultures never developed the specific European model of dramatic theatre at all. And even in Europe its life span is comparatively short — if we adopt a narrow perspective and try to identify only the dramatic theatre that was really literature-dominated, we are dealing with not much more than three centuries of dominantly dramatic theatre. After its beginnings in the context of the festivity culture of the Renaissance it flourished in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries and was already put into question toward the end of the 19th century.

The term ‘postdramatic theatre’ covers a whole range of aesthetic approaches in theatre practice, the book with this title presents a number of analytical descriptions, notions and categories for the landscape of innovative theatre of roughly the last three decades. The word is not intended to be just a helpful umbrella notion, however, but is meant to point to a certain coherence, a common denominator. Not in the sense of a minimal common aesthetic denominator, a checklist — this should go without saying in view of the enormous variety of theatre work today: from a theatre of images to a theatre of voices, from choral and monologic structures to durational performance, from multimedia theatre to theatre with amateurs, from new documentary forms to pop-theatre and theatre as game. The unity, the common denominator can only be situated in the common problem with the dramatic imagination as such, a heightened consciousness of a certain inner and essential limi-

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2 The book *Postdramatic Theatre* attempts to scan this movement and implies (but does not develop) a hypothesis about the ‘progress’ of theatre toward post-dramatic forms. *Postdramatic Theatre* was first published in 1999. Now a number of translations have been published: English, French, Japanese, Polish, Croatian, Slovenian, among others; the third edition in Germany is out, the term and references to the notion ‘postdramatic’ figure widely in essays, in criticism, in conferences, research projects, theatre dictionaries. A book like the newly issued *Qu’est-ce que le théâtre* by Christian Biet and Christophe Triau makes constant reference to the notion. I mention these circumstances because they suggest that the analysis and the concept seems to meet certain preoccupations of theatre makers today.
tation of dramatic representation, the limits of a theatre centred around the notion of *mimesis praxeon* (imitation of actions) and connected mostly (not always) to the predominance of text, textual structure and coherence.

Dramatic theatre is constituted by the construction and presentation of a principally separated fictional universe of the drama, a world of the drama — be it in Rotrou, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Racine, Schiller, or Ibsen. This procedure results in specific chances but also limitations of theatrical communication which are now increasingly considered as impediments for the theatre insofar as it is essentially ‘live art’ which has the possibility to include spectators in an event and a situation instead of making them (only) contemplate a different fictive cosmos. These limitations are compounded by the fact that, as mentioned, the form of drama has a tendency to create the less and less plausible impression that actions in this world essentially depend on the decisions and the psychology of individual human agents, while since Nietzsche, Marx and Freud the problem of ‘agency’ has turned out to be much more complex. (Just as in ancient Greek theatre and in many great plays, by the way — but the form of drama and the tradition of dramatic theatre aesthetics tended to hide their deep insights into the problematic ‘subject’ of action all too easily behind the unifying character and the logic of dramatic action.)

If you consider some of the notions in *Postdramatic Theatre*, such as the predominance of the theatron-axis and the emphasis on the shaping of a situation and an *Ereignis* (event) instead of a work (cf. Lehmann 127ff, 104ff), it is obvious that these realities of spectators and performers passing a specified time and space of activity together can be said to enter into the very definition of theatrical practice as such. The social, the communicative, and the communal have always been part of theatre. But they used to be considered as aesthetically and theoretically secondary. Now the situation has changed. In a world of media-shaped perception the activity, the face-to-face, the situation and the event of theatre becomes a dominant concern because it is here that the specific qualities of ‘live art’ in the widest sense — and in contradistinction to the massive presence of mediated performances of all kind (cf. Auslander) — can be brought into play. Thus, while these aspects have in some ways been
elements and part of all theatre, in ‘postdramatic times’ they gain a new significance. Similar and even identical features assume a new and completely different function and meaning in different contexts.

We may picture the postdramatic condition as a photography taken some time after the explosion of a huge celestial object — dramatic theatre. This model or paradigm of theatre was a rich totality of elements, arranged in various ways but with certain priorities, forming an overall structure. Now on the photography we can detect the exploded individual elements and particles, in various distances from the place of explosion. They are now autonomous and isolated — here you see space as a theatrical element, there time, here gesture, there fabula, here role, there voice and so on — all now separated from each other, each objects of interest in themselves, but already entering into new agencements — to refer to Gilles Deleuze. They form new connections and relations, thus making the New in fact readable as a re-arrangement of the Old. We can conclude that the affirmation that postdramatic theatre existed, so to speak, from the beginning and the affirmation that it defines a specific moment of theatre after/beyond drama do not exclude each other but coexist.

Understanding the implications of the above-mentioned tension or duality between theatre and stage leads to the insight that the notion ‘dramatic theatre’ can even be read as a contradictio in adjecto. Once the autonomy of the theatrical process with its tendency toward openness, event and situation, is set free against the dramatic structure with its tendency toward closure, logic, order (even in so-called ‘open forms’ of drama), the terms of the game of theatre change profoundly. The word ‘postdramatic’ does by no means refer to a collection of whims and oddities of a number of theatre directors. Constituting a reaction (a rich variety of manifold responses) to a general problem of and with dramatic representation, ‘postdramatic’ is to be understood not as what Hegel calls an “abstract negation” of drama (just saying ‘no’ to drama) but as a concrete negation („konkrete Negation“ or „bestimmte Negation“) which by working through the problem of dramatizing produces a new wealth of theatrical and performative possibilities, each in itself concrete and unique.
If we consider not only the social realities — which, however have always been the core and substance of drama — but our ‘ways of world-making’ in general, we find that artists find less and less interest in dramatic narration of a world with beginning, middle, and end. Yet this was the central point of the Aristotelian tradition of theorizing drama: organisation, framing, construction, giving form to a process which runs from a beginning to an end, with a middle in the middle. It sounds simple but it is an ingenious insight into the epistemological grounds of the artistic composition and construction of the beautiful. (Jean-Luc Godard was challenged by a critic that even he, Godard, would admit that a film must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. He answered that he agreed — but, he continued, “not necessarily in this sequence…”)

Authors like Frank Kermode and after him Paul Ricoeur have convincingly demonstrated that this Aristotelian structure is closely related to a model of time that is instituted and reinforced by Christian theology and which places all events between a beginning (Genesis) and an end (Apocalypse). None of us is free of the fascination exerted by an apocalyptic vision (which nowadays especially cinema loves to present) — proof enough of the continuing effectiveness of this model of time. It is highly probable that it was and is this biblical time-structure which fed and feeds the Aristotelian model with ever renewed energy — the dramatic time with a kind of zero-point of the beginning, a turnabout (*metabole, peripeteia*) and a catastrophe, the up and down of *desis* and *lysis.*

This observation obviously raises the interesting question which cultural and artistic notions caused other civilizations not to develop the specifically European tradition of dramatic theatre. It is tempting to propose the hypothesis that a certain teleological concept of time and a certain notion of the human subject in action may be tightly bound up with one another, creating in their union the structure of drama. The latter’s decline may then well be an expression of the decline of such a concept of subject and/or subjectivity.

But even if we confine the field of inquiry to a phenomenological approach to lived reality, we find ourselves always — in the middle. Even in situations of ‘dramatic’ turnabouts we realize that the future was al-
Hans-Thies Lehmann

ready present in the past, that the past had already pointed to the future. In other words: the concept of beginning and end is a construction, the dramatic form does not reflect structures of reality but imposes a certain model and framing. We constantly experience transitions rather than beginnings or radical ends, which in the Aristotelian model of framing, however, constitute the mimesis of bios, life. Drama is a postulate, a concept which affirms the necessity of a certain logic in mimesis, thus qualifying the concept of mimesis as repetition or imitation in a decisive way. Mimesis is as much construction as it is reproduction. The frame of drama satisfies a certain desire of the imagination, a basic wish for order, structure, paradigm. The pleasure of finding this desire satisfied, along with it the pleasure of insight, understanding, matthesis in Aristotle, justified the beauty of dramatic form as a para-logical arrangement teaching (implying, suggesting) order, harmony, understandability of the world as a totality. The scientific dissolution of those categories of order in (post)modernity brought about a consciousness in which the form of drama no longer appears as convincing — even if it satisfies the desire of our imagination for structuring and constructing a unified world, the holon of Aristotle; even if it appeals to our awareness of the individual life span with beginning/birth, middle, and end/death, which in some ways may echo the illusionary eidolon presented by dramatic composition.

On yet another level it can be stated that drama paradoxically becomes not only unconvincing but at the same time in a way superfluous, one might say: overdone. The analysis of human perception seems to demonstrate that the sensory apparatus spontaneously structures time in such a way that it creates a Gestalt. We automatically ‘dramatize’ even the continuous ‘tick tick tick tick’ of a clock in such a way that we ‘hear’

3 “But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action [praxeon] and of life [bion] […]” (Aristotle, Poetics, Chapter 6).
rather the famous ‘tick tock’ and again a ‘tick tock’ — that is: each time a micro-drama all complete with beginning (‘tick’), a middle (small pause), and an end (‘tock’). The perceptual apparatus constructs a little drama, a pattern in the seemingly formless continuous sequence of the sounds. Tick tock: a (certainly rather inconspicuous) genesis, a middle, and an end (an equally modest apocalypse): drama. I borrow this nice example from Frank Kermode. It beautifully illustrates the question: why should theatre bother and construct huge aesthetic systems of dramatic logic, which imply statements about the order of the world that are no longer believable, if our dramatic need can already find satisfaction in the smallest units like steps, auditive sequences, movements, series of noises or gestures? The truth is: we can deal with quite a lot of chaos, anarchy, deconstructing, montage and collage which we find in contemporary postdramatic theatre — our senses will still find satisfaction of their need for order and paradigm.4

5

How can we grasp more precisely the function and role of the text within the practice of postdramatic theatre? The opposition between avant-garde theatre and text-based theatre enjoys a certain popularity, but it is false. Decisive is not at all the opposition verbal/non-verbal. The wordless dance may display an over-didactic Aristotelian structure, the signifying word can be a joyful dance of language gestures. Generally speaking though, in postdramatic theatre, breath, rhythm, the opaque actuality and intensity of the body’s visceral presence take precedence over the logos, disturbing and interrupting all semiosis, which may be produced by the meaning of the text, by dramaturgical order and scenic

4 One of the last productions of the wonderful theatre group Forced Entertainment – a paradigmatically postdramatic theatre work – carries the telling title Bloody Mess. It is a wonderfully chaotic show where among many other elements the motifs of sound and silence, the clock, and, incidentally, the repeated attempt (of course the constantly failing attempt) of a clown to tell the story of the world from beginning to end are presented. Postdramatic theatre is constantly self-reflective and thematizes the traditions from which it breaks away.
structure. What emerges in the new theatre is often — in ways similar to modern langage poétique — an attempt toward a restitution of chora. I allude here to the vocabulary of Julia Kristeva, who interprets Plato’s notion of chora as a ‘space’ and discourse without telos, hierarchy and causality, fixable meaning and unity, the ‘semiotic.’ In this sense postdramatic theatre tends toward something like a chora-graphie. The loss of a central meaning creates a field, a dissemination of possible modes of signifying which in turn calls forward the active productivity of the audience, thus emphasizing once more the situation of the theatre event. It is obvious however that this telos of deconstruction would result simply in autodestruction if it would be completely and totally reached. Rather, what we find can be determined as movements of deconstruction and interruption rather than negation of meaning. In a recent essay Patrick Primavesi spoke of postdramatic theatre as “theatre in the state of its productive self-alienation” (cf. Primavesi 18ff). This formula holds true also for the presence of the worded text in it. Some may have the impression that the text is devalued but the matter is not so simple. On the one hand it is true that the hierarchy of dramatic theatre — where the text was at the highest place and all the rest of the theatre there to serve the text, the meaning, the sense, the Sinn — has been widely abolished. The de-hierarchization of theatrical means is a universal principle in postdramatic theatre, and the text has become only one of the players. At the same time, however, certain dimensions of the text can best be explored and brought into play by destroying the old hierarchy of signifiers which tended to render insignificant the poetic, structural, linguistic dimensions of the text and reduced all too often the words to nothing but an expression, an expressive means to create a role, convey a character’s mood or thinking. It is often forgotten that in much dramatic theatre, which on the surface seems to be more true to the text than postdramatic practice, the text as text is — if we look closer into the matter — totally wiped out: transformed into nothing but a role-script, only a means to create a persona, not an end in itself. While at the same time the actor as the real, idiosyncratic person that he/she is vanishes likewise, wiped out by the actors’ studied methods to embody the fictive character.
Since there exists a structural conflict between text and stage, this tension as such can become a consciously intended principle of staging. The director Laurent Chétouane works with actors in such a way that he encourages them to let go as much as possible of their professional safeguardings, the tricks and habits which allow them to hide on stage behind the mask of the role as well as behind the mask of their competence as actors. The text is, so to speak, not appropriated by the actor. In works like *Lenz, Iphigeneia, Kabale und Liebe* as well as in a series of other impressive productions, what happens is this: the poetic text does not disappear behind a dramatic role but is made present, tangible, close to a presentation of its pure literal reality. The text remains autonomous in relation to the actor, the latter, capable of just letting the text happen, abdicates as the sovereign-actor who makes use of the words. Instead, he makes room for the text. The gap between text and theatre, which dramatic technique tries to close as much as possible, remains open. Interestingly enough the *practiced gap* between text and actor creates a heightened theatricality. In the work of Chétouane, the real co-presence of actor and audience as well as the conflict between text and live-performance becomes the centre of the theatre experience. By breaking up the unity of speaking performer and text, this theatre practice breaks free from the closed frame of dramatic presentation. It opens a risky interaction between the ‘real’ actor and the audience, emphasizes in an intense (in a ‘postdramatic’) way the confrontation implied in the theatre situation. Instead of a relative closure of the stage process and the meaning of the text, the theatre situation opens up and creates the chance of establishing a direct communication between stage and audience, mediated by the presence of text. The latter is in fact being placed in a position of productive alienation from its usual theatrical function: as a servant to role and actor. It is clear that in this way theatre approaches the domain of performance. One essential aspect of this kind of work is that the actor communicates and transfers emotionally his/her own weakness, failure, fear and all the awkwardness which he knows is being exposed to the spectators. And in the process of such ‘transferrence’ the significance of the text is radically, that is theatrically, deferred, transformed, modified. The theatre consciously interrupts or breaks open the frame of a narration, relegates representation to a sec-
ondary status while it focuses on the essential theatrical reality of a situation where the dialogue is displaced insofar as it takes place more between audience and stage than between fictive characters.

A general tendency is the principle of exposition. We find that in postdramatic theatre (cf. Lehmann 146ff) it is not only applied to body, gesture, and voice but also seizes the language material and attacks language’s function of representation. Instead of a linguistic re-presentation of facts and meanings, we find a disposition and a ‘position’ of tones, tonalities, words, sentences, sounds which are not so much controlled by the meaning but exposed as a material open to manifold possibilities of understanding. I will illustrate this with an example of a contemporary theatre text, Sarah Kane. I do not intend here to enter into the interpretation of her texts (the problem of tragedy, the question of acting in postdramatic theatre, the themes of love, sexual desire, the ‘hollow’ Persona, the impossibility to reach the other and the self). I concentrate on the fact that Sarah Kane liked to call her texts “texts for performance.” The two last works of Sarah Kane have found particular interest with directors working in non-traditional ways. I saw Crave in one production by Sebastian Nübling where the uncertainty of identities was played out in a very playful manner with constant clothes-changing among the protagonists. Thomas Ostermeier presented Crave at the Berliner Schaubühne by placing the four actors on high pillars in Beckett-like complete isolation from one another. In Frankfurt am Main the text was presented by Wanda Golonka as a performance of dancers, a choreography in a circular and sometimes rotating installation with huge curtains. The text was present in the voices which were held up with effort against the physical stress of the dancing. Crave is divided into anonymous figures or voices, referred to as A, B, C and M. The poetics of the text is a montage short lines, small frag-

5 Keeping in mind that, obviously, postdramatic theatre does not need postdramatic texts. It can be realized with texts of all kinds, modern or classic dramas, non-dramatic texts, documents, fiction, theory, lyrical texts. Nevertheless, there are a number of authors whose writing is so to speak ‘in tune’ with the postdramatic talent. I only mention, in a German-language context, Heiner Müller, Elfriede Jelinek, Rainald Goertz, René Pollesch.
ments of phrases, dialogues, divided among the voices — only one very long monologue occurs. It is hardly possible to follow the lines of the argument. Reader and spectator are confronted with a kind of chorus of single voices, echoes of repetition, parallels, deferred answers, questions and addresses which find no immediate response. The poetics of this text is so open that a director not only can, but in fact must choose which attitude, which theatre to develop from it. Of course, also a classical text allows for different options of mise en scène, but here the openness is the essence: the texts of Kane are written the way they are in order to provoke a questioning of the theatre. She stated that she likes theatre as artistic form most because it is live and creates an unmediated relation between stage and audience (cf. Tabert 17). Already in her first drama *Blasted*, suddenly in the middle, a more or less realistic drama setting literally exploded — not only the scene, a hotel room in Leeds, but at the same time the structure of drama (and, by the way the English theatre world). *Crave* was called by Kane an “experiment with form, and language and rhythm and music” (cit. Thielemans 10), the text was to become a stimulus to advance ever more in terms not of interpretation but of musicality. This view is close to what Roland Barthes says about the ‘diction,’ the literal speaking and spoken reality of the text. This physical presence of text becomes (as it does in Artaud) the primary theatrical reality. The inner rhythm, the *melos*, the pleasure of the text rework the signifying structure (Barthes 272). Listening to a voice opens the relation to the other. Even speaking of *Phaedra’s Love*, her structurally most conventional text, Kane insisted: “But much more important than the content of the play is the form” (Stephenson and Langridge 130).

How much more this is true about Kane’s last text *4.48 Psychosis*, where nearly no traces of traditional drama are left over. The text is divided into twenty-four parts, making reference, like the title, to time. Here is the beginning:

*(A very long silence.)*
But you have friends.
*(A long silence.)*
You have a lot of friends.
What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?
*(A long silence.)*
What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?

(A long silence.)
What do you offer?
(Silence.)

..... (Kane 205)

At first the “very long silence” is destined to raise the extreme consciousness of the theatre situation. The silence unites and divides actor and/or actors and spectators. The first word “but” points to the fact that the process has already begun. We will not see a holon but only an excerpt. The dialogue is a half-dialogue. Questions are followed by no answers. Above all: the use of the word “you” here is unavoidably directed to the spectators. And the theme of giving, offering, supporting, friendship conjures up again the idea of a Gemeinschaft, communauté, community (or perhaps even the communitas of Turner, which is part of the liminal state, more precisely the liminoid reality of a theatre which draws near to ritual). Later in the text many devices, especially phrases like “Validate me/Witness me/See me/Love me,” work in the same direction: the text aims at rendering present the theatre situation itself, only in the second place is it interested to create a representation of whatever fictive reality. At the end of 4.48 Psychosis we find a comparable situation:

Black snow falls

in death you hold me
never free

I have no desire for death
no suicide ever had

Watch me vanish
watch me

vanish

watch me

watch me

52
It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind

please open the curtains. (Kane 244f)

The white blank of nearly the whole page surrounds and separates the last two sentences — associating an endless pause and silence. The last phrase makes again a reference to the theatre situation (not only the hospital room), paradoxically exchanging beginning and end — since normally of course the curtain is opened at the beginning of a performance not at the end. Thus from the beginning (which makes manifest an end) to the end (which indicates some beginning), the text (re)presents the figure of the transformation from a drama (and a life) in dramatic categories, to a postdramatic condition where the theatre is searching desperately authentic ways of communicating, possibilities to ‘touch’ the other in an impossible dialogue beyond all dramatic dialogue. Kane spoke of her desire to make possible in and by theatre an experience of limits. This was to happen by a function of language which is perhaps only possible in theatre: to produce a direct, intellectual, emotional and physical contact with the needs of the audience. The experience of the text as part of the theatre situation outshines the presence of the text as object of interpretation. Text in postdramatic theatre becomes part of an artistic strategy which transforms the spectator into a witness and calls up an experience of responsibility. In the place of traditional fear and pity: awareness and responsibility.

*Chora-graphie*, conflict of text and stage, the principle of exposition, text for performance — some notions which help to explain the ways in which contemporary theatre articulates stage and text.
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
Plot after Postmodernism

From the time of Aristotle until the early decades of the twentieth century, plot — that is, the organization of the events represented on stage — has usually been considered the cornerstone of drama. But during the last hundred years, the primacy of plot has been systematically eroded by anti-realistic playwrights, and a number of influential dramas appeared that marginalized, displaced, or parodied the role of plot. Recently, a few experimental authors have confronted the concept of plot in more radical and subversive ways that lead not merely to a revaluation of its significance but also call into question its very nature and function. In what follows, I will outline particularly intriguing sequences of events in several works that challenge or subvert classical conceptions of plot: principally, Baraka’s *Slave Ship*, Beckett’s *Endgame*, Caryl Churchill’s *Traps*, Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life*, and Peter Handke’s non-representational *Offending the Audience*. I hope to show both the originality of these pieces and disclose how each of these works poses especially difficult questions for contemporary narrative and dramatic theory.

Aristotle argues for a concept of plot that is unified, an “imitation of one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be dis-

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1 I wish to thank Robert F. Gross and Markus Wessendorf for some very helpful suggestions that I have incorporated in this paper.
jointed and disturbed” (53). He does acknowledge that some authors erroneously present several largely unrelated episodes from the life of a man, and therefore falsely assume that since Heracles was one man, the story of Heracles must also be a unity. Many modern theorists, building on a story grammar derived from Vladimir Propp, likewise aver that “the fabula that constitutes the global structure of the drama is a dynamic chain of events and actions;” and “the series of distinct actions and interactions of the plot are understood to form coherent sequences governed by the overall purposes of their agents” (Elam 120, 123). This approach to plot lends itself best to classical tragedy or Menandrine comedy, which typically builds toward a single resounding conclusion. This model is implicit in Chekhov’s famous pronouncement on the inevitable narrative economy of drama which asserts that if a pistol is introduced at the beginning of a play, it must be fired by the third act.

A work like Amiri Baraka’s Slave Ship (1967) transcends traditional concepts of plot in a number of intriguing ways, as a brief summary of its events will reveal. The drama begins on a slave ship transporting Africans to the Americas; this scene documents the brutalities endured by the Africans, their sufferings, their attempts at resistance, and the violent retribution these provoke. The next scene takes place much later, possibly a century later; it is set on a plantation in Virginia in 1831 where Nat Turner is planning his slave revolt. Here too different characters take different positions; one slave informs on the others and is rewarded with pork chops as the rebels are killed off stage. The scene then shifts to the 1960s; a black preacher is now advising others to use non-violence in their dealing with white oppression. Baraka states that this character should be played by the same actor who had played the betrayer in the previous scene; likewise, angry blacks who are willing to take up arms to end their oppression are played by the same actors who had previously portrayed rebel slaves and African warriors. In the end, a successful black revolution is announced and the audience is invited to join the characters in a final dance on the stage. By establishing and maintaining these doublings across centuries, Baraka ensures that the actors’ bodies will suggest a continuous historical drama of submission and resistance that is repeated from generation to generation and extends to the present day. It is the audience who must continue the
struggle they see enacted on the stage and, Baraka insists, they must choose either insurgency or accommodation. As I have discussed at greater length elsewhere, Baraka’s postmodern transformation of plot is achieved through a number of strategies: it is the story of a collective, historical group subject, not an individual or family; temporality is extended as successive scenes stretch across centuries; direct causal connection between successive events are replaced or complemented by larger historical trajectories. Finally, the work resists closure by encouraging the audience to complete in their lives the events they have seen on stage.

For a different challenge to the Aristotelian concept of plot, we may look at the work of Samuel Beckett. In *Endgame*, there is no single, unified action, no dynamic chain of events, but merely a series of largely gratuitous doings. The play is rather an assault on the teleology implicit in much traditionally plotted drama rather than an embodiment of it. As one arbitrary or meaningless event follows another, the question is not how tightly they are all connected, but whether there is any connection there at all. To interpret this play, one does not follow the trajectory of its plot but attempts to determine whether it has any semblance of plot at all. Early on, Hamm asks Clov whether or not he has “had enough.” Clov responds he has always had enough, to which Hamm responds, “then there is no reason for it to change” (5). With this, Beckett seems to be challenging the basic premise of drama, transformation, and instead constructs a static drama, devoid of all that makes a story ‘narratable,’ or worth telling. There is a disequilibrium, even a conflict — Clov’s continued subservience to his blind, immobile master. But as we quickly realize, this too will not change. When Hamm asks, “Why do you stay with me?” Clov replies, “There’s nowhere else” (6), a statement that may just be literally true, given the postmodern space of the play. For characters and audience, this amounts not to a plot but to a refusal of plot. Despite repeated claims that “We’re getting on” (9) and “Something is taking its course” (32), there is no unified, coherent aggregation of events, but rather an arbitrary conglomerate of random actions that lead nowhere. In this respect, *Endgame* is a defiantly anti-Aristotelian drama. Manfred Pfister has referred to Beckett’s tendency to reduce the story to a mere sequence of events. In *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, or
Happy Days “the immutability of the situation in which the dramatic figures find themselves — something they accept as a foregone conclusion — and their constant verbal and mimetic activity are no longer designed to bring about a change in the situation through action but have decayed into a form of game that merely serves to pass the time” (201).

Other postmodern playwrights go further, and contest one of the most fundamental concepts of current narrative theory: the distinction between fabula and sujet. Although a number of different terms are still employed to express this differentiation (histoire/recit, story/plot, story/discourse), the distinction itself is one that is generally accepted, as Genette has recently observed (13). It has also been successfully extended to the theory of drama, most notably by Manfred Pfister (196–245, esp. 196–198, and 276–279) and Keir Elam (119–120). Stated simply, the fabula or story is the series of events that have occurred in their chronological order; the sujet denotes the order in which those events are presented to the audience.

These concepts are very useful in describing plays like Oedipus Rex or Corneille’s ingenious L’Illusion comique, in which much information about the past is disclosed during the course of the action. They are also an essential tool for expressing the chronology of non-linear dramas that employ numerous flashbacks (or even ‘flashforwards’), such as J. B. Priestley’s Time and the Conways, Charles Fuller’s A Soldier’s Play, or Tom Stoppard’s Artist Descending a Staircase. Thus the fabula of Oedipus begins with the prophecies before his birth, though the sujet begins on the day of his self-discovery and exile. The sujet of Artist Descending a Staircase presents a series of flashbacks ever deeper into the past, followed by a symmetrical return to the events of the present. Its fabula however would begin in the 1920s and move forward in a perfectly linear fashion. In Pinter’s Betrayal, the fabula and sujet move in opposite directions as each successive scene in the performance dramatizes an earlier episode from the characters’ past.

Contemporary drama provides still other possibilities. Charles Ludlam’s The Grand Tarot (1969) contains twenty-two scenes. Before each performance, tarot cards were dealt out to determine the sequence in which the scenes would be presented. Every performance was different and incorporated the play of chance into the presentation of events.
Ludlam claimed that the story was never the same twice. From our vantage point, we might say instead that the *fabula* was constant (all twenty-two scenes were always performed) though the *sujet* was always different. It is worth noting that this kind of production proved so difficult that Ludlam later established a fixed order of presentation for subsequent productions (see Kaufman, 108–114 and 37–39). We might also note that a work like Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* (2001) is a largely undifferentiated mass of text without any indications for its performance (see Blattès and Koszul); a director who stages it must determine how many speakers there will be and which lines will be spoken by each — a situation also present in many of the plays of Gertrude Stein. Here we have a fixed *fabula* with an intentionally incomplete *sujet*.

Implicit in the *fabula*/sujet distinction and theories of plot in general is the desire for a universal theory that can encompass all narrative, whether fictional or non-fiction, literary or popular, narrated or enacted. This distinction therefore assumes that a coherent story can always be inferred from any text or performance, and at a superficial level this seems quite plausible. A biography, documentary, or novel need not begin with the origin of its subject; it may, like any other narrative, begin *in medias res* or for that matter at a late, climactic event and then proceed backwards in time. In such cases, a self-consistent, unitary story will always be able to be inferred from the events presented, regardless of the sequence of their presentation.

The *fabula*/sujet dyad however tends to weaken or even collapse when applied to any of several contemporary dramas. In many of Beckett’s plays, the characters’ speeches and disclosures are so oblique, fragmented, contradictory, or unreliable that a single consistent story cannot be exhumed: we will never know what ‘really’ happened in *Play* or *Not I*. An extremely challenging work of Caryl Churchill’s further problematizes these concepts. *Heart’s Desire* (1997) starts with a fairly ordinary scene which is then repeated and developed with major variations numerous times. We have several repetitions of the same cluster of scenes, each of which moves the action forward and offers a new continuation; in the next repetition, the new addition is either abandoned or developed further as the latest scene struggles (or lurches) toward what one presumes to be the ‘correct’ story. The *fabula* keeps getting re-
peated, altered, partially negated, and extended. A fascinating ontologic-
al hierarchy emerges as the repeated elements assume a solidity while the
unrepeated, undeveloped possibilities become abandoned bits of action
that briefly enter and are quickly removed from the world of the story.

Pinter’s work, particularly that from the late sixties and early seven-
ties, extended situations far beyond ordinary mimetic parameters. *Old
Times* and *No Man’s Land* were not simply about characters who made
up stories about the past in order to control the present, but works that
fractured the very concept of shared experience and unified identity that
persisted over time. Perhaps his most anti-representational piece is *The
Basement* which juxtaposes a series of events and settings that, while
individually plausible, together form an impossible totality.

The characters change roles and situations frequently, without any
possibility of verisimilar recuperation. The play begins with Stott, wet
and poor, knocking on the door of Law; it ends in a symmetrical rever-
sal, with Law, wet and poor, knocking on the door of Stott; in between,
there are numerous scenes of friendship, fighting, sexual betrayal, ill-
ess, and calm, which cannot be assembled into a coherent sequence or
*fabula*. The seasons change from fall to summer to winter without any
discernable temporal pattern. The room itself keeps changing for no
apparent reason: about a third of the way into the play, the basement flat
seems to have become a very different place: “The room is unrecogniz-
able. The furniture has changed. There are Scandinavian tables and
desks. Large bowls of Swedish glass. Tubular chairs” (161); the bed,
however, is the same. Later, the room reverts to its original furnishings
(165), though this does not indicate a return to an earlier time. Then,
‘the’ room changes again: “The walls are hung with tapestries, an oval
Florentine mirror, an oblong Italian master” (167). Next, the room is
completely bare, then it returns again to its original state (169, 171). All
of the ordinary semiotic indicators of passing time, shifting place, or
economic mobility are divested of such conventional meanings; the
place is transformed according to a logic largely independent of verisimi-
lar practices or concerns. In doing so, Pinter foregrounds standard
strategies of representation by utterly defamiliarizing them, and thereby
invites us to speculate on the nature and methods of representation it-
self. Here we have a fixed discourse (*sujet*) with an indeterminate story (*fabula*).

In Caryl Churchill’s play *Traps*, a comparable strategy is deployed and developed even more relentlessly. Thus, it is easy to summarize the events of this piece, but impossible to place them within a mimetically coherent or logically consistent framework. The following depictions should give some sense of the range of actions being presented and the interpretive difficulties they present. The room in which all the action takes place changes location during the course of the play. The room’s door is locked for some characters but unlocked for others — without anyone ever touching the bolt. Syl and her husband Albert discuss the possibility of finally having a child — some minutes after we see them complain about the trouble their infant causes. The character Jack then announces that he and Syl have recently gotten married. One character experiences the same recognition scene twice; another character changes personalities. Albert commits suicide, the rest of the characters reflect upon his death, and then Albert re-enters as if nothing has happened and the others show no surprise. In the first act, Reg brings a box of chocolates to Christie and Del; he says he wishes they had never moved from the country to the city; in Act Two, the chocolates are being eaten and the characters are living happily in the country.

One of the things Churchill has done is to take a series of perfectly ordinary actions, and then invert the sequences of some of these progressions while maintaining the linearity of others. This results in a kind of narrative Möbius strip, to employ one of the central images of the drama. As Churchill states in her preface, the play is like an impossible object, or a painting by Escher, where the objects can exist like that on paper, but would be impossible in life. In the play, the time, the place, the characters’ motives and relationships cannot all be reconciled — they can happen on stage, but there is no other reality for them […] There is no flashback, no fantasy, everything that happens is as real and solid as everything else within the play. (71)

Another possible parallel that comes to mind is the fictional book within Borges’ story “The Garden of Forking Paths” which is both a book and a labyrinth, since it allows several mutually exclusive narrative possibilities to unfold. But unlike Borges’ work, which merely describes
such a text, Churchill has it acted out on stage. Her work strikes me as being one of the most ambitious, fascinating, and thoroughgoing experiments in avant-garde drama, and one that tests and possibly reaches the limits of anti-representational theater.

It is not clear to me that one can go any further in this direction than Churchill has gone, though comparable extremes can be approximated in another manner. Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) presents a series of discourses about a woman (or several women) named Anne, or Anya, Annie, or some other variant. They are presented as different people with different life stories in different situations: the girl next door, a performance artist, a rich woman, a terrorist, a scientist, a porn actress, a character in a script, even a new make of car (the Anny, naturally). If this were all, the play could have been titled *The Many Annes of the World* and it would have been little more than a series of unconnected vignettes. But there are several strategies, beginning with the actual title, that invite the audience to bring many of these disparate stories into a plot. These include the numerous, seemingly contradictory messages that are received by Anne’s answering machine in the play’s first scene, which prefigure the story fragments presented in many of the subsequent scenes. The fourteenth scene, a musical number, likewise affirms a unitary character (“she”) even as it subverts any essence or ground for such a unity:

She is royalty
She practices art
She’s a refugee
In a horse and cart
She’s a pornographic movie star
A killer and a brand of car
A KILLER AND A BRAND OF CAR!
She’s a terrorist threat
She’s the mother of three (59)

Similarly, many details recur from one scene to another that suggest a closer connection than mere random association. Warfare, international travel, ashtrays, affairs with married men, terrorism, and repeated imprecations appear to connect certain scenes. When we are told that Anne, the suicidal performance artist, offers a dialogue of “blood, saliva, and chocolate” (50), we are reminded of the car, the Anny, that will never be
made “slippery by blood,” “slippery by saliva,” or “sticky by melted chocolate” (34). Of course, it must be acknowledged that none of these recurrences is especially distinctive. By the end of the drama, we have no resolution and the central question for theorists (as well as spectators) remains: is there a single fabula (or a few) capable of embracing the entire work, or are there simply sixteen that string along after the first scene? The work itself simultaneously advances and precludes both answers. One may read the work allegorically or metadramatically, as a critique of the concepts of a fixed, stable character, or as an account of the ways in which subjectivity is constructed by the discourse that surrounds it. The work itself suggests yet another interpretive option. The penultimate scene, in which a pornographic film is being prepared, suggests a number of correspondences between the film and the play itself: “Of course there’s no story to speak of […] Or characters […] Certainly not in the conventional sense” (65–66). After her period of work, the voices suggest that the porno actress could go on to be a number of things, including a model, a painter, swimmer, chemical engineer, humanitarian, psychologist, writer, and so on (69–71). Building on this suggestion, we may choose to interpret the various Annes and Annies of the play as potential characters that one woman might assume during the course of her life; all are aspects of a potential fabula.

One can think of interesting parallel achievements in the plastic arts, and a very few in experimental fiction like Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy. These works by Pinter, Churchill, and Crimp can certainly be comfortably situated within the stated aesthetic goal of several art forms in the twentieth century to move beyond mimesis toward a pure abstraction. Unlike comparable attempts in painting, sculpture, and even fiction, however, such abstraction may well be most difficult to achieve in the medium of drama, and therefore all the more impressive once it is attained. Surprisingly, these liminal works which are situated at the very boundaries of dramatic representation have not begun to receive the theoretical attention they deserve; perhaps they are doomed to be neglected until a critical language that can transcend mimetic representation can be articulated. Critical analysis of such plays would certainly be able to enrich existing accounts of time, character, and especially plot itself, as it discloses nonmimetic and contradictory possibilities rarely
Brian Richardson

glimpsed by conventional theoreticians of drama and theater. These are after all dramas in which, as Churchill notes in her preface to *Traps*, the “characters can be thought of as living many of their possibilities at once” (71), a situation that current poetics does not acknowledge as a theoretical possibility.

To complete this analysis of plot after postmodernism, we must briefly cross the boundaries of drama in English. Handke’s *Offending the Audience* (*Publikumsbeschimpfung*) takes us still further from tradition and convention. Here, the concept of story has no place at all: the actors do not impersonate characters and their actions do not disclose a story or even depict events; this is a non-representational play in which the players merely speak their lines. As the actors themselves state to the audience: “This is no drama. No action that has occurred elsewhere is re-enacted here […]. This is no make-believe which re-enacts an action that really happened once upon a time. Time plays no role here. We are not acting out a plot” (15). This work lays bare every convention of drama, including the basic elements that constitute any play. It may well be that the fundamental concepts of *fabula* and *sujet* have no place here at all. The actors go on to refer playfully to the concept of the neo-classical unities, noting that since there is no represented time or space, but only the time of enactment and the space of the theater, there is a perfect unity of time and place — and in this they are correct. They also state that “by always speaking directly to you and by speaking to you of time, of now and of now and of now, we observe the unity of time, place, and action […]. Therefore this piece is classical” (20).

We may question whether there really is no plot here, and if not, what impels the discourse forward? In other words, is there any alternative organizing principle that would suggest why some of the material is placed earlier and some later in the piece? In fact we can find at least two kinds of progression at work here. One is the level of intensity which, like all good plays, reaches a climax near the end as the audience is verbally abused, as the title had promised. The other is the way in which changing grammatical tenses are used to describe the audience’s experience. In the beginning, the future tense is used: “You will see no spectacle. Your curiosity will not be satisfied” (7). / „Sie werden kein Schauspiel sehen. Ihre Schaulust wird nicht befriedigt werden“ (15). Soon
after, the present tense is used to describe the first responses of the spectators: “You are beginning to breathe in one and the same rhythm” (8). As the work continues, a shift in subject matter occurs, as the many statements about the performance give way to a greater proportion of statements about the audience: “You provide us with words here. You are the playmakers and the counterplotters” (21). Near the end, the past tense is used: “You were true to life. You were realistic” (30). Ultimately, we get a discourse that moves from a beginning to a middle to an end — in that order — and provides a sense of closure, as the final words indicate: “You were welcome here. We thank you. Good night” (32). / „Sie waren hier willkommen. Wir danken Ihnen. Gute Nacht“ (41).

Though the actors have asserted that “the plot is not freely invented, for there is no plot” (26), we may nevertheless point out that an alternative ordering of the discourse has been presented, one which employs the rhetoric of progression and traces a kind of shadow pattern that, generally speaking, mimics the movement of more conventional plots. We may call it a pseudo-plot or perhaps a non-narrative plot, if that is not a contradiction in terms. In any event, it shows us how the postmodern rejection of boundaries and hierarchies can produce an utterly original work that forces us to rethink or reconstruct the very concept of plot. And not only plot, but also the idea of representation. To describe the kind of sensibility behind the more extreme and transgressive works, we may look to the ideas of an early avant-gardist, Gertrude Stein. As Marc Robinson explains, in language that echoes some of Handke’s assertions, “she reasoned that a play should be a play — not a recreation of something else, studied only to detect the accuracy of representation.” Instead, it should be, in Stein’s words, “just there” (13).

To sum up: we have seen the extension, compression, and reconstitution of traditional plot structures in Baraka’s Slave Ship that produce, after the representation of centuries of events, a familiar plot pattern in the end. We see Beckett repeatedly evoke (at times, explicitly) the basic elements of plot, suspense, progression, and closure, the better to underscore his rejection of each of these elements. If Beckett, from a traditional perspective, may seem to have too little plot, Caryl Churchill (in Traps) and Martin Crimp, by contrast, have far too much. There are
several different story lines that together are incompatible; each refuses to hierarchize any of them ontologically by designating some as imagined or dreamed or even erased; all are equally real. Handke cannot resist employing the language of classical poetics even as he diverges radically from traditional deployments of plot, story, and representation itself.

What are the theoretical conclusions that can be derived from the plays discussed above? First, we may note the general utility of concepts of plot, story or fabula, and sujet in identifying with some precision the nature of these innovative orderings of events. That is to say, in many cases where these basic concepts of theater analysis are violated, their violation is best described by using the concepts themselves. In stating this, I do not mean to imply that these works are in any way derivative, secondary, or parasitic on more conventional dramatic practices such as realism. Each of these works is a creative totality in its own right and follows a distinctive trajectory. They take the basic elements of drama and reconstitute them in a different manner than do the practitioners of realism. The task for the study of drama is now to articulate new, more expansive concepts of story, plot, progression, and temporality that can circumscribe the practices of postmodern dramatists. Specifically, I hope the adaptations of the notions of fabula and sujet that I have employed above (indeterminate sujet, and irretrievable, contradictory, potential, and self-negating fabula) will help us better describe and analyze significant postmodern works. Above all, we need to free ourselves from the bias toward mimesis and the verisimilar that has existed in dramatic theory since the time of Aristotle. With more expansive concepts we will be able to better comprehend and more effectively appreciate the most innovative works of our time.
Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature

Is the Concept of ‘Character’ Still Relevant in Contemporary Drama?

For the past twenty or so years, the concept of character has been under scrutiny. For many scholars, the character is undergoing some kind of crisis (the title of Robert Abirached’s book is quite eloquent in this respect: La Crise du personnage dans le théâtre moderne, first published in 1977 and then republished in 1994). Similarly, in its dictionary of theatrical terms, the journal Etudes Théâtrales (2001) has the heading “character” followed by the words “crisis of” between brackets. Elinor Fuchs, of course, goes much further and announces the death of “character” in her 1996 book: The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism. It may seem therefore particularly foolhardy or perverse even to raise the question of the relevance of “character.” Closer examination of the subject, however, reveals that the answer is more complex than the rather dramatic titles of the works mentioned might suggest.

“An I addressing a you”

Let us start with Keir Elam’s claim that drama is “An I addressing a you here and now” (139). If it is certainly true that the concept of character

1 This starting point was also used by Fuchs in her book (70), but she does not discuss the implications of all the terms.
has evolved considerably in recent years, to conclude that the concept is no longer useful in the study of contemporary works seems a rather hasty judgement. I wish to argue that even in the most innovative plays of the past ten years the concept of character still has some validity. Furthermore, in the works that can be considered, to some degree, postdramatic (as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann) or postmodern (including the features listed by Lehmann: ambiguity, celebration of art as fiction, celebrating theatre as process, discontinuity, heterogeneity; non-textuality; multiple codes; subversion, etc.), it is still possible to speak of character, provided a certain number of precautions are taken. I shall attempt to demonstrate that “character” as a concept can survive even when many other traditional elements of drama have been thrown out of the window. My remarks will be limited to texts written over the last ten years or so. It is of course possible to study the evolution of character through the study of different performances of works over the ages (as Fuchs does in her chapter entitled “Counter-stagings: Ibsen against the grain”), but this aspect of character is beyond the scope of this paper.

It should be noted, however, that conventional approaches to character need modifying. Certain types of character analysis prove inadequate when applied to contemporary plays. This seems to be the case of the actantial model proposed by Greimas (who himself seems to have been inspired by a study which I will mention for the sheer pleasure of recalling the wonderful title: Etienne Souriau’s Les Deux cent mille situations dramatiques, 1950). However useful such a model may be when applied to classical or bourgeois texts (as defined by Elaine Aston and George Savona in Theatre as Sign-System), its usefulness for ‘radical’ texts is less obvious. In effect, the actantial model closely links character to action, insisting on the way individual characters influence the course of events. This idea of the individual’s power to control his destiny has been undermined by much recent work. Questions concerning the overall motivations of the characters (“obstacle-laden quest” drama in the words of Elam), categories such as subjects, objects, helpers or opponents are often irrelevant. This was true for Beckett’s plays and continues to be true. Much contemporary drama cannot be analysed in terms of the quest of the protagonist, since the notion of protagonist itself is frequently open to debate.
As far as other models for analysing character are concerned, similar problems can be encountered. Philippe Hamon quite some time ago advocated a semiological approach to character (1977) which took into account many features and suggested highlighting the most relevant features in particular works (role in action, stock characters, intertextual status, individual features etc.). This method again works quite well with more traditional forms but has drawbacks in plays where characters are given very few distinguishing features or where such features are unstable. Likewise Aston and Savona’s comparative chart for character analysis, although highlighting important differences between three types of drama, nevertheless relies on ‘radical’ texts that are in fact not that radical in their construction of character. *Top Girls*, for example, contains a wealth of information about the characters’ age, social status, background and psychology, even if it breaks with tradition in many other ways.

The characters in the plays I wish to discuss are altogether more difficult to approach. The problems they pose can be roughly divided into different categories although these categories overlap to some extent. In some cases our difficulties stem from the sheer lack of information available. In such instances, the text provides a name, sometimes an age or family status, but little else. Contrary to ‘bourgeois’ texts, virtually nothing is revealed about the characters’ past. This is one of the features of ‘character’ in Harold Pinter’s work. Any information given can be questioned and is frequently contradicted. It is often quite difficult or even impossible to decide on characters’ motivations. This, of course, was already the case in Pinter’s earlier plays (for example, *The Birthday Party*), but in his later work this has become more pronounced. In plays like *Moonlight* (1993) or *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), not only do the characters give contradictory accounts of the past, but their accounts of the present, too, often diverge. In itself, this shortage of reliable information about the characters might not prove too much of a challenge to the audience, as we can see in the case of Shakespeare, if the action and dialogue are sufficiently coherent. Coherence, however, is not the defining feature of much contemporary drama (see Tori Haring-Smith’s article on “non-realism” in *Theatre Topics*). With the end of “master narratives,” according to the frequently quoted Jean-François Lyotard’s
Postmodern Condition, works are often open-ended, proposing a structure which foils the reader’s attempts to draw conclusions.

Here and Now

Time and space, which theoretically could help us to fix character, are sometimes used to achieve the opposite effect. Moonlight, for example, is constructed in such a way as to multiply the effects of fragmentation. Two groups of characters, supposedly members of the same family, are each seen in separate spaces and never come together. At times, the two brothers seem to suggest that they are not brothers at all. Spatial separation can be pushed to extremes as in another play by Harold Pinter, Family Voices (1981) — originally written for the radio — in which we hear two voices (we presume to be mother and son) giving totally different or contradictory versions of events without ever confronting each other directly. We will return to the question of absence of dialogue in a moment.

To spatial fragmentation we can add temporal fragmentation. Continuity has often been abandoned and in its place we find plays in which the action evolves in an unpredictable way or fails to evolve at all. In the first case, a play like Caryl Churchill’s Far Away could be studied. The action jumps forward from one act to the next so that the reader/audience, already at pains to construct a situation for the two characters present in Act 1, has to set to work again in Acts 2 and 3, imagining how and why this situation has evolved. Furthermore, we can note how the end of the play is left completely open. Elsewhere other types of temporal fragmentation are at work. In traditional drama, if the time frame changes, it does so for all the characters. In Moonlight, however, not all the characters seem to belong in the same time frame. The mother and father (Bel and Andy) seem to share the same present with their sons (Jake and Fred) even if their accounts of past events are contradictory. Their daughter, Bridget, on the other hand, seems to be caught in a time warp, maintained in adolescence whilst her brothers have grown up and moved on. Pinter also bends time in Ashes to Ashes. Logically, the main characters were born after the war if we are to believe, as the printed text specifies, that it is “now” and that the characters are “in their forties.”
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However, some of the experiences recounted by Rebecca evoke situations reminiscent of war-time prison-camps: “I watched him walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers” (419). The fact that the dialogue constantly slides into narrative makes all attempts at temporal organisation difficult. Although this may confuse readers or spectators, it does not prevent them from speculating about the characters (as Penelope Prentice suggests in her recent study of Pinter).

Readers and spectators’ imaginations are pushed further in a work like Caryl Churchill’s Blue Heart (1997). The first play Heart’s Desire starts out with a deceptively simple situation involving named characters who seem to have clearly identifiable links. The setting too is reassuringly familiar. This state of affairs is very short-lived however. The play has a highly original structure. A dialogue begins, stops and then goes back to the beginning again. The second time the dialogue is allowed to continue a little longer, before being stopped again. Although there are occasional variations and remarks that are never repeated, most of the dialogue is given several times. It should be added that the sequences are replayed in exactly the same way, same gestures etc., sometimes with a variation in speed. Added to the uncertainties about the “past life” of the characters are the uncertainties about the status of present action. It is true that this type of metadramatic writing seems to highlight the artificial nature of theatrical dialogue and its very obvious lack of spontaneity, but paradoxically it does not really prevent the audience from trying to imagine a fictive cosmos in which such exchanges could be interpreted. The effect of this structure, as far as the characters are concerned, is to displace audience attention away from the words actually spoken so that, after a while, the dialogue can be given with either the first or last part of each remark missing. We are obviously very close here to what Lehmann has termed an “aesthetic of repetition” with a “deconstructing and deconstructing of story, meaning and totality of form” (156). The spectators become participants and ‘write’ the dialogue by both remembering what has been said and anticipating what will be said.

Yet, it may well take more than this to stop the audience from trying to find meaning in the very fact that the characters constantly repeat the
same remarks, not to mention the fact that the few elements of the dialogue that are never repeated stand out, as do a small number of actions that contrast with the mundane activities repeated \textit{ad infinitum}. On the one hand, we could argue that a text like \textit{Heart’s Desire} constitutes a challenge to the central position of the text in drama, as Lehmann has argued in \textit{Postdramatic Theatre}, but by its very perverse manipulation of audience expectations, the dialogue calls attention to itself. The very lack of progression in the dramatic action, instead of undermining the credibility of the characters, may actually serve to develop some subtle elements of characterisation. The repetition of the banal renders the banal unfamiliar and paradoxically makes the extraordinary events in the play seem more credible: the horde of children who rush on and off stage on page 15, the arrival of the two gunmen who kill everyone on page 17 and the entrance of the ten-foot bird at the top of page 32. Each of these events can be seen as fantasies of one or other of the three characters caught up in their discussion which never gets anywhere. The end of the play can in fact be interpreted as a kind of reversal of a conventional dramatic situation: the homecoming. The whole of the play has been building up, albeit in fits and starts, to the return of the daughter Susy to the family home. In the final moments, she appears, speaks two short lines, only for the action to stop and go back to the very beginning again for the final two remarks which we have heard eight times. We cannot be certain how to interpret the absence of progression, but this does not stop us speculating about this ‘family’ and their relationships.

A similar experience can be found in the reading of the companion piece \textit{Blue Kettle}. An extremely banal situation involving equally banal characters is disrupted by a gradual intrusion into the dialogue of the play of the terms “blue” and “kettle” as replacements for ordinary language (verbs, nouns or adjectives etc.). These intrusions become more and more frequent until the dialogue dissolves into an apparently meaningless exchange of sounds. Here again, an audience is unlikely to renounce attempts at interpretation of the characters’ behaviour even if the text offers little in the way of explanations.

On the other hand, a text which presents an ‘I’ addressing a ‘you’ in a specific time and place may not necessarily be easier to interpret in terms of character. In a play like \textit{The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo} by Howard
Barker, two defined characters are involved in a kind of verbal interaction reminiscent of more conventional drama. Furthermore, the play clearly exploits the double communication system, “the intra-scenic axis” being just as important as the “theatron axis” to use Lehmann’s terms. The intra-scenic communication axis is all the more striking here since we are told that the characters are blind. Much of the play’s theatrical effect derives from the fact that there is this discrepancy between audience and character perception. Although it could of course be argued that Barker, unlike more conventional dramatists, exploits the visual and non-verbal elements of theatre, it cannot be said that his plays in any way threaten the primacy of the text. Barker has been termed a postmodern dramatist; can he be called a postdramatic writer? It is not within the scope of this paper to answer this question. However, I would argue that his characters pose problems of interpretation of the same nature as those of writers whose work more obviously belongs to these two categories.

**Addressing**

If we have so far centred on characters who are enigmatic, unpredictable, unstable, difficult to pin down, their status as characters cannot really be denied even if the reader/spectator may have to work hard to assemble some kind of picture of the character. In some instances, however, it is not so much the words spoken that confuse us as their status as “words spoken by the character.” It is not enough to ask if the words spoken are true, reliable, coherent etc. We must now question the very nature of this discourse.

First we could note the increasing presence in dramatic texts of other texts. This intertextuality is a typical feature of postmodern writing and can take on many forms from the rather playful games tried out in *Travesties* by Tom Stoppard, which borrows in an overt and clearly identifiable way, to the more subtle borrowings of a Sarah Kane. Intertextuality quite deliberately displaces the question of who is behind the words attributed to a character, by introducing other speakers, contexts or sources. This may be linked to another aspect of discourse in contemporary drama: its self-reflexive nature. Instead of contributing to the
creation of a fictive cosmos, it seems more concerned with highlighting how a fictive cosmos functions. In some cases, this may take the form of metadrama, as was already the case in the theatre of Pirandello, but there are many variations on this. One of the most well-known examples is, of course, Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*. The number of allusions, either direct or indirect, to the fictional status of the action and central character, Anne (Annie, Anya), is quite impressive, starting with the way the text is divided into scenarios instead of scenes. The very structure of the play suggests that Anne is not to be thought of as a traditional character but as a construction, invented by screen writers, film producers, advertising agents etc. However, it seems somewhat simplistic to see the play merely in terms of the way the media manipulate identity, even if there are references to the camera and character creation. Firstly, the sheer variety of discourse styles should be noted. Secondly, the different scenarios are not completely unconnected; the theme of terrorism and atrocities surfaces in several of them. Although we might expect the notion of character to be completely irrelevant in a text which systematically dismantles every picture we try to put together of the enigmatic Anne, our character creation skills are in constant use. Each scenario in fact leads to speculation not just about Anne, but also about the characters who mention her. Despite the fact that her identity seems increasingly fragmented and unattainable, we never cease to ask ourselves questions about the unnamed speakers who talk about her. In many instances, it is quite possible, if not to identify them precisely, at least to give them some kind of social function (film-makers, scriptwriters, police interrogators etc.). Although certain scenarios are rather playful and humorous, the question of Anne's identity at times takes on more sinister overtones. Several of them hint at suicide, murder, torture etc. Identity here needs to be thought of on (at least) two levels. The audience wonders not only about the identity of Anne, but also about the identities of the characters talking about her. This double level of identity can be seen in the way the text uses dialogue within the dialogue, with one character quoting the words of another character without either of them being clearly identified:

"The airport. I'm taking my child to the airport. You don't have to shout at me. I'm an educated woman – not some peasant out of a field who came to the
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city to clean rich people’s toilets. I have a passport and a bank account in US dollars and I’m taking my child to the airport.’
—STRANGELY!
—‘Now please let me pass.’ But yes, as you say, strangely there is no child to be seen. Child? What child? (55)

This also fits in with Lehmann’s observations about narration in post-dramatic theatre: “The principle of narration is an essential trait of post-dramatic theatre; the theatre becomes a site of a narrative act […]. One often feels as though one is witnessing not a scenic representation but a narration of the play presented” (109).

Back to the I and the You

Traditional drama concentrates on the here and now, as we have already said, and presents dialogue as interaction between the characters. In much contemporary drama this is no longer systematically the case. Dialogue is mixed with narration, commentary, fragments of different origins (for example, answerphone messages inAttempts) and monologue. Contrary to conventional texts, monologues in contemporary drama do not always look like monologues on the page, since other characters might well be present and might even appear to be participating in a dialogue. Close study, however, reveals that the character is not actually communicating with another character. Lehmann has mentioned the omnipresence of monologues in some texts or the choral features of others. A text likeCraveby Sarah Kane fits into this category. The four speakers’ identities are reduced to letters of the alphabet (A, B, C and M), which in itself would not confuse the reader much if the four speakers were sufficiently differentiated. On the stage, the absence of names in itself poses no difficulties at all. However,Cravegoes much further than simply not giving a name, age, sex or social status to its speakers. What is striking here is that no precise identity is given to the four figures. Certain attributes can be used at times to distinguish one speaker from another (B smokes and drinks, M has a fear of growing old, C refers to a mother, A defines himself as a “paedophile” etc.), but it is difficult to interpret such ‘features.’ After all, it is the self-proclaimed paedophile who is given the most moving words to speak
about love. At times they seem to be engaged in some kind of dialogue (questions are answered, remarks are contested) but this is not systematic. Sometimes we have the impression that they are not addressing each other but the audience, in a kind of chorus, and the sound, rhythm and materiality of the words seem at least as important as their meaning. Many passages are structured in this way suggesting that one identity has been divided up into four voices, each one making a contribution and echoing a previous one. At other times, a dialogue gets started between two of the four figures, for example, but is soon interrupted just when we think we are on the verge of a breakthrough, just when we think we are about to pin down a specific identity or a relationship.

Monologue, which might be expected to help the audience understand the character better, frequently does the opposite, by highlighting uncertainties concerning the speaker's connection with the words spoken. Traditionally the text ascribed to a character represents the character's speech (or thoughts in a soliloquy) at a particular moment in the drama. The character and the speaker are one and this unity is usually reinforced by the presence of a single actor for each character. This is not always the case in contemporary drama where we can observe other combinations at work, as we can see in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* where the existence of 'character' is perhaps the most problematic of the plays mentioned so far. As I have already had the occasion to notice (see Blattès and Koszul), this text contains little if any indication as to how the text might be distributed between speakers. Occasional passages resemble dialogue, but many do not. In performance, the text can be spoken by one, two or more actors/actresses, physically present or not. The text slides backwards and forwards between words spoken here and now, and narrative belonging to a more or less distant past. As in *Crave*, the words themselves are less important than sounds (or silence), rhythms, patterns or images. It becomes impossible to connect speakers to characters. Reviews of the Royal Court's first staging underlined this aspect:

The actors delivered much of the text without expression; a sense of flat-line numbness pervaded much of the play, though it may be argued that the nature of the text was best served through that style of speaking. The actors performed other sections of the text — several of the extended monologues in particular — in character, with a great depth of emotional intensity. […] Patterns of speaking
the text were varied; sometimes all three actors would speak a sentence simultaneously; at other times they would finish each other’s sentences, build sentences together, and answer one another’s questions. (Earnest 300)

The text does not offer the actor(s) a single role to play, but provides them with another means of communicating with the public. Are we then to give up our attempt to find a fictive cosmos in the text? Although we cannot identify precise characters in a coherent dramatic universe, I would argue that the spectators are not simply admiring performers when they watch this play. The text offers us fragments: fragments of time and space, past and present, fragments of experience, perception and emotion which originate in a world beyond the stage. When we read or hear the play’s closing remarks the obvious theatricality of the ‘I’ and the implied ‘you,’ reinforced by the allusion to the ‘curtains,’ should not lead us to forget that we have been given fleeting glimpses of ‘real’ despair. To read the final lines of the play only as the performer’s address to the audience undermines this despair.

The type of writing we have been studying, although resorting to postmodern techniques, does not really lead to a sense of jubilation or celebration. The postmodern aesthetics seems to have been chosen since it is particularly effective for evoking the fragmented nature of contemporary experience. In fact, far from abandoning the notion, the plays seem better equipped to create character, by approaching it obliquely and indirectly, by breaking with conventional ideas of coherence. Although characters in much contemporary drama are elusive and fragmented, not firmly rooted in time or space, or yoked to one actor or one specific mode of discourse, paradoxically this reinforces rather than undermines their vitality. In line with a distrust of a fixed and closed master narrative, the audience is no longer invited to identify an already constructed character, but is expected to participate in the construction process. Therefore, we might well choose to agree with Jean-Marie Diemme who writes in *Etudes Théâtrales* (2003): “It is not that the character is in a state of crisis, just that there is an ongoing exploration of what ‘character’ actually means” (20, my translation).
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
Digital Performance: Theatre in Its Post-Medium Condition

*cybernetics and rhythms*

The impact of digital technologies on the performing and fine arts reached some of the dimensions by the turn of the century which the late Nam June Paik had already anticipated in the 1960s. Envisioning the electronic superhighway and pioneering many of the techniques of morphing/collaging moving images (e.g. in *Global Groove*, 1973) which are the common language of digital multimedia today, Paik not only helped to engineer new tools, such as the Paik-Abe Synthesizer, but insistently probed the instrumentalities and properties of a medium. *Magnet TV* strikes us today as a microscopic scan of the cathode ray, exposing the interior flesh and the arteries of electric energy. In the exhibition “Cybernetics Art and Music” at the New School for Social Research (1965), Paik’s experiments with electronic signals and feedbacks anticipated the heterogeneous infra-sound and image manipulations so pertinent to the digital culture of the re-mix.

This culture is well reflected in Paul D. Miller’s (DJ Spooky) audio recordings and his recent book, *Rhythm Science*; yet structurally such ‘digital performance’ of mixing and interfering with the signal also

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1 I wish to thank my collaborator Michèle Danjoux for her contributions to the development of the design ideas discussed in this essay.
points back to early experimental film, audio-visual composition, and computer animation (cf. Fernand Léger, Oskar Fischinger, Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Paul Sharits, Michael Snow, John Whitney). Not surprisingly, DJ Spooky’s tracks mix music with early modernist writers or Dada artists (James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Kurt Schwitters), and his recent video installation ReBirth of a Nation provocatively combines D. W. Griffith with other ‘found objects’ from history. The ‘science’ he thinks of is a methodology of cultural engineering on an aesthetic level of sampling and re-recording poignant enough to crystallize dialectical images, constructive moments of re-cognition, in the way in which Walter Benjamin thought of modern technology’s complex reorganization of the visual. Although less fraught with the ethical quandaries in the debate on genetic engineering, nevertheless the ‘rhythms’ in question are deeply connected to inquiries into cultural knowledge and cognition. The DJ’s ‘science’ is a filtering of sounds, beats, movements and torsions amidst a raving biopolitics of information-processing systems.

My interest does not rest with styles of re-mixing and recombination as a phenomenon of the digital media or a superficial reflection of scientific concepts, but with the subterranean relations between performance and computer science/engineering. Cybernetics offered explanations of phenomena in terms of information flows and feedback loops in mechanical and biological systems. Its influence on composition and aesthetic concerns with the regulation of a system (homeostasis) has expanded, as computer models of information processing and artificial intelligence merged with experimental studies in design (affective computing), physics, molecular biology, and neuroscience. This invites questions about the arts as partners in scientific research, engineering and tool-invention. It also invites us to ponder the kinds of work processes necessary for sustained laboratory experiments that can yield new art works, new inventions and new knowledge.

With regard to contemporary theatre, I want to look at current forms of design, asking how the theatrical medium has been adapted to the digital medium, and how performance might use an instrument of analysis or generate a conceptual system to analyze the organization and structure of the system, its metabolism and its boundary. Regarding dance, for example, it is telling that choreographers like Alejandro Ah-
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med (of the Brazilian company Cena 11) see their work as research into ‘behaviours’ and modes of adaptation. Rather than inventing movement phrases, he probes physical conditions for the re-organization of the body, for example in the company’s extensive work on patterns of falling (involving gravity, weight, muscular strength, pressure, etc.), and specific instances in which changes emerge in states of stillness and movement. Ahmed conducts research into patterns.

digital performance, or: das spiegelglas der welt

In the collaborative work of our Design & Performance-Lab, the instrument is a garment. We might also call it a ‘wearable.’ The role of fashion and clothing, although marginalized in critical theory and performance studies, cannot be overlooked as it directly relates to complex social as well as new digital concepts of ‘performance.’ Social performance roles have been studied by anthropologists and semioticians (e.g. Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, Roland Barthes), while ‘digital behaviours’ are a more recent phenomenon, also infused today by the impact of computer and video games on the popular understanding of participatory player culture (e.g. in Massively Multiplayer Online Games) and the various scripts that are followed by gamers to work with settings, characters, plots and the ‘modifications’ of avatar appearance. The fantasy worlds of games are a primary example of shared design, and in some instances (Second Life), all the 3D content and appearances are entirely user-created. The sharing of fantasies is an activity we see encapsulated in fashion.

The fantasy world of fashion attracted us to the corset. It is a prothetic garment, worn over and under. Either. It reveals something about the intimacy and vulnerability as well as the adaptability of the body-machine unions. It is gender-confused and can be worn by women, men, anyone enjoying its fetish-status. Worn across the Internet (in telematic performance), the networked bodies/neural organisms mobilize polyphonic perceptions. The body-machine unions are performers. In digital dance and moving design, we enjoy the compulsion so often found in humans (as well as in animals, in the fauna), namely to adorn and display themselves as a manifestation of their desire to transmit, to create their
body-machines as art and thus to move their images across, to externalize them.

the digital medium and the network

These initial reflections on wearable performance, a process to which we also refer to as 'wearing the film,' need to be framed by two quick forays into the issue of theatrical medium specificity and the emergence of wearable technologies. Transmission (the wearable in telematic performance) implies mediated performance, and telepresence or telematics suggests the experience of being fully present at a location remote from one's own physical location, generally involving a camera-based network convergence (streaming media) between two or more sites. Someone experiencing telepresence would therefore be able to behave, and receive stimuli, as though at the remote site. The scenes at two distant sites become one or seem fused (in a virtual third space). The architecture of such convergences in a studio or gallery always involves multiple screens and surround-sound in the projection of the live web streams and real-time 3D Virtual Environments. Such an ambient, immersive environment exponentially expands what we normally comprehend as our immediate sensory environment or “kinesfield.” The kinaesthetic space is extensive of the tactile experience of the garment as well, and I want to

2 Gretchen Schiller, in describing the installation architecture of her collaborative work traje (with Susan Kozel), speaks of the particular “kinaesthetic responsivity” (190) in highly mediated, sensitive and interactive environments which integrate movement and digital media. Referring to Laban’s definition of bodyspace or kinesphere, she proposes that in contemporary interactive, performative installations bodyspace extends from Laban’s kinesphere or personal reach to a “kinaesthetic dynamic across material forms, forces, space and time,” and she is not even including the telepresent dimension of co-present remote spaces and actors. But her theorization is evocative, as she argues that the dynamic and interaction between 2D and 3D spaces collectively fall into a new conceptual bodyspace (kinesfield): “digital technologies can bring our awareness to qualitative variations and inhabited dynamics between spaces in this kinesfield. These mediated installations, like video dance, create new physical realities offering alternative forms of intersubjective and community embodiment.” (ibid.)
suggest that movement and gesture span multiple telepresent bodies, making ‘fashion’ an intersubjective experience. You can see yourself being worn. At the same time, the wearer of the wearable acts to enframe digital information, giving body to digital behaviours and thus to her or his own intimately and affectively experienced sensation of ‘wearing the digital,’ of becoming digital(ized).

In the artistic sense of wearable performance, developed as a response to pervasive computing, wireless communications, and fashionable mobile devices, wearable computers are devices worn on the body, small enough to be integrated into clothing or the human body, providing continuous access to a network or receiver, controlling media output. The ‘control’ of transformable data tinkers with the commodity aspect, making them instruments of composition. The wearable here points to fashion in the sense of re-fashioning, not just controlling surface functionality in the interface but challenging digital transformation

Fig. 1: Helenna Ren performing in Emergent Dress (tedr), 2005. © J. Birringer
of the materiality of the body to provoke a new language through which discrete representations of the body can be generated and re-invented. Interface design, therefore, is contingent on many specific articulating systems. Our collaborative Emergent Dress project has been equally fuelled by new material technology — new fibres, fabrics, and innovative processing techniques that allow the integration of sensors or smart functionality into clothing. Introducing the category of the ‘wearable’ into the field of performance and choreography draws particular attention to the sensorial affect as interface, to sensorial ‘techniques,’ while it also alters the meaning of ‘designing wearability’ for fashion, as we are here addressing cutting-edge developments in wearable computing at the beginning of the 21st century. Since this area is still very much experimental, there are few mature products with a wide user base that could be evaluated. Artistic works deploying wearables and reaching a wider audience are equally rare. Therefore I just want to sketch a few design ideas involved in wearable performance, and map the ground for a

3 “Emergent Dress” has been in prototype development at the DAP-Lab, a research partnership between Brunel University and Nottingham Trent University (<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/dap>). The prototype collection under development includes ScreenDress™, featuring collaborative design concept for garment by Michèle Danjoux (fashion) and Jon Hamilton (motion graphics). Explay features collaborative design concept for garment by Michèle Danjoux and Demosthenes Koutsogeorgis (microelectronics); FantasyWear™ is developed by Michèle Danjoux, Johannes Birringer (choreography, sensor design), Paul Verity Smith (sensor design), with Helena Ren and Nam Eun Song (dance), and additional corset design fabrication by Susanna Henson.

4 For a provocative concurrent experiment in wearables, focusing on the somatic aspect of sensor technology integrated into fabrics, see Thecla Schiphorst’s description of her exhale exhibition. Jane Harris’ work, on the other hand, explores the presence and portrayal of characters through dress and textiles in the realm of 3D Computer Graphic visualization. The digital animations (Potential Beauty) she exhibited in the UK in 2002–2003 focused on the poetic and dreamlike movement of the dresses alone, insofar as the actual wearer of the garments is ‘deleted’ in the final screen version. However, one could argue that the body is not deleted as much as it is implied as the ‘source code.’ The dancer’s movement for the animations was motion-captured, and the animation of the dress rendered through making the physical/real body invisible (see Harris).
speculative description of how performance transforms design, and how the wearable experience affects technical mediation.

The theatrical system of representation has always included material forms (texts, architectures, objects, costumes) and immaterial information (personal memories, collective stories, songs, dance, rituals, performance-behaviours, celebrations, games). The theatre of the material archive, with its national canons of plays and technical pedagogies for acting and staging, with its maps for the production of closed, completed and autonomous stage works, is now similar to the museum of the old masters. The museum’s display strategies are changing (while the market becomes the referent for contemporary art practices), and so mise-en-scène making has undergone a range of innovations during the last century both in terms of styles of directing/visual staging and in the slow hybridization and mediatization of theatre (noticeable in the increasing use of video and live cameras on stage, and the non-linear, deconstructionist and deformative strategies used in postmodern theatre). But we cannot say the theatre understood that the awkward division between the spheres of production and consumption had become outmoded. Theatre scholars defending the specificity of theatricality would have to argue that the theatre (compared to other media) sustains itself as a medium because its fundamental aesthetic is based on the co-existence (co-presence) of actor and spectator, of the actual and the fictional world in the here and now, in the theatrical space and its illusion of reality. Efforts are made to define a new ‘theatre of intermediality’ striving to incorporate (remediate) the use of the digital medium, video, and virtual reality into the theatrical communication or producing its ‘double’ (remediating re-mediation) as an effect in the perception of the audience. But when I think of contemporary digital performance, in the context of interactivity and real-time computation, I am interested precisely in something that cannot be integrated into this presumed

5 A convoluted, frustrating if brave attempt to introduce new media discourse and interactivity to the theatre, and to ‘map’ the theatre as a ‘hypermedium’ remediating and mediatizing everything, is made by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt. The book that all the authors in this anthology follow religiously is Bolter and Grusin’s Remediation: Understanding New Media.
automatic inclusiveness of the theatre, this ‘home to all’ which pretends to advocate itself “at the heart of the new media debate” (Chapple and Kattenbelt 24).

The late theatre (after postmodernism, after drama) is not at the heart of new media debates. Rather than arguing that the theatre is now inter-medial or, if you want, ‘transmedial’ it is painfully clear that its operating system (playwright, script, roles, director, actors, scene and lighting designer, costume designer, audience) and conventional divisions of labour belong to the pre-digital age. The shift to computational modes of composition and a recognition of the computational environment are happening very slowly in the theatre, whereas responsive and

Fig. 2.1: Partial design in motion.

6 In a recent essay I sought to define some of the issues of transmediality, mostly in regard to contemporary dance and not to postdramatic theatre (see „Der transmediale Tanz“). Admittedly, working with dancers for the past 16 years (after writing Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism), I have lost connection to the “postdramatic theatre” so influentially described by Hans-Thies Lehmann (who also
programmable design artefacts and networking (distributed agency) are everywhere.

Historically, conceptual art’s dismissal of medium-specific art (in the 60s) created entirely new and historically irreversible conditions for the production of art. After Conceptual Art, the practical basis, and the historical horizon for the production of all art is set by the post-medium condition.

retroquotation 1, on post-medium conditions, adapted from a voyage on the north sea

seems to argue that all media can be integrated into the theatrical process and be transformed into “post-media” – which makes little sense in our present discussion of digital interactivity).
5-D environments

A 5-D template exists in the parameters of an environment allowing performer choices in multiple/potential temporal spaces, the digital medium continuously remaining fluid, transformative, morphic, and indifferent to the digital objects or projections. All data are equivalences but energies are not.

avantquotation, adapted from Olu Taiwo’s return beat

If the term ‘conceptualism’ means a certain artistic practice (and idea) of modern art, which renounces its own actualization, then LAIBACH has nothing in common with the practice, except oppositions. LAIBACH articulates itself through its own actualization and signifies the triumph over conceptualism. Every classification and determination from the standpoint of primary LAI-
BACH tendency is incorrect and meaningless, although in picture and word we do not reject the label 'trans-historical (real) realism' as a preparatory phase towards the triumph of the 'monumental retrogarde.' (NSK, 1988)

retroquotation 2, adapted from the interrogation machine, or: how the east sees the west

Performance in a theatre which is in a condition of not being theatre is a slight paradox, and my presentation at the 2006 CDE conference, downstage in front of a film screen and ten empty lecterns in a black-box, may have puzzled some members of the audience, as my references, including the Laibach soundtrack and some of the QT movies, veered wildly off centre, away from a possible meditation on the medium and its self-differential condition, and toward the retrogardes (and ironies) of the east. The show was designed as an ironic investigation of the pos-
sibility of attaining more alienation. Dance images and image modulations presented in this theatre alluded not only to a layering and cutting (fabric design) and sensorial stitching we work with when the moving body is extended. Moving slowly in the direction of producing ‘wearables’ for performance and/in everyday life, our interest also lies in the (non-Western) experience of emergent design, the tantric, sensual, proprioceptive qualities of dressing in garments, with only partially completed designs that allow space for fantasy development and contradictions. Dressing-performance in the digital context is about articulating such mutability and exploring subtle or extravagant exaggeration, as the post-conceptual mode of composition here meets improvisation (emergent) and the transformative potentials of the computational (algorithmic, generative). Some fashion designers, like Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, have proposed unexpected ‘irrational’ designs which complicate all premises of congruence (measurements that follow fit, like the glove to the hand), proportion, vertical axis, and the contouring of the body’s outlines. For example, in 1998 Kawakubo produced a collection of disconnecting parts; the clothes were broken up, fragmented and incomplete, sides and backs missing, left and right not matching etc. This strategy points to a diffusion and metonymic fragmentation of units which capture the sense of the digital we experience in the interface.

The post-conceptual garment, if we stretch Roland Barthes’ analysis of the body-garment relation, is extended as a body.\(^7\) He discusses this through his study of Erte’s fashion drawings, and specifically the Ertean silhouette, where the woman becomes the garment, is somehow biologically fused into the woman-garment. The body can no longer be sepa-

\(^7\) Whereas Hegel seems to have preferred a formless surface as “ideal” in clothing the body for the expression of the “spirit,” Barthes voices his critique of Hegel by way of the silhouette in Erte’s alphabet-drawings of women: “Hegel has noted that the garment is responsible for the transition from the sensuous (the body) to the signifier; the Ertean silhouette [...] performs the contrary movement (which is more rare): it makes the garment sensuous and the body into the signifier; the body is there (signed by the silhouette) in order for the garment to exist; it is not possible to conceive a garment without the body” (153). The body, in other words, is the support for the garment.
rated from its adornment and decoration. The woman and the garment become one. In our current experiments, the ScreenDress™ prototype, with the morphic mandate of the motion graphics replacing its original texture, is extended as a body, poetically shifting its surface of moving patterns and textures. It invents and substitutes, simultaneously masks and reveals, is animated, becomes alive and organic with multiple juxtapositions of image and colour. The filming and ‘camera eye’ remove us from one reality into another, one where dancers, organic tissues and animation become fused into expressive visual statement: an indissociable mixture of body, garment and graphics, bleeding forms, one into the other. This is a dialogue between the natural and the artificial, brought together in an intimate relationship to create a new object or artefact, the iconic garment. The iconic garment drives the fantasizing experience. ScreenDress™ and FantasyWear™ are coupled with electronics engineering, hard and soft wiring, and with ideas stretching from film to architecture, from fashion to bioculture and the current writings on prostheses. Having moved outside of the theatrical system of representation, our questions about sensorial affect concern interactivity, tactile experience of visual communication, and movement consciousness (perceptual and cognitive). In both a narrative or abstract framework, however, they can also address the wearer’s inter-relationship to the virtual spaces mobilized by the digital medium.

In terms of process, the ideas for the wearables are generally developed two-dimensionally in preparation for 3D realization. But working with the Emergent Dress, we do not start with the design sketch or static state but with movement, introducing partial garment structures and cloth to the initial frame: inviting the dancer to move with the cloth, exploring and experiencing the qualities of the cloth (in front of our eyes/the camera eye), its potential and design possibilities. We observe

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8 It is constructed from Chromatte, a technical light-reflecting cloth for chroma key production in TV and film. This material, designed to work dynamically with a LiteRing (a camera mounted device featuring LED’s) utilizes the retro-reflective properties of its fabrication for live effects/image replacement, fusing motion graphics with onscreen performance.
the movement reactions initiated by the tactile stimulus of the cloth and consider how garment form and structure might begin to emerge.

In the case of the Chromatte cloth, dancer Nam Eun Song was invited to discuss with the designer how she felt about the cloth; what type of movement behaviours it began to generate; structures and scale. Song found the touch of this particular cloth somewhat harsh and aggressive, it felt hostile to her movements and unforgiving. We explore slashing of the fabric to ease the restriction/the sensation of restriction and try coiling and wrapping cut lengths of the cloth to produce rudimentary sleeves and other garment features. The designer responds to the cloth’s structural dimension with pleats, creased stitched folds in the fabric which create an even more structural surface; one that can now

Fig. 5: The animated dress: a union of design and technology, transforming patterns expand and contract (interstitial forms). Nam Eun Song with Emergent Screen-Dress, Videostill © 2006 M. Danjoux

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expand and contract, open and close with each affected move. There is a blending of designer and dancer in this process-based iterative design methodology.

digitized movement

These ideas on intimacy and the digitally manipulated garment/body are then moved into telepresence and real-time motion graphics. In the development of the new prototypes, the ‘corset’ became a primary vehicle, conceptual metaphor and material object, along with other parts, fragments of cloth that we put on and took off, shifted from wearing to gesturing, folding, stretching, unbinding, wearing under and with the camera. Through such dressing, data are transmitted to our partners. Our thoughts centered around corporeal feminism and the body’s capacity to be moulded, constructed, socially informed or culturally specified. As designers, we contemplate the dual purpose of dress: it delineates gender and encourages the individual to internalize, as gendered roles, a complex set of social expectations for behaviour. Every wearer has to negotiate them.

But the corset (as fatal object of desire) not only suits the telematic, digital process of transducing the images generated by the moving body, carrying its fleshy data across the network and distributing fantasy-choreography, it also bears a hilarious, poignant relationship to the exoskeleton worn in magnetic motion-capture experiments, and thus to another specific data transfer process (motion tracking, motion capture) employed in real time interactive art, allowing the manipulation of physiological information on microscopic levels. This performance of a combinatory ensemble of real-time interactions took place at the 2005 Digital Cultures Lab (Nottingham). Simon Biggs and his motion capture team, working with the ReActor exoskeleton system, asked a dancer wearing the exoskeleton-corset to send his motiondata to the computer and via MIDI to a second system that was applied, via electrodes, to the face-muscles of performance artist Arthur Elsenaar.

\[9 \text{<http://www.digitalcultures.org>}.\]
Fig. 6: João Costa and Arthur Elsenaar performing a male duet with motion capture exoskeleton and facial electrodes. Videostill © 2005 J. Birringer
gestures of the dancer with the motion-capture suit thus moved the facial muscles of Arthur’s face, Arthur having no voluntary control over the shaping, changing, and moving of his cheeks, lips, mouth, and eyebrows. The dancer danced, literally, in Arthur’s face.

This examination of movement behaviour, movement transfer, and real-time processing having an affect on two human beings at the same time links our research on wearables with telematics (communications) and motion capture (ergonomics), making it interesting as well to the medical and therapeutic sectors. In this example of one dancer wearing the ReActor exoskeleton and the other performer wearing electrodes and muscle-stimulators on his face, the duet of the male couple is in fact generating an immediate tele-action, a trans-activity. Immediate transactions, I suspect, will be the tactile digital performance genre of the near future. Creating tele-presence in two persons’ immediate body experience and (involuntary) experience of self vis à vis other: such experiences on several levels (sensorimotor, proprioceptive, erotic and cognitive/psychological) are a corporeal expression of transindividual rhythms. This is an intimacy (visual and non-visual) which evokes to us the idea of wearing the fantasy-images of the other (self), allowing a dynamic interaction which exceeds ‘authorship’ and stimulates non-conformist, producerly consumption. You want to wear and be worn, but

10 Yoruba dance philosopher Olu Taiwo writes eloquently on such “interfacing” with worlds. When he addresses movement, sensation, and the experience of the moving body within intensive rhythmic/corporeal situations, he is thinking of hot information environments forming four-dimensional (4-D) and five-dimensional (5-D) processes of perception. The experience combines “metabolic and digital processes.” Within his framework of the Return Beat rhythm, such movement is also understood as a transcultural practice in interactive relationships to complex worlds. The interconnected metabolic and digital processing of these interactions are part and parcel of a human being’s collective experience (collective self); its most important collective dimension is the rhythm.

11 Reference to “wearing the digital/wearing the film” is based on workshops conducted with fashion designers, performers and engineers in the DAP-Lab, where we explore the relations of fabric design and interactive design/performance. One aspect of this work includes exploring wearable computing and the inclusion of biofeedback sensors in the weaving of the textile design which allow a direct influ-
the terms of the interaction ritual are open to be negotiated directly and individually. To each their own bespoke prosthetic, in the networked confluences of digital proprioception and metabolism.

Works Cited


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II. PRACTISING DRAMA AND AFTER POSTMODERNISM
Traditionally, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (hereafter *R&GAD*) has been interpreted as a metadramatic representation that starts from the premise that all the world’s a stage, and that our — i.e. the spectators’, man’s — fate is no different from Ros and Guil’s. In short, at the end of the day, we all have to die. Wheels may be turning above our heads that we do not comprehend, our fate lies in store for us all, and while we may enjoy some freedom within the confines of our existence, we cannot change the boat’s course. Indeed, the play offers ample textual evidence for such an interpretation, and its metaphoric images seem to support it. Ros and Guil are left no escape; they are trapped in Shakespeare’s script, and only gain their identity by reluctantly heading towards the deaths that have been predestined for them. There is no other way than to follow the way to England and play their roles till they have been literally out-played: “The script is written; there is nothing to be done” (Babula 281). Any audience that is somehow in touch with theatrical and literary history is in the know about the destiny that awaits Ros and Guil in Stoppard’s play. The play’s title leaves little doubt about the lord attendants’ exit. There is a grand design from which no escape is possible, and which inexorably ends in death. In this sense, it is generally thought, Ros and Guil represent mankind.
Contrary to what is assumed by most critics, who interpret the play solely as a memento mori (e.g. Hunter, Tom Stoppard’s Plays 137), I would suggest that this is a fallacy which is constantly obscuring a far more persistent idea to which no attention has been devoted so far. Not only do Ros and Guil express their fear of death, there are abundant textual elements that point to the exact opposite. Although some literature on R&GAD has questioned the status of death with regard to its protagonists, a crucial aspect in the debate has been grossly neglected, namely the possibility of eternal life. Concomitant to the uncertainty of their being alive or dead, they express a latent feeling that they might live on forever. The thought of eternity seems just as frightening: “Eternity is a terrible thought” (51), Ros moans, and Guil’s repetition of this reflection stresses their anxiety about this possibility: “Death followed by eternity … the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought” (52).

Analyses of the play, however, do not question the assertion that life’s only certainties are provided by birth and death, and they are blind to the opposite assumptions expressed by Guil. John Fleming, for instance, concludes that “[e]xistence, though not necessarily essence, and mortality are the only certainties — all else in life is a mystery, an unanswered question” (58), whereas Stoppard himself referred to Ros and Guil as “existential immortals” (qtd. in Fleming 265). Indeed, the courtiers’ lives are construed in an eternally repeating pattern.1

This incongruity confronts us with a problem about the ontological nature of the lord attendants. Are they dead, or do they relentlessly head towards their end, or do they face, on the contrary, an eternal life? We can solve this paradox if we regard Ros and Guil as subjects from a Lacanian perspective. According to Lacan, human subjects suffer from a

1 The play’s circular pattern was more prominent in the first edition, where the two puzzled ambassadors who bring the news of Hamlet’s death in Shakespeare are summoned by their names shouted out loud. Thus, in recalling the messenger’s summoning of Ros and Guil at the beginning, the setting is re-arranged for the next performance, allowing history to begin all over again. Although Stoppard has dropped this invention, R&GAD breathes the atmosphere of repetition; as the references to circularity abound, death cannot be an absolute, as Ros makes clear: “Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard” (12).
lack which was implemented with the paternal metaphor and the symbolic order. Since there is always a part of himself that is lost forever and which serves as the cause of his desire, man can never fully be himself. The subject is, with Lacan, the effect of signifiers, and must rely on the Other in order to exist. This means that, paradoxically, man can only become a subject by being radically determined by his lack. Hence, Lacan concludes that the subject is necessarily split and alienated, and, in a way, dead from the moment that he enters the linguistic order (see e.g. Lacan, Seminar XI 211).

It is here that Stoppard’s metadramatic game which plays with the device of multi-layered confusion turns into an onto-existential questioning of the subject. The gratuitousness of intertextual playfulness yields for an inquiry into truth, the human condition and time. The messenger called upon by Claudius pulls Ros and Guil into Hamlet’s drama:

That’s it – pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters – shouts – What’s all the row about?! Clear off! – But then he called our names. You remember that – this man woke us up. (13)

From this moment on, they enter another world indeed, the world of drama. This absorption equally marks the start of their feeling of loss and deprivation, the feeling that they are bereaved of their grip on the world. As they are dramatic characters, however, this messenger also brings them to life: he “woke us up.” Were they not being called upon, Ros and Guil would never have existed at all. This makes it hard to claim that they are merely moving out from a non-dramatic world into a dramatic world. The messenger’s call equals a creator’s breath of life. Ros and Guil do not step from one life into another, but are created ex nihilo. They only become subjects from the moment Shakespeare wrote their roles. Only when they enter Hamlet’s but above all Shakespeare’s drama are they turned into existential beings. They cannot live without being integrated in the law of the symbolic. Playing word games, reasoning with syllogisms and probing the pragmatism of language, to Ros and Guil, the world of drama just as well appears a world of the word. It is exemplary that they are drawn into the linguistic world as the messenger — and could it be more telling that it is precisely a messenger, the bringer of the word? — “called our names,” as Ros relates the story.
Laurens De Vos

Name-giving turns one into a subject. We can hardly underestimate the importance of the short sentence in Guil’s fairly long speech: as a caesura, “then a messenger arrived” (12) serves not only as a metadramatic reference to Claudius’s appeal, but alludes to the existential loss of mankind, as the law of the symbolic has taken possession of them and burdened them with self-alienation that was, however, a sine qua non for their creation in the first place.

What is striking about this idea is that the human condition appears no more real than a fictional world inhabited by literary characters. The courtiers’ entry in the linguistic reality is juxtaposed with the fictional world of the players. An important detail that underscores the fact that they enter a play world lies in the manner with which they are woken up. The messenger banging on the shutters and urging them to come out anticipates the Player’s later command for his troupe to come out of the casks in which they had hidden on the boat: “Aha! All in the same boat, then!” The Player “climbs out [and] goes round banging on the barrels,” shouting “Everybody out!” (82). Thus, the player and the messenger are linked, and the interrelatedness of Ros and Guil summoned to come out and play on the one hand with the human entry in the symbolic order on the other is emphasised. If we pursue this train of thought, what Stoppard is saying is that human reality is as fictional as Ros and Guil’s dramatic world. They, too, are subjected to the symbolic castration. Thus, with the ‘recycling’ of such well-known literary characters that are staged as spectators, Stoppard has succeeded in questioning the ontological certainty of the audience as human beings.

Ros and Guil, however, refuse to participate in the tragedians’ role-playing, and thus decline to submit to the symbolic castration. If we consider the troupe of players that visits the court as representatives of the symbolic order, primarily Guil persists in denying his dependence on this rabble of prostitutes. He takes the lead in the courtiers’ resistance to the implementation of the human lack with the symbolic order. This is not to say that the symbolic castration has not taken place (it has, as a matter of fact, with the messenger’s wake-up call), but to accept it as a necessary intervention is another matter. In fact, Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be’ problem is pushed to Ros and Guil as the centre of their concern.
The question of the contingency of their existence is reflected in quite neurotic behaviour.

Ros and Guil’s denial of the symbolic castration results in their rejection of the Other. Particularly Guil by all means tries to maintain his independence of the players as representatives of the linguistic order. He wants to keep control over everything, and cannot accept that a flaw is inscribed on his subjectivity. Thinking himself in possession of the imaginary phallus (− $\varphi$), the obsessional neurotic not only erases the existence of the Other, but confines his existence to his own being-there. Indeed, Guil tries to have everything under control, and does not acknowledge the bar that causes the split in the subject ($\$$). He cannot possibly accept his interdependency on the Player and tries to master him as long as possible; attempts which are, however, ridiculed by the Player. Guil’s promise to use his influence at the court is mere bluff to set himself off as the one without a lack.

Guil’s neurotic behaviour again comes to the fore in his reaction to the players’ pornographic performance in which the courtiers are invited to participate. Confronted with the sexual desire of the Other, Guil fears that he might get caught up in the Other’s jouissance. As he likes to present himself as the object of the Other’s desire, the neurotic constantly faces the threat of becoming the object of his jouissance, by which, ultimately, his integrity as a subject is about to collapse. Similarly, Guil underscores his alienation from the sexuality manifested by the Player, for he realises that the Player poses a threat to his controlling position. His resistance to being caught up in the assumed perversion of the Player results in his neurotic stance, which Lacan considers a defence against the Other’s sexual desire. He ascribes to the Player a demand which, in his phantasm, the tragedian wants him to fulfil: “The perversion is in the unconscious of the neurotic as phantasy of the Other” (Lacan, Écrits 356). The terror to lose control in front of the Player’s perversion may account for Guil’s sudden mental breakdown:

Guil. (shaking with rage and fright) It could have been – it didn’t have to be obscene…. It could have been – a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder…. It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way…. I was prepared. But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this – a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes…. (19)
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The sexuality he is confronted with might undermine his illusion that he is without a lack and, consequently, without desire, which may, after all, disclose his dependency. Although Guil is obviously driven by a desire for knowledge and presence, in the opening scene he already claims that “I have no desires. None” (11). Significantly, this assertion is followed immediately by his mention of the messenger. Thus, his symbolic castration is linked with desire, which he categorically denies. As Lacan points out, after all, the neurotic endeavours to mask his desire: “the neurotic hides the castration that he denies. But, contrary to appearances, he clings to it” (Écrits 357).

The neurotic’s search for the imaginary phallus as a result of the insufficiently overcome oedipal complex culminates in an ambiguous relationship with the ideal father, with whom he first of all identifies. Yet this narcissistic identification must lead to feelings of rivalry and aggression towards the ideal father; through his identification the neurotic wishes to obtain the imaginary phallus which he attributes to this father. This equivocal attitude, which mirrors the opposite feelings of awe and envy of the clan of brothers towards the primal father in Freud’s Totem and Taboo, is split up in R&GAD. Guil takes on an aggressive stance towards the Player as the possessor of the imaginary phallus; at their first encounter he seizes the tragedian violently and smashes him across the face, culminating at the end of the play in his murderous attack on the Player. The ideal father, as Lacan notices, is the dead father: “The neurotic’s wished-for Father is clearly the dead Father. But he is also a Father who can perfectly master his desire — and the same can be said of the subject” (Écrits 355). Guil’s attempt to kill the Player amounts to his wish to be in possession of the imaginary phallus, and gain autonomy without desire.

In interviews, Stoppard has suggested that, in fact, Ros and Guil are two sides of the same coin. The little characterisation that they are given depicts Guil as the intellectual questioning what happens around him, while Ros is more emotional and intuitive, a bit naïve yet supportive: “They both add up to me in many ways in the sense that they’re carrying out a dialogue which I carry out with myself. One of them is fairly intellectual, fairly incisive; the other one is thicker, nicer in a curious way, more sympathetic. There’s a leader and the led” (Stoppard in Gordon
While Guil represents the aggressive feelings towards the father, Ros is the more adoring son, who looks up to the Player and shows a keen interest in his role of performer. Thus, Ros and Guil are two sides of the neurotic subject having ambivalent feelings towards the father. The ideal father is not only the object of identification but, as the master imposing the law, he also demands complete obedience. Because of this deification, the minions often fail to make up their own minds; as a rule, the neurotic is someone who cannot decide and speak in his own name. His choice and desire are always coloured by the ideal father, whom he would like to resemble more than he would admit. Therefore, to the Player’s simple question of how they liked the troupe’s dress rehearsal, Guil can only respond: “What was I supposed to think?” (57) But the most obvious example of their indeterminateness and inability to develop their own desire, of course, lies in their paralysis to take fate into their own hands as they learn the letter’s content that demands their immediate decapitation.

At the end of the play, it looks as if Ros and Guil eventually come to terms with the symbolic castration, in compliance with the illusory nature of reality. At that point they willingly step forward, away from the stage and into their deaths. When they accept the human condition with its inherent lack, as they are about to be beheaded, their symbolic castration will finally be enforced and rid them of their impossible desire not to desire. It is, moreover, no coincidence that it is the Player, the first representative of the symbolic order, who warns the attendants in the course of the play of losing their heads.

Ros and Guil’s neurotic inclination is sensible in their inexhaustible energy to find out the truth and lay bare the whole master plan of being. What they are seeking in their denial of the linguistic order, actually, is the final signified, the real thing. If they want to have everything under control, there is no way that they could reconcile themselves to a life among signifiers where meaning is perpetually deferred and where truth never has a fixed position. In his essay on the question whether Stop-

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2 The relation between decapitation and castration is, of course, a firmly established one, with Freud’s notes on the Medusa head (in Rieff 212–213) as one of the more notable examples.
pard belongs to the postmodern generation embracing the relativism of truth and the indeterminacy of all values, Michael Vanden Heuvel claims the following:

Burdened with the nostalgic desire for origins certainly felt as lost and irreclaimable, Ros and Guil engage in a deadly game of play that presses home the desire for presence, being, and final truth or signifieds, but ends by affirming nothing. (223)

Obviously, the games by which the lord attendants seek to obtain the final truth belong to the symbolic order just as much as the tragedians’ performances. However vehemently they may try to get rid of it, they are bound hand and foot to this linguistic order to which they have been called. Captivated by language, the word is their last resort that provides them with a certain kind of stability, yet at the same time it is the most painful illustration of their imprisonment. Merely pawns on a chessboard with a minimum of significance, their whole life — which is no more than the literally dramatic, never expanding theatrical world — is written on paper. The following sequence points at both the inadequacy of language to capture the truth and the aggravation that it is their only instrument:

Ros: We’re his [i.e. Hamlet’s] friends.

[...]

Guil: You’ve only got their word for it.

Ros: But that’s what we depend on. (79)

They have no other choice but to surrender to the word, which stands out as the first and last authority. They will need to be satisfied with signifiers moving and shifting around without getting at the ultimate signified. That is why Ros and Guil feel they are puppets on a string. In whatever direction they walk, they cannot change the ship’s course. This comparison both illustrates their ontological condition and refers back to dramatic intertextuality. Neither the courtiers nor Stoppard himself can go wherever they want to. Located on Shakespeare’s ship, they can walk freely on the boat but this freedom is ‘relative,’ as they cannot change the overall dramatic Shakespearian action. The bard’s written text manifests itself as the groundless, inexplicable law, which asks to be interpreted, yet the very existence of which can never be explained, let alone justified. Shakespeare’s text sets itself up as the dead letter, the
inert inscription that we should consider as an a-historical core situated far beyond all interpretations; the signified stands out as the interpretative law that no signifier can ever attain. The text is a *creatio ex nihilo* that is latently present in the background. Also Stoppard’s interpretation circles around the silent, a-historical yet omnipresent Shakespeare. This seems to me the quintessential reason why Stoppard had recourse to well-known dramatic characters. Their entrapment within the dimension of the Other underscores the ‘parasitic’ nature of language. Grafted onto the subject, language is always borrowed, the awareness of which is augmented significantly with Stoppard’s use of overt intertextuality.

Ros and Guil, however, fail in producing an adequate interpretation of the groundless law that is the script in which they are trapped. With their refusal to participate in the play, they cannot weave a coherent story around Shakespeare’s letter. Direction and signification can only be determined when they accept to no longer stand aside as spectators but assume the role of actors. Had they done so, their fate, which is firmly established by Shakespeare the Law, would have remained the same, yet they would have been able at least to gain some understanding of the events by which they feel overwhelmed. To play may not guarantee access to the truth, but it definitely creates a world that might account for the truth. The Player points out to the attendants that truth is a construction that should be taken for true. As Stoppard himself indicates, “truth is always a compound of two half-truths, and you never reach it, because there is always something more to say” (Watts 49). If they want to succeed in rendering some signification to their life and make it understandable from a certain perspective, though it will obviously not be the perfect truth, they need to appropriate the symbolic order. However, they refuse to play along, and succumb to the reality manifested in the roles they assume. Here lies the major difference between the henchmen and the players: whereas the players have no qualms about giving in to the laws by which they are governed, Hamlet’s companions resist their submergence in a compelling script they do not know the ins and outs about. Taking into account that Ros and Guil are representatives of the audience, they serve as an exemplar of the existentialist shortcomings due to the human condition.
The subject’s existence, then, depends on the Other; he cannot be completely autonomous and autarkic, but only gains signification in relation to the Other. The acceptance of this dependence is quintessential to function properly as human subjects. This view is rendered by Derrida as well in his book *Specters of Marx* (1994). This book asks what the legacy of Marxism is after the implosion of communism, yet its scope is far broader than the political world future. Dealing with human ontology, history, memory and presence, it clarifies the way we perceive reality, and how we deal with the past’s inheritance. Referring to *Hamlet* throughout the book, *Specters of Marx* illustrates how one is haunted by ghosts and how one deals with this spectrality. *R&GAD* is exemplary for our exorcism of the spectres of the past. The play bears not only the spectral legacy of Hamlet’s father, but of Hamlet himself. Moreover, if Ros and Guil are confined to a predetermined destiny, they are still pursued by a four hundred year-old script.

*Specters of Marx* is a reaction to those new ‘ideologies’ advocating the positivism of presence and the end of history (as e.g. in Fukuyama). Derrida criticises modern man’s propensity to exorcise the ghosts from the past, and live with the illusion of ontological presence without the traces of what was and is yet to come. Absence is a necessary prerequisite of meaning. Presence, Derrida says, can never stand on its own, but is always moulded by the spectral, by what is not present (xix). While the dead return, those who are not yet born cast their shadow too, and thus all interfere with the living. Derrida calls this living with ghosts *hauntology*. Spectres occupy a twilight zone between being and not-being, between absence and presence (6).

Ros and Guil are spectres too, disjointed from the world they are living in. Revenants of a past present, Elizabethans in a future to come, and clowns in a tragedy. These peculiar figures wander between different eras, nowhere quite at home, except for the voids between those different presences that they can never attain. All their reminiscences of a presymbolic home are in vain; they can hope for nothing more than temporarily settle down between these fixed present states. Resisting the frightening idea of spectralisation, these simpletons strongly resemble the anti-hero Don Quichote and his servant Sancho Panza; like human
beings, Ros and Guil too are fighting windmills in an era they do not fit in.

Underlying their tragedy is this thread that runs throughout the whole play: ‘The times are out of joint:’ “We can give you a tumble if that’s your taste, and times being what they are...” (16). The spectral moment has become timeless. Ros and Guil are living in a transitory passage between past and future, in an in-between they will never get hold of. The timelessness to which they are subjected is perhaps best expressed in the scene in which ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ is set up. When this play within the play within the play goes beyond the meta-dramatic mise-en-abîme and predicts what lies in store for Ros and Guil in their ‘reality,’ it widens beyond and breaks through the framework of the play it is supposed to fit into. In this transitory passage where past and future meet, a ‘logical’ concatenation of events in a chronological order is a shattered illusion.

The lord attendants make frantic efforts to establish their ontology and erase their hauntology. They embody exactly what Derrida condemns as the contemporary illusion of positivism. Trying to reach a pure, ontological state, they resort to logics, empiricism and rationality to ward off the timeless ghosts of the irrational, unexplainable and unnameable. They herald, in Fredric Jameson’s words in a review article on Derrida’s book, an “anti-speculative positivism, empiricism or pragmatism” (75). Throughout the play, Ros and Guil try to exorcise the ghosts that challenge their consistency and affirmation of presence. To live with spectres always involves “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida xix), so it is little wonder that the courtiers long to turn their memory into a blank. If they succeeded in effacing their minds about their past, history would not stand a chance to get involved in their ontological actuality. Particularly Ros wants to abandon everything he remembers, to clear his head of all memories. Haunted by an existential angst, Stoppard’s protagonists do not find themselves back in times that are “indifferent” and “wicked” (17). It is extremely hard for them to uphold the illusion of their living presence and their actual being-there. Disadjusted as they are, they have lost all sense of identity, as they do not remember who they are. If times are out of joint for Hamlet himself, this surely holds true for both courtiers,
who have not the faintest notion of what is going on at Elsinore. Spectres do not live in the present moment; there is no anchor-point they can have recourse to in order to get things sorted out. Due to spectrality, the present evaporates in “untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary” (Derrida 99).

These non-contemporary characters yearn to straighten things out by means of definitions and identifications. However, despite their attempts to ascertain their presence, they feel that they are “slipping off the map” (78). Whatever they do to gain certainty, it only leads them to passive pusillanimity and teaches them nothing at all. Pure knowledge cannot be attained by tedious efforts to straighten things out. After all, spectres are non-objects that do not lend themselves to knowledge: “this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge” (De rrida 6). Scientific understanding cannot be applied to ghosts.

Even the most quintessential of all distinctions is felt to become de-stabilised. It dawns on them that the border between life and death is not so clear as they would like to think. Something has disappeared in the apparition as reappearance of the departed. The spectre as a non-object, as a non-present presence does not belong to the scope of knowledge. Ghosts require a forgetting without a complete forgetting (Derrida 6). Ros and Guil are subjected to the ungraspable too. This is a constant anxiety that runs throughout the whole play. “Am I dead?” Ros asks (31) and neither of them can give an answer to this question. The disturbance the scene provokes in which they watch their own death sentence is the realisation of their ontological uncertainty. They feel disrupted into an existential disorder; at this very moment they see the frightening gap yawning before their very being. Who is to say for sure that they are really alive? Ros and Guil are determined by this absence, this lack; as all human beings, they are dead in the Lacanian sense, but they refuse to remind themselves of it. However, it is clear that they have recognised themselves — even visually, face to face, as it were — in the play within the play, when two player-spies wear coats identical to theirs. Not capable of dealing with the unbearable thought of being dead, they conjure away these spectres which are an essential part of themselves. Having locked up themselves in vain in the present world of
Tom Stoppard, both characters efface their memory of a past — which is in Shakespeare — and of a future — which is reflected in the play within Stoppard’s play. Thus, a present representation of the future is taking Ros back to the past; in other words, back to the future.

Taking into consideration that the play endows Ros and Guil with the same ontological qualities as the tragedians, if the Player has not ‘really’ died after Guil’s stabbing, how should we interpret the attendants’ awaiting deaths? Is death, as Guil would have it, the final criterion that distinguishes their realness from the artificiality and simulation manifested by the tragedians? Well into the first act, Guil posits the only certainty amidst a world of confusions: “The only beginning is birth and the only end is death — if you can’t count on that, what can you count on?” (28) Until shortly before the end of the play, the courtiers seek to establish a living presence that is unmarked by spectral appearances. Thus, in a final attempt to strictly delineate the border between life and death, Guil stabs the Player, who falls down at his feet. Yet very much to Guil’s surprise the Player again rises up while he is being applauded by the other tragedians; he shows Guil the retractable blade which has done the theatrical trick. His non-death signifies the culmination point of the disruption of Ros and Guil’s perception on the one hand and the players’ on the other. Throughout the play both protagonists have been manoeuvring to establish the frontier between being and non-being. From their perspective the Player is murdered in ‘real life.’ When his death turns out to have been mere play-acting though, their previous argument to distinguish between real and acted death no longer carries any conviction.

GUIL. I’m talking about death – and you’ve never experienced that. And you cannot act it. You die a thousand casual deaths – with none of that intensity which squeezes out life … and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after death – there is no applause – there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s – death – (89)

Jocularly, in his last lines Guil — or rather Stoppard — is challenging the words of Shakespeare’s protagonist by paraphrasing Hamlet’s last words: ‘the rest is silence.’ By putting so much emphasis on the silence and the absence of applause that awaits one after death, we cannot help
but interpret these lines metadramatically and thus have our serious doubts concerning Hamlet’s role, especially in this new light that is cast over the life-death distinction. Within moments, Hamlet will rise up again and be applauded by the audience, just as the Player will and indeed, just as Ros and Guil will. The self-reflexive metadramatic reference emphasises the fictional nature of death as phrased in Guil’s definition, thus sincerely downgrading the assumed consequentiality of his words. Yet the artificiality of death is not only underlined by this ironic wink to Shakespeare’s tragedy; Guil’s pompous outcry also recalls the Player’s paroxysm addressed at Ros and Guil for having abandoned them during their performance, leaving them without an audience. Compare Guil’s line with the Player’s in Act Two:

**Guil.** But no one gets up after death – there is no applause – there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s – death – (89)

**Player.** No one came forward. No one shouted at us. The silence was unbreakable, it imposed itself upon us; it was obscene. We took off our crowns and swords and cloth of gold and moved silent on the road to Elsinore. (46)

This parallel draws Guil’s notion of death fully into the theatrical world. Moreover, if I have previously indicated that the players blend in with Ros and Guil during the spy’s scene, nowhere do they come so close to one another and even seem to merge with each other as in this instance of narrated integration. From the correspondence between both outbursts we might derive, after all, that the shroud, the second-hand clothes to which Guil refers, may have been the “crowns and swords and cloth of gold” worn by the players. Evidently, these parallels convincingly point at Ros and Guil’s true nature; like the troupe, they, too, are players, and despite their attempts to exorcise the spectres of their hauntology, their definition of death as the ultimate negative and absence comes across as shallow and unreliable. To conjure away the spectres of the Other is denoted by Derrida in terms of negativity too: the abandonment of ghosts amounts to “non-being, non-effectivity, non-life” (Derrida 30).

According to the attendants, death — and along with death, the past, history, the future and what cannot be perceived — is denounced as something that cannot possibly belong to our present actuality. Whatever has withered belongs to the past and, as long as it is remembered, to
memory. It bears the traces of the non-present, and manifests itself as an insubstantial flux. Hence, the hauntology of the dead can never find a place in Ros and Guil’s trace-ridden world infatuated with presence. As Jameson explains, “a world cleansed of spectrality is precisely ontology itself, a world of pure presence, of immediate density, of things without a past” (Jameson 102). In Guil’s opinion, death equals absence and disappearance. He wards off the spectres of times past by holding on to the living presence and denying their temporary reappearance. 

It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all – now you see him, now you don’t, that’s the only thing that’s real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back – an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death. (61–62)

Ros and Guil’s effort to define death in terms of absence is a conscious and deliberate choice, but this assertion turns out to be a fallacy just as well. It is a cry of despair. Too much doubt in Guil’s reasoning discloses that he does not believe it himself. Guil very well knows that this is not the way it works. In a panic, they attempt to re-establish their presumed presence and reconfirm their being-there, their being-alive. To stipulate what death is, to mark off the domain of not-being, offers the only way to efface the threatening cross-over they are confronted with. In R&GAD, death operates as a fiction to establish life’s presumed reality.

The above argument is taken up by Ros later on. After having fought the pirates, it appears that Hamlet is gone. Here again Ros and Guil are eager to jump to oversimplified conclusions; the fact that the prince is “not coming back” should account for cast-iron proof that “[h]e’s dead then” (87). Existential fear is at the bottom of this wishful thinking. They still try to convince each other of the interchangeable nature of physical absence and death, but the awareness is growing that their subjective absence and lack have led them not only to their existence but to death. Hamlet’s disappearance is yet another example of how Stoppard undermines Guil’s words. If Hamlet’s disappearance does not necessarily mean that he is dead, as we know from our Shakespearian pre-knowledge, we have every reason to doubt his previous generalisation about the equalisation of disappearance and death.

Guil’s very last line resumes his previous notion of death; before being beheaded, he disappears saying: “Now you see me, now you —”
(91). Since his opinion about death as disappearance and absence has proved him wrong, it appears that Ros and Guil’s departure will not mean the end of the courtiers’ lives. They will of course reappear, re-enter the stage after a short disappearance, turning death into a very relative notion. Once having entered the symbolic order, one cannot leave it.

Moreover, as Richard Corballis argues with regard to Guil’s closing line, Guil’s “phrase itself is a very artificial one, drawn from the parlance of conjurors and magicians” (42). Thus, their deaths are levelled with the illusory games played by the tragedians and Ros and Guil themselves. R&GAD is imbued with magic and trickery; besides Ros’s coin games, the gigantic barrels on the boat in which the players initially hid not only refer to Beckett’s Play and Endgame, but are particularly an enlarged version of the magician’s trick with a number of cups under which a small object may appear or disappear, apparently without lifting them up. After the brawl with the pirates, one barrel is missing, and in addition, Ros and Guil on the one hand and the players on the other appear and climb out of another barrel than the one they had leapt into to hide. These analogies prompt us to regard Guil’s interpretation of death as a kind of magic too, an illusion based on false perception.

Ros and Guil are not unaware of the fact that their search for ontology, including the abandonment of death as complete absence, may be founded on a lie. Indeed, only in this way can we explain why eternity takes such a prominent place in the play. Contrary to most critics’ statements that R&GAD is a play about death, I purport that this is only superficially the case. I do not agree with Jim Hunter who claims that Ros and Guil’s world concept, which is based on a fear of extinction, makes them “entirely modern” (Tom Stoppard 32). Since this fear is subverted by the panic that there might be no end whatsoever, the Renaissance “dread of something after death, the undiscovered country,” as voiced by Hamlet, permeates the play. In this sense too, we see Ros and Guil wander between two eras, spectres disjointed in times that never entirely give them shelter and in which they cannot fully be themselves.

In R&GAD death and life alternately take over from one another in a circular movement. One ontological state retreating in favour of the other recalls the Player’s assertion that every exit leads to an entrance.
Once the cycle has come to its end, it starts again from the same beginning. To the players, every performance night is a new beginning of the same set of actions: “We’d be back where we started — improvising” (16). Because Ros and Guil are ontologically no different from the players, Stoppard’s henchmen belong to the same recurrent world. Maybe their inability to avoid being cast from one stage to another in an eternal movement marks the only certainty in a world of doubt and existential loss, as Guil remarks in his considerations about their plight:

we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there, but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact – that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England. (73; my italics)

The conclusion that the same event happens to Ros and Guil in a never-ending story also allows us to account for some of Guil’s other enunciations that may initially come across as rather odd. But in the light of perpetual repetition, his exclamation that “it has all happened. Hasn’t it?” (78) fits in perfectly with the logic of the stage.

In this sense, their hauntological existence, just like ours as symbolic beings, is never coming to an end, as they are being driven from one signifier to another without ever reaching the terminus of the signified. What keeps Ros and Guil going is their inability to die as a signifier; once integrated in the order of the symbolic there is no possibility for them to transgress the symbolically structured world and again enter the undifferentiated realm of the Lacanian real. They cannot be radically exterminated beyond the law of the signifier. A ‘second death,’ as Lacan calls “death insofar as it is regarded as the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated” (Seminar VII 248), a death that would wipe them out as a signifier, is not within the subject’s reach. They cannot be eradicated from the symbolic order, and although they might do everything themselves to erase their own memory, they cannot be erased from our collective memory. Within the symbolic dimension, Ros and Guil will never die. Precisely their entrapment within the script guarantees that they will live on and on, until they are erased from our collective memory. “Do you know what happens to old actors?” the Player asks Ros. “Nothing. They’re still acting” (84).
Laurens De Vos

Stoppard has understood that one cannot exist without honouring the dead. He turns to a broad literary and pictorial tradition ranging from Shakespeare to Wilde, from Chekhov to Václav Havel, from the Ancient Greeks and Romans to Strindberg, from James Joyce to Tristan Tzara, from Beethoven to Magritte. Writing before the publication of Derrida’s book, Mary Doll notices that Stoppard’s metadrama is haunted by ghosts itself:

plays within plays illustrate political situations; the Czech revolution, with its accompanying censorship of artists like Pavel Kohout, ‘ghost’ every attempt by Tom Stoppard, born in Czechoslovakia, to write in the free world. Both Macbeth and Hamlet have at their dramatic centres a ghost; so does Stoppard have at his centre a ghost – his own dead father and the censored artist from his father-land. While British audiences are well schooled in understanding such rituals as parlor games and tea, these same audiences have no way of dealing with the black holes of totalitarianism. Stoppard brings forth spectres of his ‘checkered’ past (re-presented through Shakespeare) so that British ears may acquire new hear- ing, British eyes deeper seeing. (126)

It goes without saying that Stoppard as a spectral playwright par excel- lence never reaches a conclusion. Freewheeling through an endless range of signifiers, he perpetually postpones the authoritative signified. Unlike his protagonists, he allows his hauntology free entrance; always deferring the ultimate meaning as the truth, he delights in contradicting himself over and over again, as he explicates in one of his best-known inter- views:

there is very often no single, clear statement in my plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel that is the speech to stop it on, that is the last word. (Hudson, Itzin, and Trussler 58–59)

This is a very postmodern stance, yet Stoppard’s relation to postmodernism is a very ambiguous one. If we regard his doubts about the value of truth and his emphasis on the self-conscious artificiality of art and life as postmodernist devices, Stoppard certainly belongs to this generation. Yet his plays suffer from too much intellectual debate and are so ingeniously well-constructed that they defy to be easily subsumed under this label. It is assumed that postmodernism is reflected in the theatre under
the form of ‘performances’ in which narrative and plot yield to a non-narrative assemblage of images. Postmodern performances tend to abandon the script and rely on improvisations based on the company’s collectivity. The author is no longer accepted as the originator of the work, whose play is then translated by the second in line, the director. Instead, a performance grows organically out of the collective’s rehearsals (cf. e.g., Auslander, \textit{From Acting to Performance}; Auslander, \textit{Liveness}; Lehmann). As a result, a play’s contingency as a work in progress conquers the stage and dislodges the written script that advocates the authority of the text in the theatre. Obviously, with his minutely constructed and quite dictatorial play texts which do not leave any space for improvisation, Stoppard finds himself at the other end of postmodern performances.

Consequently, to ask whether Stoppard is a postmodernist playwright is food for much controversy. For instance, Michael Vanden Heuvel discusses Stoppard’s \textit{ambivalent} attitude to postmodernism in his article “Is Postmodernism? Stoppard among/against the Postmoderns” (2001), whereby he counterbalances the pros that might account for the playwright as a postmodernist, with the cons that make him the odd man out. Vanden Heuvel was probably not aware of the fact that he himself bears close resemblance to Ros and Guil, trying to see clear and create order in what has come down to them as a shambles. Clearly, to pin down how much Stoppard is indebted to the ideas of postmodernism testifies to our own desire to determine ontological stability. Even the exploration of which artists have exerted an influence on Stoppard’s writing amounts to an attempt to ward off the ghosts that haunt us. Maybe, therefore, on a metadramatic level \textit{R&GAD} is equally poking fun at the occupation of critics to put interpretations on art and in doing so exorcise its spectres. The audience, just like Ros and Guil, is trying to make sense of what they see in front of them; and what they see is an inheritance that allows them to bear witness to what they are. In this sense, the theatrical experience indeed holds up a mirror to our nature, but it builds this nature too. We are only insofar as we inherit (Derrida 54).
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
“Funny thing, memory, isn’t it?”
Deconstructing Remembered Identities in Michael Frayn’s Donkey’s Years and Copenhagen

In 1992 Jan Assmann speculated that cultural memory would be one of the defining terms in the emerging area of Cultural Studies. Fourteen years later the sheer mass of publications, conferences and research done in the area of memory not only in Cultural Studies points to the importance of the concept in and beyond the Humanities. Cultural memory encompasses individual as well as collective forms of memory, as Mieke Bal has stated: “the term cultural memory signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one” (vii). What collective and individual memories have in common is that they are seen as a prerequisite to collective and individual identities,

1 For a selection see the contributions in the following anthologies: Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer; D’haen; Grabes; Assmann and Harth.
or in a nutshell: No identity without memory. We are what we remember to have been. Nevertheless, the shape of our memory changes through the act of remembering itself as our memory is updated and made sense of in the present.

What I will have a look at is this connection between memory and identity. The protagonists of Michael Frayn’s comedy Donkey’s Years and his acclaimed play Copenhagen will serve as an example for processes of identity that are based on memories of the past but are constructed in the present and projected into the future. While Frayn has always been interested in the problem and paradoxes of memory in his plays as well as novels, memory’s involvement with identity politics takes centre stage in these two texts.

A conversation between David Buckle and Christopher Headingley, two main characters in Donkey’s Years (first performed in 1976 at the Globe Theatre in London), will serve as a starting point for the following discussion of the role of memory in identity construction:

BUCKLE: You think you remember everything. Then when you look you realize there are all sorts of things you’d forgotten.

HEADINGLEY: Funny thing, memory, isn’t it?

BUCKLE: Then, as soon as you see the things you’d forgotten, you realize you remember them after all.

HEADINGLEY: Funny.

BUCKLE: Very funny.

HEADINGLEY: And then again in another way it’s not funny at all.

BUCKLE: No, it’s all perfectly natural.

HEADINGLEY: I think that’s really what’s so funny about it. (Donkey’s Years 86)

In this conversation the central insights of contemporary memory theory can be detected. Firstly, memory is a question not only of remembering but also of forgetting. Secondly, memory is something that takes place in the present. Therefore, Buckle and Headingley do not simply retrieve a ready-made image of the past from storage but they also have to look at themselves now to realise what they are remembering. In that sense, the funny thing about memory is its constructive and therefore

2 For a discussion of the connection between identity and memory see Eakin; Glomb; Neumann.
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fluid and changeable nature. And thirdly, the men not only think about and construct images of the past; they also construct self-images of the past. In that meeting after twenty years of absence at their old college, their reconstructions of their past identities serve to make it possible to talk to each other in the present. Due to what Peter Burke has called the pliancy of memory (291f) and what I have called here the constructive nature of memory, an identity defined as relying on memory is not something that is found, gained and kept but an endless process that includes past, present and future.

Hypothesis

The central concern of my paper is this paradox of memory and identity as two constructive processes that claim to represent a personal self that once existed. While many recent studies have emphasised the necessary connection of past and present in memory and identity, the role of the future has still remained underestimated and underdefined. Analysing the construction and deconstruction of memory and the ensuing identities in Donkey’s Years and Copenhagen, I will try to show why and how not only past and present, but past, present and future are necessary to explore memory as the prerequisite for an identity that is never finished but only exists as a project. In order to do that, I will sum up recent developments in memory theory as well as identity theory before applying my hypothesis to the plays. The theoretical approach is divided into two parts, the first one analysing memory and identity as processes of change in the present, the second one analysing memory and identity as processes directed at the future.

Memory and Identity as Processes of Change in the Present

It has been stressed recently that the old storage-and-retrieval metaphors do not match the memory process. The sociologists Olick and Robbins see memory no longer as “an unchanging vessel for carrying the past into the present; memory is a process, not a thing, and it works differently at different points in time” (122). How and what an individual and a society or culture remember is much more an indicator of how
the present works than what the past was like. Neurologists have emphasised this as well when they distinguish between the actual process of recollection (in German *Erinnerung*) and the stock of memories that provides the material for recollection (in German *Gedächtnis*). Memories can therefore not be true in an extra-textual, objective sense and they tell far more about the present and the current use that individuals or cultures make of memories. Marita Sturken therefore states: “We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present” (2). Or as James Wertsch has summed up, memories are not something we have, but rather something we do (17).

This performative aspect can be found in recent theories of identity as well. After the proclaimed death of the subject and the deconstruction of identity as a stable core most theories are based on the assumption that identity is something we do, not something we have. In order to experience myself as myself, I must remember what I was in the light of what I am now. But at the same moment what I was has already changed and made it impossible to fall back on a stable, preconceived shape. In the sense of Jacques Derrida’s term ‘iterability’ an identity can never be identical in the sense of staying the same. In his essay “Signature Event Context” Derrida describes how in order to have meaning a sign has to have already been understood. It is a repetition. But this repetition frees the sign, or in this case the identity as a sign, from the author’s and the self’s authority. The Latin ‘iter,’ again, has a parallel in the Sanskrit word ‘itara’ meaning ‘other’ (*Margins of Philosophy* 317). Repetition is therefore inseparably linked to alterity. The self is an Other as it tries to stay the same. But if memory and identity become unsuccessful attempts at repeating the past in the present, then the future as that temporal dimension at which memory and identity are directed moves into the centre of attention.

*Memory and Identity as Processes Directed at the Future*

With reference to memory Derrida states: “Memory, as we have seen, consists only in the power of reminding ourselves of the signs of our ideas, or the circumstances which accompanied them […]” (*Margins of
Deconstructing Remembered Identities in Michael Frayn’s Donkey’s Years and Copenhagen

Philosophy 313). If the sign is really subject to what Derrida has termed **différance**, then memory as a sign is never present as it depends on all that it is not in a spatial and temporal sense. This has consequences for identity as well. In the hope of being present in the future I can only go on remembering and go on being absent. In order to have meaning the present of a memory as well as its past are superseded by its future which is only ever a promise of presence. In his *Memoires for Paul de Man* Derrida thinks memory as *avenir* and *futur*, as something to come or something that I will always be waiting for (*restant venir*) (18). Therefore, Derrida no longer speaks of identity but of the “phantasmatic process of identification” which imagines a return to oneself that remains ever in the future (*Monolingualism of the Other* 28).

Recent concepts of identity take deconstruction into account by emphasising identity as inexhaustible potential and virtuality. Past, present and future are encompassed in an identity that is a process rather than a conclusion, a project rather than its outcome, change rather than standstill. Jürgen Straub speaks of identity as aspiration in the sense of being “a notorious project” (280). Zygmunt Bauman speaks of identity as only available in the future tense (19). Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth formulates identity as a potential or an interval that is sequence and palimpsest and that is unique in the sense of a trajectory into the future (411f). And the German philosopher Wilhelm Schmid speaks of identity as a coherence in which the self is a flexible, changing unit of multiple parts (252). Identity becomes a promise for the future which everyone has to keep trying to attain without ever succeeding.

**Working Definition**

I will therefore define identity as a process that is based on the memory of a past coherence, which has to be actualised and reshaped in the present but which only works as an aspiration for the future. Memory and identity are intimately connected and encompass all three temporal dimensions. Identity as a memory of what one has been, is and could be is like tying a knot in one’s handkerchief. It is the attempt to secure now...
that I remember tomorrow to stay what I probably was yesterday. Memory becomes what in psychology is called “prospective memory.” The present functions as a turntable making sure that I will remember in the future what I resolved to remember in the present, which has then already turned into the past.

Michael Frayn’s Donkey’s Years and Remembered Identities

In the application of this working definition to the first play, Donkey’s Years, I will proceed in three steps which map the three temporal dimensions onto three exemplary characters. Identity as memory of the past will be explained by the memory strategies of Christopher Headingley and David Buckle. Identity as the wish for the presence of the past will be illustrated by the character Rosemary Driver, while the character Kenneth Snell serves as an example for identity as an aspiration for the future. It will be shown that in confining themselves to only one temporal dimension all the characters fail in securing their identities by memory.

Identity as Memory of the Past: Christopher Headingley and David Buckle

In Donkey’s Years a situation is depicted in which the interconnection of memory and identity is not only strongly evident; it is also a situation in which identities are put to the test by the conflict between the present and the remembered past. A group of men gathers at their old college for one weekend to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of their degree. Apparently, the old place has not changed, neither has the old porter, the mulberry tree or the river. The men themselves have changed profoundly though. Christopher Headingley and David Buckle, both successful men in their early forties, deal with this by trying to re-inhabit their old identities. This attempt can only succeed if they can leave out

3 For an introduction to prospective memory see Brandimonte, Einstein and McDaniel.
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the present as well as the future and isolate the past in the same way that the weekend at the college is an isolated place in an isolated time frame.

Claiming a total recall, Headingley enters the college, exclaiming: “I haven’t forgotten anything, Mr Birkett. It’s curious. I feel as if I’d never been away” (*Donkey’s Years*, 82). This postulate includes the claim of an unchanged identity. But right at the beginning of the play these claims of a total recall and an unchanged identity are scrutinised:

**BIRKETT:** And you haven’t forgotten the steps, have you, Mr Headingley, sir?
**HEADINGLEY:** I haven’t forgotten anything, Mr Birkett. It’s curious. I feel as if I’d never been away.
**BIRKETT:** That’s what they all say, Mr Headingley.
**HEADINGLEY:** In fact I feel rather – rather moved. Well, I must go and change.

*Headingley exits through the door to G staircase
A crash is heard
BIRKETT:** The step, Mr Headingley, sir, the step! (*Donkey’s Years*, 82)

In contrasting what Headingley says and what he does, his claims of a complete control over the past and an unchanged continuity of the self are unmasked. In admitting that he feels “moved” and adding that he has to go and “change” the failure of this nostalgic look on the past is revealed in a performative contradiction. This is later taken up again:

**BUCKLE:** Oh, Chris hasn’t changed.
**TATE:** No, he hasn’t changed, has he?
**BUCKLE:** So he’s changing now. (*Donkey’s Years*, 98)

David Buckle, a college-friend of Headingley’s, shows the same discrepancy between the claims of continuity and the ensuing contradictions. A dialogue between the two friends not only shows how their memories are heavily intertwined with their past identities but also how difficult it is for them to keep up the illusion of never having changed in the light of their present identities:

**HEADINGLEY:** I don’t really feel that I’ve changed.
**BUCKLE:** No, I don’t feel I have.
**HEADINGLEY:** And yet, in some ways …
**BUCKLE:** Oh, in some ways …
**HEADINGLEY:** In fact, it’s surprising how much one has changed in some ways.
**BUCKLE:** Oh, I’m astonished how much I’ve changed. In some ways. But also, how little.
**HEADINGLEY:** But how funny being back here!
BUCKLE: Isn't it funny?
HEADINGLEY: That's what I can't get over.
BUCKLE: The things you remember and the things you don't. (Donkey's Years 85)

By admitting that they do not remember everything, that they have also forgotten, their evaluations of how much they have or have not changed are undermined. Whether it is true that they have changed very little or very much cannot be decided. Still, the concession that a total recall of the past is impossible is suspended by the return to the college as that place where their remembered identities are centred. “But how funny being back here!” can then be interpreted as Headingley and Buckle’s realisation that it does not really matter whether it is true that they have not changed. What matters is that they are able to assume for one weekend they have not. Their behaviour in the course of the celebration (getting drunk, throwing people into the river, demolishing college buildings, telling dirty jokes, stealing beer from the college buttery) shows how the isolation of the past in the closed-off time and space of the weekend is the only possibility to re-inhabit, however uncomfortably, their remembered identities.4 If we jump to the third act, the fragility of this isolated time-space can be detected in the bodily symptoms of both Buckle and Headingley on the morning after:

BUCKLE: Yes, I feel a bit ...
HEADINGLEY: Yes.
BUCKLE: Nothing serious.
HEADINGLEY: No.
BUCKLE: Just a shade ...

4 In his introduction to Plays One Michael Frayn compares this uncomfortable re-habitation of old selves to the wearing of old clothes: “In Donkey’s Years middle-aged men find themselves confronted by the perceptions they formed of each other – and of themselves – when they were young, and by the styles of being they adopted then to give themselves shape in each other’s eyes, and in their own. In the ensuing years they have all, consciously or unconsciously, slipped out of these shells, and when for one night they try to re-inhabit them the effect is as absurd as wearing outgrown clothes would be.” (xiii). Taking this quotation further one can say that Buckle, Headingley and their old fellow students not only try to wear outgrown clothes, but they try to wear remembered outgrown clothes.
Deconstructing Remembered Identities in Michael Frayn’s *Donkey’s Years* and *Copenhagen*

HEADINGLEY: Exactly.
BUCKLE: But otherwise, fine.
HEADINGLEY: Quite.
BUCKLE: Feel like breakfast?
HEADINGLEY: No.
BUCKLE: No. (*Donkey’s Years* 140)

Their attempts at living in their memories for one weekend are undermined by the change their bodies and minds have undergone in the twenty years that have passed. When reduced to the past, identity and memory fail to provide a shape that can be inhabited because it is too rigid to allow for change. Their hangover is only a symptom for an identity politics that denies the fluidity of what Derrida has called the “phantasmatic process of identification.”

*Identity as the Wish for the Presence of the Past: Rosemary Driver*

Rosemary Driver is the wife of the Master of the college and formerly attended a girl’s grammar school nearby. All the characters in the play claim to remember her from more or less compromising situations. Still, her strategy of identity and memory differs from theirs in that she does not try to live in an isolated past cut off from the present. In marrying a don and staying at the college, she tries to preserve her past identity through her memories, but not as a past, but as a never-ending present. Another character therefore formulates: “And you couldn’t bear the idea of going down and leaving it all. [...] So you ditched Roddy. And you married Harry Driver, and stayed here, and took over the whole college” (*Donkey’s Years* 107). She has become part of the college which is a place where time is stopped or at least slowed down. In the second act, Rosemary goes up to the room of her ex-lover, Roddy Moore, who is tellingly absent at the anniversary, and makes a speech in which this wish to arrest time and change the past into the present becomes obvious: “Look, I’m not crying because of you. I didn’t come to have some terrible nostalgic scene, because I don’t feel like that about it. I never think about the past. I’m far too busy with the present” (122). A few sentences later she contradicts herself by saying: “You may not believe this, but I often think of what happened. I often think about you ...”
In fact, the scene and the speech are nostalgic in the sense that Rosemary tries to go back to an identity she has inhabited when she was young. Nevertheless, what she tries to do is remember that identity now and actualise it by an act of memory that takes place in the same rooms as the remembered scenes. In that sense, she does live in the present, but always with the wish attached that this present might come to resemble the past in the same way as the college still does. Her identity politics are therefore focused on the present as that temporal dimension in which the past has the only chance to stay alive. Like Buckle and Headingley’s, her strategy of combining acts of memory with the construction of an identity in the sense of an arrested, preserved self is therefore impeded by her wish to stop identity from becoming the process of identification that it necessarily must be.

Identity as Aspiration for the Future: Kenneth Snell

Kenneth Snell is the only character in the play who is not fixated on keeping or re-inhabiting his former identity by acts of memory. For a very long time in the play his first name is not mentioned, he is obviously no part of the festival group and he is unknown to most of the other fellow-students. This is due to the fact that he never had a room at the college but was in “lodgings,” as he frequently explains. While people

5 In the term nostalgia the Greek word nostos, ‘return home,’ is combined with algos, ‘pain.’ Rosemary’s wish to return to the home of an identity that was lost with the past is therefore definitely nostalgic as it is fraught with pain and the impossibility of ever really returning to oneself. As the past and the lost self cannot be inhabited anymore, the nostalgic impulse of Rosemary has to confine itself to returning to the place where one’s memories are located. The college therefore becomes what Pierre Nora has termed ‘lieu de mémoire’ and what has been translated as ‘realm of memory.’ With respect to identity, Derrida also combines this wished-for return to oneself with the spatial return home in the sense of nostalgia: “Whatever the story of a return to oneself or to one’s home [chez-soi], into the ‘hut’ [‘case’] of one’s home (chez is the casa), no matter what an odyssey or bildungsroman it might be, in whatever manner one invents the story of a construction of the self, the autos, or the ipse, it is always imagined that the one who writes should know how to say I.” (Monolingualism of the Other 28).
like Buckle or Headingley reminisce happily about the good old times of their student days, he sees his student days as a wasted time: “I wasted my time here! That’s the tragedy. I wasted three years of my life. I just worked, and worked, and cycled back and forth to my lodgings, and worked and drank Néscafe, and worked, and got a second” (Donkey’s Years 144). While the others talk about having girls in at night, painting the college statue and swimming in the river, Snell’s memories contain nothing that is part of the generic memory of a young man at college. For the audience and for the other participants he is a man without a past. He seems to have no children, no wife, no hobbies; the only thing we get to know about him is his profession (ethical pharmaceuticals), which again matches his self-description of his college-days as just work. Finally getting a room in college at the twentieth anniversary and thus taking part in the memory work of Headingley and the others, Snell projects his identity onto memories he is resolved to have in the future. He exclaims: “I wasn’t old enough to be young. But now I could do it! Do you see? Because here I am, doing it! Do you see that? I am making sense, aren’t I? I mean, here I am! Room in College! Girl in all night! No trouble. Easiest thing in the world, now” (144). His application for a mature studentship is really an attempt at “making sense” of a life that has remained a non-entity over most of the play. He constructs an identity on the basis of memories he has not had in the past but which he wants to have in the future. Here, a strong collective component comes into Snell’s vision of his future identity. What he imagines his future to be like is strongly connected with what his culture holds in store as generic student life. The end of Snell’s idea of the mature studentship shows that it is not as simple as that though. Thinking that the others want to prevent him from staying at the college he turns aggressive, is sedated and taken to a mental hospital. This can be read as a consequence of his identity politics. As a person without a past and without a present it is not enough for Snell to construct a future out of the generic, collective memories that a culture places at his disposal. What Snell lacks is his individual interpretation of this stock of memories. His identity is non-existent as his memory is non-existent. The fact that his former lodgings are now a maternity home is indicative of the state of his personality: Like a newborn, he has no past and nearly no present. An identity polit-
ics that is fixated on the future, without a past and a present making sense of it, is therefore no alternative either to Headingley and Buckle’s or Rosemary Driver’s strategies.

Memory in a Timeless Space? Remembered Identities in Copenhagen

While *Donkey’s Years* is positioned in a specific place and follows the linear time span of one weekend, Michael Frayn’s acclaimed play *Copenhagen* has no such temporal or spatial location. In the tradition of the genre of the dialogue of the dead Niels Bohr, Margrethe Bohr and Werner Heisenberg meet in the timeless space of the hereafter to finally answer the question why Heisenberg came to Copenhagen in 1941 and what he and Bohr really talked about. By acts of memory all the characters try to re-establish ‘what really happened’ in the past which they have irrevocably left with death. At the same time, the structure of the play does not point to a specific present or future either. Instead of being a teleological timeline pointing to one direction, *Copenhagen* as a whole is constructed in the form of a circle that always turns back to what has already been said. The circular, bare stage of the New York production in 2000 makes this temporal structure not merely visible but gives the three characters only a small room to move and act in. On the level of dialogue, this becomes obvious by the repetition of the phrases used when yet another version of that day in 1941 is presented in yet another act of memory. Bohr and Margrethe start with phrases like: “Tell us once again. Another draft of the paper. And this time we shall get it right. This time we shall understand” (*Copenhagen* 53). And time and again Heisenberg begins his acts of memory with the question: “Why did I come? And once again I go through that evening in 1941. I crunch over the familiar gravel, and tug the familiar bell-pull” (53).

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6 For a theoretical outline as well as an anthology of exemplary texts from the genre of the dialogue of the dead see Keener.
Memory, Complementarity and Uncertainty

In the course of the play it becomes clear that neither Heisenberg nor Bohr or Margrethe can remember ‘what really happened.’ They are unable to give the remembered past a fixed shape that is not transformed and changed by the next version that is created through their competing memories. As in the splitting of an atom described by Bohr, one memory is split into two, two are split into four and so on:

An ever-widening chain of split nuclei forks through the uranium, doubling and quadrupling in millionths of a second from one generation to the next. First two splits, let’s say for simplicity. Then two squared, two cubed, two to the fourth, two to the fifth, two to the sixth … (Copenhagen 33)

Or in keeping with the theory of complementarity that is used in the play as well: the establishment of the one true version of the past acts like the electron that is wave and particle at the same time. In order to describe that electron two competing versions are needed that exclude each other, or as Bohr states in Act Two: “They’re either one thing or the other. They can’t be both. We have to choose one way of seeing them or the other. But as soon as we do we can’t know everything about them” (69). While complementarity and fission are important for Copenhagen’s form and content, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is most central to the understanding of the whole play in the sense of being a metaphor for processes of memory and the structure of human knowledge in general.7 Even in the seemingly objective, neutral and omniscient realm after death uncertainty remains at the core of things. In his very first utterance of the play, Heisenberg emphasises this intimate connection between memory and uncertainty by remarking that the only two things that the world remembers about him are the uncertainty principle and the mysterious visit to Copenhagen. That these two things are identical becomes clear when he continues:

7 The role of science and the uncertainty principle in Frayn’s play has been discussed widely. See for example Ruddick; Lustig and Sheperd-Barr; Innes; Soto-Morertini; Stewart.
Everyone understands uncertainty. Or thinks he does. No one understands my trip to Copenhagen. Time and time again I've explained it. To Bohr himself, and Margrethe. To interrogators and intelligence officers, to journalists and historians. The more I’ve explained, the deeper the uncertainty has become. Well, I shall be happy to make one more attempt. Now we're all dead and gone. Now no one can be hurt, now no one can be betrayed. (4)

In spite of Heisenberg’s initial optimism the memory of the trip to Copenhagen is itself the most obvious example for uncertainty and emphasises the impossibility of returning to the past in the sense of storage and retrieval. It is therefore no accident that the theory of uncertainty has crossed the border between physics and philosophy while Heisenberg himself has, according to some critics, become “a kind of remote patron saint of postmodernist theses about the impossibility of certain knowledge” (Dasenbrock 223). The fluidity of memory as an insoluble uncertainty is experienced by all the characters in the play. The orderly meaning of the characters’ past dissolves as it turns from a static picture of the past into a present act of memory:

HEISENBERG: September, 1941. For years I had it down in my memory as October.
MARGRETHE: September. The end of September.
BOHR: A curious sort of diary memory is.
HEISENBERG: You open the page, and all the neat headings and tidy jottings dissolve around you.
BOHR: You step through the pages into the months and days themselves.
MARGRETHE: The past becomes the present inside your head. (Copenhagen 6)

In spite of the timeless, circular space in which their memory work takes place, all of the three characters try to move backwards in time by seemingly jumping into the situations of the past themselves, “acting them out” in the present tense” (Stewart 303). Or as Bohr claims in the dialogue quoted above, they try to “step through the pages into the months and days themselves.” A tense change from past to present marks these jumps in time and gives a multidimensional temporal structure to Copenhagen that remains essentially circular. Inside this circle competing linear reconstructions of the past are then presented. Like the fork that appears during the splitting of an atom, the past that is acted out in the present tense multiplies as the memories of the characters multiply. The different versions of the past are overlaid by present acts of memory.
that do not only actualise ‘what really happened’ but give this past an essentially uncertain and fluid shape. In the same way as Bohr’s, Heisenberg’s and Margrethe’s memories exclude each other but are all needed to make the whole truth accessible, the play takes on a circular and a linear form at the same time. Both are examples for Bohr’s theory of complementarity.

**Uncertainty and Remembered Identities Between Past, Present and Future**

Here the future as the third temporal dimension makes its entrance. As the past always needs the present to stay alive through its actualisations, these circular actualisations need the future as that virtual space in which they will be performed. Although *Copenhagen* as a play has an end, it would be easy to imagine Bohr, Heisenberg and Margrethe going on forever with repeating and changing their versions of the past. In the timeless hereafter of death, past, present and future are all crammed into the single moment that is performed on stage. The play therefore ends with the three characters imagining a point in time where the circle stops moving while they themselves do not. Characteristically for the whole play they realise that even at that imagined point there will be no end to uncertainty until the last human being has vanished:

*BOHR*: Before we can lay our hands on anything, our life’s over.
*HEISENBERG*: Before we can glimpse who or what we are, we’re gone and laid to dust.
*BOHR*: Settled among all the dust we raised.
*MARGRETHE*: And sooner or later there will come a time when all our children are laid to dust, and all our children’s children.
*BOHR*: When no more decisions, great or small, are ever made again. When there’s no more uncertainty, because there’s no more knowledge.
*MARGRETHE*: And when all our eyes are closed, when even the ghosts have gone, what will be left of our beloved world? Our ruined and dishonoured and beloved world?
*HEISENBERG*: But in the meanwhile, in this most precious meanwhile, there it is. The trees in Faelled Park. Gammertingen and Biberach and Mindelheim. Our children and our children’s children. Preserved, just possibly, by that one short moment in *Copenhagen*. By some event that will never quite be located or defined. By that final core of uncertainty at the heart of things. (*Copenhagen* 93–94)
The most precious meanwhile that Heisenberg invokes is the timeless as well as multi-temporal space of the play and of human existence. Here the question of identity as a product of constructive processes between past, present and future arises. When Margrethe asks, “[a]nd when all our eyes are closed, when even the ghosts have gone, what will be left of our beloved world?,” she inquires after the role of the human observer who creates the world and himself by observing and remembering what he has observed. Although the three characters are, at first glance, situated in no specific surroundings, they are three very different human beings who encounter themselves and each other in highly individual terms, as David Barnett has pointed out: “The contradiction here is the cleavage between the possibilities of a timeless nowhere and the eminently identifiable human beings that have populated it” (147). In a central statement of the play, Bohr explains why the theory of complementarity and the uncertainty principle put the human being back at the centre of the universe:

It starts with Einstein. He shows that measurement – measurement, on which the whole possibility of science depends – measurement is not an impersonal event that occurs with impartial universality. It’s a human act, carried out from a specific point of view in time and space, from the one particular viewpoint of a possible observer. Then, here in Copenhagen in those three years in the mid-twenties we discover that there is no precisely determinable objective universe. That the universe exists only as a series of approximations. Only within the limits determined by our relationship with it. Only through the understanding lodged inside the human head. (Copenhagen 71–72)

The identity of a human being thus perceived changes from a stable concept to another case of uncertainty. The centre at which man finds himself is decentred before he has even entered it. If the universe exists only as a series of approximations, then the single human being inside this universe is also only a subjective and changeable approximation. What is more, this process of approximation is focused on the past and its memories, necessarily actualised in the present and fundamentally dependent on the future. Identity as approximation must remain a project for the future without ever being able to take on a more solid shape. The image we get of Heisenberg in the course of the play therefore changes from helpful old friend to evil collaborator to selfish show-off to secret resistance fighter to helpless individual who simply wants to
save his family. It is a logical conclusion that this process of identification will continue beyond the limit of Frayn’s text just as the revision of the memories of that day in 1941 will continue. The ongoing discussion among historians and scientists that was triggered by Frayn’s play and which was centred on the question whether Heisenberg was presented too positively is a case in point here.8

In and beyond Copenhagen, the world only takes on a visible shape inside the human head, while that same observation is always already incomplete as it is an ongoing and imprecise process. Thus, Margrethe’s question, “So this man you’ve put at the centre of the universe — is it you, or is it Heisenberg?” and her comment, “If it’s Heisenberg at the centre of the universe, then the one bit of the universe that he can’t see is Heisenberg” (72), link the problem of identity with that of memory and observation. The continuing reworking of the memories of that day in 1941 with its ensuing uncertainty is an ongoing process that maps memory onto the characters that remember. While they turn the past into the present by actualising it, they actualise their selves in different roles as well without being able to get a full view of themselves. Looking at their past through their memories necessarily leaves a blind spot on the identities they are trying to perceive, no matter how long this process extends into the future. This is what Margrethe points out when telling Bohr about Heisenberg: “So it’s no good asking him why he came to Copenhagen in 1941. He doesn’t know!” (72) The endlessness of the processes of memory and identity formation is therefore another case of complementarity and uncertainty. On the one hand, it prevents the characters from finally answering the main question of the play, namely why Heisenberg came to Copenhagen and what was said between him and Bohr. On the other hand, this open process secures the identities of all three characters in the sense of constructing them by acts of observation which are acts of memory at the same time. Their identities therefore have to take on the same unstable shape as their memories, or have no shape at all. They are a circle and a line, they are a past which only lives on in the present, they are a present which needs

8 For an overview of the discussion that followed Copenhagen’s publication and performance see Dasenbrock.
the future. *Copenhagen* stages an uncertainty that crosses from physics to philosophy to what it means to be an individual human being with a merely virtual identity which remains an approximation for the future based on memory. Or as Heisenberg says near the end: “Somewhere at the head of the table, I think, is the real reason I came to Copenhagen. Again I turn to look. … And for a moment I almost see its face. Then next time I look the chair at the head of the table is completely empty. There’s no reason at all” (76–77).

**Conclusion**

It can be summed up that the strategies of memory in both plays are attempts at constructing identities that fail when they aim at a stability that cannot be achieved by remembering. In *Donkey’s Years*, identity is neither a happy recollection of a coherence passed, nor a stable image from the past that still holds true for the present, nor is it only a project for the future without a past or a present. In *Copenhagen*, the ongoing process of memory stretches across past, present and future in a circular time-space that contains multiple layers of timelines as well. The conversation between the three characters with its constant revision of events and identities points to the irreducible uncertainty at the centre of human existence. Both plays focus on memory as a process that is directed at the past, realised in the present and projected into the future. Such a memory serves as one of the focal points for an identity that is defined as a project or a process of identification. The statement “no identity without memory” therefore points to the need to integrate not only past and present, but past, present and future into a structure that is able to encompass identity as a process leading to an aspired but never attained coherence by acts of construction and making sense. As all of Frayn’s characters experience, memory is a funny thing which makes identity a funny thing as well. The challenge they are facing is to cope with these two fluid and potentially frustrating open-ended processes without ceasing to have fun.
Deconstructing Remembered Identities in Michael Frayn’s Donkey’s Years and Copenhagen

Works Cited

**Primary Literature**


**Secondary Literature**


Deconstructing Remembered Identities in Michael Frayn’s Donkey’s Years and Copenhagen


“head green water to sing:”

Minimalism and Indeterminacy in Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life*

The play *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) represents a point of inflection within Martin Crimp’s theatrical production. By introducing instances of concrete poetry and linguistic ready-mades — both minimalist strategies from the second avant-garde in the 1950s — the play redefines the concepts of subject, author and gender, short-circuiting the text and turning it into a space of ‘becoming’ and indeterminacy. Indeed, Crimp detaches himself both from the conventions of realist theatre and versified, poetic drama (which had been the most significant types of theatre in Great Britain up to that moment) and, through ironic distancing, he offers a poetic exercise of meta-commentary and self-reflection.

In the play, a series of characters set to the task of imagining, recreating and describing Anne, a female who, however, never materialises on stage. Indeed, the process of interpretation is always mediated by a series of cultural myths and expectations which render her increasingly opaque and obscure. She is fragmented into many different women, and even into different objects, like a car or an ashtray, proving that the same vocabulary that can be used to describe a woman may serve just as well to describe a car. As the characters put it in the episode “The New Annie:” “We see the new *Anny* snake along between the red-tiled Mediterranean rooftops. […] Fast. […] Sleek. […] Free. […] We now understand that the *Anny* comes with electric windows as standard” (Crimp
Language seems not only to obscure her further, but it also proves uncannily intrusive and enforcing. Both Anne and the characters appear to be no more than vessels for the perpetuation of certain social roles that respond to the interests of post-capitalism and of the powers-that-be.

The play claims that the series of myths and expectations which circulate in contemporary society are shaping a detached and evasive system of communication, and it highlights the violence implicit in the creation of roles and archetypes through discourse. This has consequences both at the level of interpersonal relationships and accounts for larger, foreign policies which overlook human rights and remain caught in stereotyping the other. In the episode “Strangely!” Anne is a Third World woman who wants to cross the border into the United States, and urgently needs to take her child to the airport. She claims that her child is in two bags and her land has been plundered. Yet the guards let the priorities of human rights and humanitarianism slip by their attention and, instead, they discuss her appearance as a “non-wealthy” and a “non-American” immigrant. And, indeed, most strangely, “no one questions why a child should be in two bags” (Crimp 57).

Through the characters’ words, Crimp challenges directors, audience members and readers to experience the existence of subjectivities (that of Anne, but also that of the characters) that may be almost completely mediated by discourses, and which may produce and create, in their turn, fictive and mediated identities, as is continually suggested by Anne never appearing on stage.

The characters’ words, then, make visible the power diagram in which institutions are inserted, unfolding different technologies through discourse, very much in the line of what Foucault theorises in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). Discourses, according to him, are not mere “groupings of signs, of signifying elements which remit to contents or representations, but practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak” (81). Thus, Crimp turns his play into a pastiche that expresses that behind the person of “Anne” that the characters strive to construct there is only an absence, pointing to the identity they describe as a fiction. In the same breath, their discourses are parodied as technologies for the construction of subjects.
Yet even if the play continually challenges its viewers/readers to imagine subjectivities and individuals as dispersed and as essentially constituted by a field of discourses, through the poetic strategies of the linguistic ready-mades and of concrete poetry Martin Crimp re-defines such understanding of the subject, pares it down and gives it new agency, developing an alternative view of subjectivity.

Indeed, the linguistic ready-mades are political interventions of authenticity that break with the characters’ speech and make manifest, and uncover, the power diagram in which institutions are inserted. They cross right through the active consciousness of the characters — who have apparently forgotten the spectator in a conversation seemingly moved by improvisation — as voices directly addressed to it. Indeed, the linguistic ready-mades function as a disruptive device that denounces the process whereby the characters turn the protagonist’s identity into an archetype. On the other hand, the presence of concrete poetry, which takes place in the form of a list of names and things appearing on the margins of about eight pages, represents Crimp’s own experimentation with a different subjectivity that builds itself out of remnants and re-defines itself as hybrid and non-hierarchical. Thus, Crimp delimits and re-envisions the subject as the repository of an essential, albeit minimal, core of ethical values, challenging the main modes of subjectification that the mass media, as well as all those mechanisms geared to create public opinion, generate.

Finally, Crimp also questions the notion of “Author” in its teleological meaning, that is, as the ultimate figure of the creative process to which literary identities, plot and all theatrical instances refer, as their ultimate legitimating voice. The play is structured around the principles of indeterminacy and seemingly casual composition, as Crimp acts more like a ‘listener,’ or even as just one more voice amongst the polyphony of the characters, than as a composer of a discourse of opposition, or the organiser of a plot and character identities. Thus, what in the play are peripheral instances of a different sensibility, must become the structural components of the audience’s subjectivity. The audience must decode these poetic elements and become their recipient, expanding them and activating their validity and necessity. The theatrical event thus be-
comes the first space where this view of the subject is actively put into practice.

For all these reasons, Crimp can be linked to dramatists who also contributed to destabilise the traditional separation between stage and audience, or the fixing of roles in the theatre. The process of implicating the audience that Crimp intends to achieve in his works through the poetics of drama can be linked to a wide spectrum of scenic experiences which range from Samuel Beckett’s pieces of Theatre of the Absurd, to Peter Handke’s „Sprechstücke“. Offending the Audience (1966), for instance, is constituted by Handke’s imprecations upon the audience, foregrounding the conscious and unconscious rules composing the theatrical event. It has been argued that Beckett’s Catastrophe (1984), where a director is designing an image of human suffering, dramatises the director’s, or the playwright’s, authoritarianism. That is, the tyranny that any author exerts on his own creations, “torturing,” as it were, the characters and manipulating them until achieving the desired images and words. John Osborne’s most provocative theatrical exercises, such as A Sense of Detachment (1973), could also be included in this type of scenic experiences, and they all find a contemporary referent in postdramatic plays of scenic poetry such as those of the German playwright Kathrin Röggla. Her play Wir schlafen nicht (2004) is an ironic caricature of savage capitalism, also lacking a conventional plot and characters.

Martin Crimp’s play enters into dialogue with precisely such attempts at destabilising the theatrical event because his theatre deeply questions traditional structures and authorial control. Attempts on Her Life directly avoids this tyranny, proposing an altogether different structure.

*Ready-mades and Diagrams of Power*

In the play, the character of Anne is the object of a whole process of reification on the part of the characters, who intend to reduce her to the state of a myth or media icon. She is an object with no depth, conceived only as a constituent part within a system of simulacra which, in the context of the society of the spectacle, seems to be the only space where one may find something similar to a referent, in order to create a state of
opinion, an ideology, or an identity. Such a society promotes not only an interrelation amongst individuals mediated through simulacra, but also constructs a whole mythology — creating different models of identity and behaviour — which serves to reinforce this type of social relationships. Communication is mediated, mainly, through a series of icons which refer only to themselves, concepts deprived of their interrelation with the social environment which would explain them.

Thus, as the characters express it in “Pornó,” Anne is said to be a porn star who “is young and fit, and happy with her body. [...] How she uses her body is her decision. [...] Porno [...] is actually a way of taking control” (Crimp 66-67). She is also portrayed as a redeeming, Christ-like figure or an NGO activist, or even an inscrutable terrorist who “doesn’t seem to care. She has no conscience. She expresses no remorse. She says, ‘I do not recognise your authority’” (Crimp 37). If this mythologised society intends to define and delimit reality according to its own narratives, through linguistic ready-mades Crimp introduces instances of indeterminacy which denounce society’s attempts at stereotyping, delimiting, and mediatising individuals. These strategies developed in the 1950s avant-garde. At that time, and as a response to the crisis of values following World War II, scenic poets and playwrights (such as Beckett, Artaud, the Living Theatre, etc.) also felt compelled to do away with Aristotelian conventions and to pare down language of everything that had deformed it. Crimp takes strategies of that sensibility in order to respond and offer resistance to his own context of moral deceit and linguistic manipulation in a media-ridden society (an exponent of which is the de-historicised manner in which the images of the 9/11 attacks were exhibited) as well as their consequences. As a strategy of resistance to this context, Crimp also gives priority to the material aspects of the word over its signification, and takes clichés to their limit. This is the same impulse which led those playwrights also to detach themselves from the play’s more usual components of character, plot and psychology.

As opposed to this willingness to reduce life’s authenticity and autonomy, the play’s linguistic ready-mades set life at the same level as art. Crimp’s politics of dignifying life find inspiration in many of the projects which, influenced by the ‘happening,’ intend to extend the field
of art to the point of confusing it with everyday, quotidian experience. In this line, we might mention the Living Theatre, or Joseph Beuys’s theories, synthesised as “every man an artist.”

The ready-made is a de-contextualised object and, as such, it questions the institutional context in which it appears. Duchamp’s ready-mades, such as Fountain (1917), Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy? (1921), and Bicycle Wheel (1913) amongst others, question the museum and artistic context in which they emerged. They could present a urinary which acquired the status of a piece of art just because of the museum context in which it appeared, as in Fountain (1917). They are not finished, complete works, because their condition as such depends both on the process of de-contextualisation and on the process of questioning the new context in which they are exhibited, namely, the museum institution. That is, the type of subjects it constructs through its space and its codes of behaviour; the conduct and expectations that this space generates as it becomes institutionalised. They are, therefore, tied to the interaction which may be established between them and the spectator who witnesses this process of criticism, and who is forced to redefine the interpretation of both the artistic concept and the institution in which it is exhibited. In the same manner, Crimp’s ready-mades question the political and social context in which they originate, and are not finished until the spectator appropriates them and “uses them” as moments of disruption and indeterminacy.

One of the most relevant ready-mades appears in “Pornó,” the penultimate episode and the one to which all others seem to lead. The distortions effected on the integrity of subjects (represented by “Anne”), which have been taking place in each of the episodes, build up to this final event in which a very young woman is forced to read from a script which refers to her porn activity as a valid, even feminist, way of life. The characters find themselves in a TV plateau, where the media technology, applied to translation, will help sell these roles to every corner of the world:

—It’s really important to understand that she is in control.
[translation]
[...]
—Even when it looks violent or dangerous.
[translation]
—She enjoys her work.
[translation]
—She's young and fit and happy with her body.
[translation]
—How she uses her body is her decision.
[translation]
—Porno […] doesn’t stop her from leading a normal life.
[translation]
[…]
—Porno is building up for her the kind of security and independence many women would envy.
[translation] (Crimp 65–67)

In order to call our attention to these discourses as contemporary active modes of subjection, that is, as external, mediated understandings of self and society, Crimp suddenly rips the characters’ discourse apart by taking it to its limits. Indeed, he directly presents us a catalogue of instructions, which indicates these discourses’ “subconscious,” their ultimate intention. Whilst some of the characters continue with the discourses, the others drift apart:

Anne will now demonstrate the crash position […] which you should adopt when instructed by the stewards… […] Head down. […] Knees drawn up. […] If oxygen is required […] oxygen masks will drop down automatically. […] Pull on the mask to start the oxygen. […] Do not smoke while oxygen is in use. […] Please ensure that your seatbelt is fastened […] your table is folded away … and that your seat is in an upright position. […] During the flight […] we will be coming round with a list of duty-free goods. (72–73)

1 Both Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis (2000) and Peter Handke’s Kaspar (1966) take institutional discourses, aimed at the construction of subjects, to their limit, making them appear in their real dimension as formulae and enforcing prescriptions, emphasising their disciplinary nature. Sarah Kane dramatises the influence of those “formulae” in the psyche, as the speaking consciousness portrays the psychological support that such clichés are supposed to offer as madness-inducing (see 233–235). In the same vein, Peter Handke’s Kaspar also portrays language as an arena of power for the control of individuals. Kaspar, an autistic child, is taught language by a series of experts who, afraid that he will discover language’s subversive potential, reduce it to a series of prescriptive catalogues (see, for instance, 83).
The instructions are a parodic correlate of the process of externally imposing an identity; that is, just as the play’s characters fix Anne’s identity, the instructions construct the identity of a passenger-victim-of-a-plane-crash. Both the catalogue and the characters’ fixing of Anne’s identity acquire a highly normative character. It is worth noting that Jean-Pierre Ryngaert and Julie Sermon propose to read this type of communication with the audience, which they see as characterising contemporary theatre altogether, as an attempt to break with representation and illusion in the theatre, which has come to replace conflict and character development. As they express it: “The poetic treatment to which the authors submit the voices of the characters — the enunciation regimes they propose — play the role of a filter that de-naturalises representation”\(^2\) (111).

The ready-made makes the audience experience the various discursive threads in which institutions participate as devices inserted within a diagram of power, appealing to mechanisms of knowledge, and unfolding different technologies for the construction of subjects.\(^3\) These technologies, as can be observed, range from the most apparently harmless ones to instructions of adaptation to nuclear devastation and threat: “head down, knees drawn up, pull on the masks to start the oxygen” (Crimp 72).

This parodic recourse of the ready-made not only allows Crimp to show the strategies of physical and symbolic violence that discourse wields on individuals, but also makes manifest the lack of consistency of its elements. In this sense, this representation is closer to the idea of pastiche in postmodern architecture which, from a patchwork of dis-

\(^2\) Ryngaert and Sermon’s translation from the French is mine.

\(^3\) The ready-mades plunge the spectator in the condition, in Elam’s words, of “undercoding.” This is a condition that remains more or less constant throughout the performance, and indeed, “much of the audience’s pleasure derives from the continual effort to discover the principles at work” (95). The ready-mades encourage the audience to connect apparently opposed contexts and thus, to create new relationships between events or ideas. It is mainly when the audience cannot rationally and discursively decode a communicative act that it has the experience of the poetic, and it is positioned into an appealing ‘strangeness’ from which alternative meanings may be worked out.
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courses, articulates a criticism of their validity, necessity and universality through an ironic distancing. In the same vein, the literary pastiche expresses the fragmentation of the subject that has been created through language into many different layers of subjectification. Therefore, it shows that it is linguistically constituted. Pastiche does not act like a stylistic resource with an intention to transmit or express a specific content. Instead, it expresses the refusal to see in discourse a phenomenon of expression, seeing it rather as field of regularity for various positions of subjectivity.

Martin Crimp’s critique of language also appears to be influenced by specific manifestations in the visual arts where reflection on language has a main role. Crimp himself has stated that he looks for inspiration mainly in experimental arts because in the theatre the conventions of representation are more firmly rooted: “The field of the plastic arts is more experimental [than the field of drama]. In the plastic arts, the idea of the ‘well made’ piece of art has been dead for a long time, whereas theatre is still very socially conservative” (Interview with Author). Crimp asks himself whether this is so because theatre needs a narrative: “are these the conservative demands of theatre?” (ibid.) An artist from the field of the plastic arts who has also explored these concerns is Bruce Nauman. In his video installations, such as for instance “Thank You Thank You” (1992), or “Good Boy Bad Boy” (1985), language is interrogated to its breaking point, as a polite speech act is uttered innumerable times, with increasing ferocity. In both works, there is a dissonance between the meaning of the utterance, apparently neutral, and the different modes of delivery (calm, aggressive, violent, provocative and enforcing). As Emma Dexter explains in Raw Materials, “his texts often break down into a range of linguistic and logical functions, like commands, exhortations, statements, lists, […] instructions, propositions, deductions” (Nauman 20). They demonstrate Nauman’s minimalist approach to language, “his interest in the extreme shifts of meaning that can be achieved by removing one or two words from a given phrase” (Nauman 20). Thus, “Thank You Thank You” transmutes from a polite greeting to an insult and back again. Nauman appears visibly connected to Martin Crimp regarding the interrogation of language, also seeking “the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for
communication — which is the same edge where poetry and art occur” (Nauman 21). Besides contributing to fragmenting the unity of language, the ready-made breaks down the text into a range of linguistic functions (like commands, formulae, catalogues etc.), against which, or in resistance to which, alternative forms of communication can manifest themselves. These crevices that Martin Crimp also tries to open in language make possible the irruption of a poetic field, one which materialises through experiences of concrete poetry.

“The principal speaker is a very young woman” — the Space of Concrete Poetry

In the episode “Untitled, A Hundred Words,” the playwright does not limit himself to deconstructing the characters’ discourses but, through an exercise of concrete poetry, he proposes an alternative horizon of references. The episode offers a list of words/things that appear in the margin of the page. Through this flow of anonymous words Crimp seems to point to an alternative creative dimension of language which is non-attributive and which contrasts with the art critics who try to invalidate Anne’s suicide performances through a prescriptive use of language. As one makes clear: “what we see here are various objects associated with the artist’s attempts to kill herself over the past few months. [...] In addition to the polaroids there are rather unpleasant, I have to say, video recordings of the attempts themselves” (Crimp 45). In contrast, the list appears timidly yet steadily at the margins of about eight pages, juxtaposed to the more central voice of the characters. The marginality of the factor of resistance, appearing at the interstices of others’ totalising, authorial or authoritative discourses, is conveyed by the visual disposition of concrete poetry on the page.

In concrete poetry the attention is turned away from the sign and its signification and re-directed to matter and expression. The poem stops being something symbolic or metaphorical and becomes something literal. In a study on conceptual art of the second avant-garde, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh asserts that “to the degree that the semantic and lexical dimension of the poetry is annihilated, the plasticity and presence of the artefact is paradoxically increased” (81). And he adds: “the purification
of the pictorial or linguistic signifier would in and of itself accomplish an act of resistance against the positivist and instrumental subjection of language to meaning and communication [of information]” (74). Concrete poetry does not answer the question “what does it mean?” but “what happens?” or “what is there?” Language frees itself from pre-established meanings and it becomes an event. The word list, which presents groups of three nouns followed by a verb in the infinitive, suggests a certain cyclical rhythm, a transformation of time into repetition and return. All together, the words seem to work like an uncontrolled mechanism producing liberated expression:

Head
Green
Water
To sing
Death
Long
Ship
To pay
Window friendly
Table
To ask
[etc.] (Crimp 45)

Crimp has argued that he is interested in psychiatric disorders; particularly in “clang disorder,” which is, as he has put it, “when people pick up words by rhyming association” (qtd. in Gallagher 12). Katie Mitchell, who directed his play in 2000 at the Piccolo Theatre in Milan, comments that she wanted her mise-en-scène to transmit this sense of liberation and possibility transmitted by the list of words:

The Untitled (100 Words) scenario draws, in part, on Jung’s list of 100 words. He would say a word, ask his patients to free-associate, timing their responses with a stopwatch […]. This word game revealed the patient’s unconscious. In our production, the list of words was said very quietly by one of the cast. The effect was that this innocent list, when juxtaposed to the noise generated by the critics, had a significant emotional force. (Sierz 199)

In this case, writing functions directly in the real (understanding the real not as a structured reality but as an immediate, rough experience), eliminating the gap that discourse opens between the real and its ab-
straction, or sign. Furthermore, the subjectivity expressed through poetry is de-centralised and not hierarchically organised, since the words reflect a direct and non-mediated expressiveness. Indeed, the infinitive is a response to the semantic properties of gender and number (“she” and “her”) through which Anne is referred throughout. It represents pure activity without the interference of the action’s specific subject, and gender: “part, old, flower, to beat / head green water to sing” (Crimp 47–48). Far from intending to create and fix an identity, poetry here becomes a mechanism of resistance in relation to the enforcing and dominant function that the rest of discursive forms exert throughout the play. In this context, and as its visual disposition also indicates, concrete poetry is the language that transits on the outside of such an assemblage of forces.

In defining women’s notion of temporality, Julia Kristeva argues that cyclical temporality would correspond to a feminine experience of time, as opposed to the traditionally male historical or chronological sense of time. Cyclical time “provides a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from amongst the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilisations” (191). It subverts linear time which, in her words, “is that of language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb + topic-comment; beginning and ending)” (192). This other experience of time is multiple rather than linear and organised. As the play proceeds, and precisely because her own speech is continually delayed, Anne comes to embody the possibility of an alternative subjectivity. It is a subjectivity which, like the scattered words themselves, or the books she is said to have underlined as a girl because “she thought they had,” or had been “taught” they had, “some meaning” (Crimp 79), may create itself anew out of fragments and valuable pieces of information or experience. Furthermore, it conceives itself as multiple and heterogeneous, and as already inserted within a plurality of debates, voices and opinions. Thus, this exercise could be seen as Crimp’s own attempt to imagine Anne’s speech as one that escapes the logocentric, patriarchal logic of mastery and self-aggrandisement.

Yet it must be borne in mind that multiplicity, heterogeneity and liminality, in and of themselves, do not necessarily imply liberation or self-assertion. Crimp presents two extremes of language, refusing to
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... outline any permanent solutions, or to point to a specific course of action. This has led critics to state that he “exposes the perversions of current discourses without being able to point out alternatives” (Zimmermann 123). The play, however, does offer glimpses of a subjectivity structured according to values other than imposition, attempting to produce subjectivity precisely through the disintegration of opposed dualisms and categories. Thus, it is made to occupy a ‘marginal’ position both because it is a factor of resistance and because it perceives itself as already integrated within a plurality of voices and debates.

In A Thousand Plateaus, which is also concerned about finding ways of resistance to disciplinary control of the body and identity, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose the metaphor of ‘becoming woman’ as a way to express resistance to the fabrication of opposable identities. As they put it: “the question is fundamentally that of the body — the body they steal from us in order to fabricate opposable organisms” (276). However, because the young girl has not yet been fixed into a woman, she epitomises in-betweenness and dissolution of dualisms. She is an abstract line, or a line of flight [...] girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes; they produce molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualisms machines they cross right through. (276–277)

Like the metaphor of the young girl, Crimp’s reworking of subjectivity is not something articulated around specific concepts such as historical linearity, gender, sign and discourse. Rather, it circulates, in a non-mediated manner, through life cycles of pure matter and activity. Instead of reifying character, Crimp opts for presenting the immediacy of a biological rhythm.

To conclude, the play’s postmodern devices, such as the flirting with the disappearance of the self-determining subject or its willed self-reflexivity, are ultimately integrated within a pedagogical strategy in which the dramatic form echoes the message that is being conveyed. Thus, Crimp’s use of irony and satire is not meant to postulate moral relativism but, as he himself has expressed, “to imply a moral position, and to distinguish right from wrong” (qtd. in Aragay and Zozaya).
The play pares down and delimits the subject to an assemblage of values that should be implemented through a series of micro-political interventions of authenticity, empathy and unmasking (as shown by the ready-mades), and which may rewrite a particular order of things. On the other hand, his view implies an understanding of subjectivity as a non-hierarchical process of becoming (as suggested by the linguistic extreme of concrete poetry). This proposed subjectivity, then, could be defined as nomadic (Hall 166), that is, as an androgynous, non-hierarchical site of struggle debating and correcting any given political reality.

Through minimalism, Crimp proposes a less mediated drama and, through indeterminacy and by bringing to the theatre the avant-garde notion of “chance,” he definitely attempts a more direct communication between poet and reader, playwright and audience, dispensing with notions of plot and characters and going for the unmediated concept.

Ultimately, this willingness to construct a dramaturgy based on subtraction and immediacy takes the playwright to the extreme of questioning the dogma of author and authority. The fundamental “attempt on her life,” therefore, is not only that of the characters who create the fiction of Anne as they speak, but that of the author him/herself, in his/her position to write about identities. Poetic theatre allows Crimp to deconstruct his own attempt, just like any playwright’s attempt, to be a source of subjectification for his characters.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

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Secondary Literature


Mark Ravenhill’s plays have often been praised for their relentless focus on life as it is. Ironically, however, this life comes across as real precisely because it is presented as surreal or hyper-real: There’s repeated video-watching in *Shopping and Fucking*, CCTV-surveillance in *Handbag*, polaroids in *Some Explicit Polaroids* and constant video-recording in *Faust (Faust Is Dead)*.\(^1\) But how do the characters respond to this kind of real (hyper)reality? After all, it is our reactions to reality, rather than this reality as such, that are primarily reflected by the theatre (Gottlieb 5). It is my contention that the most extremely and desperately real events of Ravenhill’s drama may be read as such reactions to a reality which has removed itself further and further from the characters’ reach. Without exception, Ravenhill’s characters lack sensibility, a deficiency often explicitly acknowledged by themselves: In *Shopping and Fucking*, Mark explains: “I want to find out, want to know if there are any feelings left” (34), and the Chorus in *Faust (Faust Is Dead)* complains: “I don’t feel a thing” (137). This emotional impotence, i.e. the lack of relating to one’s surroundings, comes in different forms, with characters

\(^1\) It is quite significant in this context that, in spite of Max Stafford-Clark’s entreaties to make the play more specific, Ravenhill refused to include any “geographical or historical reference” (Ravenhill 135) in *Shopping and Fucking*, presumably since this would have destroyed the surreal and hyper-real atmosphere of the play.
having given up on reality and life altogether and thus feeling existentially lost, or in the shape of theoretical detachedness and sophistication, as is most notably the case with Alain from Faust.

According to Jean Baudrillard, the postmodern condition manifests itself by a hyper-reality that by and by absorbs and supersedes reality, while this implies less a disappearance of reality as such than the impossibility of differentiating between reality and fiction as reality itself becomes increasingly simulative. With this boom of “simulacra and simulation” which can no longer be traced back to any reality comes nostalgia, the “[e]scalation of the true, of lived experience” (Baudrillard 7). This thesis is also supported by Elaine Scarry, author of The Body in Pain. In order to restore reality, Ravenhill’s characters resort to the most basic unit of human existence: our bodies, as, in times of emotional and ideological crisis, “the sheer material factuality of the human body will be borrowed to lend […] ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” (Body in Pain 14). Since reality has become so difficult to access, experiences situated at what one would consider the opposite ends of the scale of physical sensibility, namely sexual satisfaction and extreme physical pain, are most popular with Ravenhill’s characters. Conventional sex, however, appears to be no reliable a strategy for the real: when Alain sucks off Pete in Faust, the latter has to be informed about his orgasm, which thrills him, albeit not quite for the right reasons: “Really, that is amazing. That is so cool. Because you know something? I didn’t feel a thing” (Faust 115).

Pain, on the other hand, is seen to act as a rather efficient antidote to hyper-reality, granting access to (physical) reality and heightening or intensifying one’s experience of it, and “the preference of the 1990s plays for scenes of bodily suffering” may indeed be traced back to such a “craving for the ‘real’” (Tönnies 65, 66). In this context, it is quite significant that Scarry’s book on The Body in Pain should bear the subtitle The Making and Unmaking of the World, thus acknowledging the intrinsic connection between the experience of pain and our relation to external reality.

Most of Ravenhill’s plays oscillate between simulation and pain in as far as they revolve around their characters’ hyper-real preoccupations and the auto-aggressive strategies they employ against them: “The alternative, one favoured by both Baudrillard and ‘in-yer-face’ drama, are
pain, violence and eventually death” (Pankratz 73). In this paper, I am going to focus on *Shopping and Fucking, Faust* and *The Cut,* Ravenhill’s latest work that saw its world premiere at Donmar Warehouse in February 2006, in order to analyse how physical pain features here as a (dubious) avenue towards ‘the real.’ In a second step, having recourse to Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre and Its Double,* where the term cruelty is used “in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue” (Artaud 80, my emphasis), I shall explore how the fact that those painful realities are mediated by their presentation on stage affects or fails to affect the audience.²

In *Shopping and Fucking,* Gary’s sexual preference consists in being fucked with a knife, and he urges Robbie that what is so far only a story or film in his head be turned into reality: “I thought you were for real. Pretending, isn’t it? Just a story” (*Shopping and Fucking* 85). At this point, Mark takes over and, instead of his tongue, he now uses a knife, to ‘realise’ Gary’s story. Ultimately, however, Gary remains trapped in his fiction; slapping him, Mark has to remind him: “I’m. Not. Your. Dad” (84). Although Gary’s strategy ‘to make it real’ seems rather promising in as far as it combines both the sexual and the painful, thus two-dimensionally stimulating the body, the only thing that is indeed made real is Gary’s pain. The link between the sexual and the painful keeps resurfacing: In *Mother Clap’s Molly House* Tina has her labia pierced, and in *Faust* the chat-room, normally a space for conversing about one’s sexual preferences, now serves as a forum for the display of self-inflicted pain. The motions of sex are thus distortedly mirrored in what Scarry describes as the “rhythmic on-off sensation” of pain, characterized by attributes such as “flickering,” “quivering,” “pulsing” and “throbbing” (*Body in Pain* 7).

The kind of pain we are talking about here is thus rather a unique variety, with three distinct characteristics: in the first place, it is self-inflicted, that is inflicted with the consent of the victim or even by him-/herself. Secondly, it is frequently related to sex. Thirdly and most

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² If Artaud’s modernist theories prove relevant for Ravenhill’s post-modern theatre, this may be interpreted as an indicator of continuity rather than of radical rupture between modernism and postmodernism.
importantly, it is constantly invested with a significance and meaning that points beyond itself, namely towards a reality that is otherwise already considered dead, as pointed out by Alain in *Faust*: “At some point, at a moment at the end of the twentieth century, reality ended. Reality finished and simulation began” (*Faust* 132). Clearly, this play is most theoretically and practically explicit about the implications of hyper-reality and the potential reactions it may trigger:

ALAIN: Reality died. It ended. And we began to live this dream, this lie, this new simulated existence.
PETE: Reality just arrived. (*Faust* 132)

And so it did: through Donny’s suicide in front of their eyes.3 Dan Rebellato is right when he claims that Alain’s discoursing “with the utmost seriousness about the death of reality, while Donny lies at his feet, really dying” unmistakably states the “breathtaking abdication of responsibility that these ideas entail” (Rebellato xv). As Aleks Sierz puts it, since, “[f]or Ravenhill, philosophy’s retreat from social responsibility is deeply reactionary” (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 135), his plays exhibit rather than enforce postmodern ideology, but they exhibit it as a highly influential and dominant ideology the effects of which cannot possibly be overestimated. Postmodern ideology is, by no means, dead, although so far the title *Faust* (*Faust Is Dead*) has always been taken to refer to Alain, “an amalgam of the French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard” (Rebellato xiv). Alain’s moral recklessness in the pursuit of knowledge and experience quite naturally aligns him with the Faust icon, so that the play would signify the death of this type of philosopher by defeating him with his own weaponry — declaring the death of him who had declared the death of history, man and reality. But there is another, more uncanny reading of the title: the mythological Faust turned his back on those arts that were still more or less soundly grounded in real-

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3 Earlier versions of the play showed Donny on a video screen, cutting his jugular, but when the budget was increased and allowed for three actors, Ravenhill immediately decided to get rid of the video mediation and had Donny kill himself *live* on stage (cf. Sierz 137).

4 See Gottlieb for a further account of the irresponsibility of postmodern ideology.
Painfully Shocking – Mark Ravenhill’s Theatre as Out-of-Body-Experience

ity and sold his soul for arriving on another plane of experience by way of magic and the supernatural. It is Donny who inversely mirrors the Faustian project when he sacrifices his life for moving on to a level that would be more real than the life he has experienced so far. After his suicide has taken place, the Chorus informs the audience about Donny’s motivations:

CHORUS: Donny knew. Donny knew what he was gonna do. He told me:
‘I’m heading out now for a real meeting. Had enough of just communicating with all you guys in a virtual kind of way. […] So, I’m gonna meet them. Motel room and I’m gonna make it real. Totally real. I’m gonna go for my jugular.’ And you know something? He made every TV show, every talk show. (Faust 134)

Once again, a desperate attempt to make it real has been doomed to failure: while Donny was successful in bringing about his real death, this death was immediately turned into an event and virtualised via television shows and even a pop song. Ravenhill clearly takes very seriously the irredeemable implications postmodern ideology may have for his characters whose lives are not infrequently ruled by Donny’s motto “you take the pain, you get the gain” (Faust 123).

In Ravenhill’s latest full-length play, the centrality of pain manifests itself even in the title: The Cut is significant in that “cutting is a desperate way of making contact with reality, pain stimulating a body numbed by the delirium of consumer pseudo-choice and mediation on every level” (Rebellato xvi). In the play’s first scene, Paul, a state official, is approached by John who yearns for the cut from which Paul tries to dissuade him by offering such tempting alternatives as prison, army or university. John tries to convince Paul of the cut’s desirability by hypnotising him, but the experiment somehow misfires when, immediately afterwards, Paul gives full vent to his suicidal despair. After a considerable struggle, John finally receives the longed-for cut. The play’s second scene is set in Paul’s dining-room where he listens to his wife’s complaints about their new maid Mina. She also informs him that, encouraged by their son Stephen’s political leanings, she contemplates joining a group against the cut — she appears unaware of her husband’s profession. The scene is loaded with aggression and despair as Paul mourns the lack of physical intimacy and emotional closeness in their marriage. In the final scene, Paul is in prison awaiting judgement, and he refuses to
allow his son Stephen, who has risen to political leadership in the meantime, to put in a good word for him.

Nowhere during the play does it become clear what the cut actually stands for, but one thing remains indisputable: The Cut is an extremely painful procedure, and yet it is something John positively yearns for. Of all reviewers, only Sierz mentions this “inversion of the torturer and victim relationship” (“The Cut”) that, in my opinion, proves to be the central motif of Ravenhill’s work and sets The Cut apart from the type of traditional political drama it supposedly echoes. Once again, the cut as the real thing is opposed to its virtual representations: John keeps comparing the video clips and leaflets he has watched and read to prepare himself for the real setting, stylising it as the major event of his life: “The clips, the books, waiting, waiting, planning, planning. Every moment I ever lived for this moment” (The Cut 21), and he consequently has no tolerance whatsoever for Paul’s efforts to offer alternatives: “Let’s not mess about” (The Cut 9), is what he says when Paul wants to talk, since talking would imply just another virtualisation of what he now hopes to experience for real. It is also quite significant that John’s sanity has been certified: his eagerness to receive painful or even lethal treatment at the hands of someone else thus cannot be argued away by his being out of his mind — he is just as sane as Paul who, in the play’s final scene, equally refuses to have his son put in a good word for him when he is in prison. People want to be cut — even if Susan, Paul’s wife refuses to believe this when her husband tells her so.

As in Ravenhill’s previous plays, the cut, an act of “[e]normous pain — physical for you, spiritual for me” (The Cut 12), as Paul explains to John, is embedded in erotic discourse: In the second scene, Susan tells Paul about her afternoon daydream of him administering the cut while he claims to have had sexual fantasies about her that very afternoon: “I thought about you physically this afternoon” (The Cut 39). Although the play may be criticised as one-dimensional and too overtly symmetrical, with the final scene mirroring the first scene, as Paul acts John’s part of the defiant victim, it centralises and further radicalises Ravenhill’s interest in a kind of pain whose infliction is desired as it is believed to initiate access to another plane of experience and whose discourse is characteristically and uncannily linked up with the sexual.
I shall now turn to the theatrical mediation of physically painful experience that is to provide a breakthrough to the immediately real. Although “bodies on stage will always be bodies and the theatre will always be the theatre,” these “bodies on stage are always already framed as part of the theatrical code” (Pankratz 75). Staged pain is mediated in two ways: first of all, it is merely simulated; even in Thomas Ostermeier’s Berlin production of *Shopping and Fucking* (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 133), where the knife-penetration was not merely hinted at but acted out for a full seven minutes and with lots of blood, no actual physical pain, to be sure, was actually experienced. Secondly, the events that take place between the characters are framed by the stage: they do not happen to us, but in a virtual reality that has been constructed for our view. While these theatrical givens clearly help to enhance the hyper-real preoccupations of Ravenhill’s plays, they seem to prevent spectators from empathising with those characters who submit themselves to pain in order to come closer to ‘the real thing.’ Whereas, according to Elaine Scarry, “‘having pain’ implies certainty, ‘hearing about pain’ may be regarded as the primary image of what it is ‘to have doubt’” (*Body in Pain* 4). As has been pointed out by Bernard Beckerman, it is quite clear that this constant oscillation between performance and presentation is an if not *the* intrinsic characteristic of theatre, but the presentation of pain on stage seems to be particularly problematic since pain, the way it functions in Ravenhill’s plays, relies more than any other emotion on its supposed ‘authenticity.’ As Scarry points out, the sensation of pain is exceptional “by not having an object in the external world,” “it is itself alone” (*Body in Pain* 161, 162), denoting an absolute presence, which is why it cannot easily be objectified.

Aristotle’s theory on the empathy of audiences, namely that a (tragic) play arouses pity and fear with spectators, thereby effecting a catharsis of these very same emotions, does not satisfactorily account for this Ravenhillian variety of pain: the emotion of pity is caused by feeling sorry for a person other than oneself, and fear is provoked by a potential future event one might be subjected to. Both of these audience reactions are therefore by definition triggered by factors that lie outside of the spectator’s self whereas pain is a highly idiosyncratic emotion, characterised by its unsharability. Furthermore, whereas Aristotle wel-
comed the emotional purification he attributed to tragedy, the maintain-
ing of pain as the road towards reality, rather than the liberation from it,
constitutes what is at stake in the drama of Mark Ravenhill. One may
therefore wonder how else empathy can efficiently take place here. “Pain
may provide incontestable ontological proof to the one having that
pain” — but it is next to impossible to communicate, “defying as it does
precise expression and its corresponding sentence in the other”
(Callens 174).

I want to argue that the pain experienced by the characters on stage
resurfaces as the shock experienced by members of the audience. Like
the pain indulged in on stage, this sensation of shock can be said to be
self-inflicted as, in most cases, one may safely assume that spectators
knowingly and voluntarily decide to expose themselves to a play by
Mark Ravenhill, whose plays have, by now, quite a reputation for evok-
ing shock and scandal. Even less well-informed theatre-goers are unlikely
to expect anything comforting or reassuring when going to see a play
called *Shopping and Fucking* or indeed, *The Cut*. Besides, Ravenhill’s
explicitness about pain parallels his explicitness about sex: both are
issues we normally prefer to deal with in private and behind closed
doors, and yet they are both relentlessly exhibited and put on display for
the benefit of the audience. Therefore, as the pain experienced by the
characters on stage often ties in with the sexual, the shock reactions of
audiences witnessing either are also similar. In the words of Pete from
*Faust*, spectators acquiring a ticket for the show “buy so many totally
real experiences” (112). However, while the shock experienced by spec-
tators shares two traits of the characte rs’ pain on stage, in that it can be
said to be self-inflicted as well as closely linked to the shock of sexual
explicitness on stage, the third aspect has not yet been satisfactorily
addressed: How can we experience pain, and the reality it affords, vicari-
ously?

In his analysis of Nixon’s Watergate affair in *Simulacra and Simula-
tion*, Jean Baudrillard insists that “Watergate is not a scandal: this is what
must be said at all cost, for this is what everyone is trying to conceal”
(15). Shock and scandal are necessary for concealing the fact that the
normal state of affairs (here the moral of the practice of capitalism) is
already scandalous in itself. If we transfer this to the enjoyment of
watching Ravenhill’s plays, or even to theatre in general, we might argue that the shock and scandal experienced by spectators when witnessing the painful proceedings on stage permit them to catch a glimpse of the shocking condition of reality as such, whether they are aware of it or not. The spark of the real, however painful, might thus be said to ignite characters and audience alike.

In his *Theatre and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud explicitly recommends “sudden shocks to revive our understanding” (66) as an appropriate means “to make theatre a believable reality inflicting this kind of tangible laceration, contained in all true feeling, on the heart and senses” (65). This theatrical strategy of putting “the mind bodily on the track of something” (70) seems to imply that what takes place on stage may affect the spectator by being immediately re-staged in his or her mind, that is the actors’ physicality is to activate the mind bodily. Referring to sensations of utmost physical pleasure, Elaine Scarry describes those as “moments of overt disembodiment [...] when acute bodily sensations are experienced as something other than one’s own body” (*Body in Pain* 166). Although Scarry explicitly insists on pleasure as being the very opposite of pain, it is nevertheless justifiable to transfer this description to the experience of extreme pain, since, as I have shown, pain is closely connected to (sexual) pleasure in Ravenhill’s theatre. More importantly, however, what Scarry describes here very nearly approaches a characterisation of the sensation of shock: Moments of great danger or extreme pain are typically experienced as if one was seeing oneself from the outside, watching in slow motion how what was happening was not in effect happening to oneself but witnessed as happening to someone else from a point of view located outside of that person, creating a so-called out-of-body-experience. Also, in a state of shock, the experience of pain is deferred and not immediately felt, and it is this deferral of pain which leads Manfred Poser to assume that evolutionary advantages may be at the root of this psychic strategy of dissociation (Poser 35).5

5 By deferring pain, out-of-body-experience differs from the concept of trauma as introduced for example by Christina Wald, who argues that, when faced with a traumatic event, “the subject is unable to grasp it psychically at the moment of occurrence but merely can register it physically” (115). Since it is quite unusual for
I would like to argue that theatre in principle and Ravenhill’s theatre in particular allegorises a state of shock in as far as it realises out-of-body-experience: the spectator’s consciousness is divided between simultaneously witnessing the physical pain of someone outside of him- or herself and immediate identification with that person. Such a view is supported by Poser’s observation that, in situations of great nervous pressure, one experiences oneself as if one was on a stage or in a film (Poser 51). Elaine Scarry seems to share this recognition when she points out that “[a]lthough […] artifice is more modest and fragmentary than imagining, its objects have the immense advantage over imagined objects of being real, and because real, sharable; […] its outcome is for the first time collective” (Body in Pain 171). In this sense then, Ravenhill’s plays or, more specifically, their characters’ “bodies in pain” can be said to be artefacts that the audience may have a share in — via shock.

Ravenhill’s latest play seems to be quite aware of this audience-orientated dimension of staged pain: Apart from being eager to get the feel of reality, there are hints at other motives for wanting to be cut. “To be cut” could also be understood in the sense of “to be on film,” that is to be subjected to pain in public or even by the public, as personified by Paul, a state official. As in Ravenhill’s previous plays, pain serves to establish identity, but it can only do so if it is publicised and exhibited in front of other people, or, indeed, in front of an audience. The audience is thus implicated in the performance. As Sierz puts it: “When taboos are broken in public, the spectators often become complicit witnesses” (In-Yer-Face Theatre 7). Additionally, The Cut appears to be far less insistent on the body as a guarantor of the physically real than Ravenhill’s earlier work. Instead, John’s reasons for his eagerness to receive the cut rather seem to be rooted in a desire for inter-subjectivity:

theatregoers to register physically what is happening on stage, I shall, in the following, continue to focus on the experience of Ravenhill’s theatre as shocking rather than traumatic.

6 Cf. Donny in Faust (Faust Is Dead), who introduces himself with the words “My name is Donny and I cut myself” (129).
PAUL: [...] But you’re keen. Because ...?

JOHN: Because. Because I want to be free. Free of, of, of me. Of all this. I want it to be Cut away. I want to be Cut away from this body. [...] I want to be released. (The Cut 14)

If the major force behind the action of the first scene can be seen in John’s ambition to arrive at another perspective of seeing the world, we might argue that the scene where he hypnotises Paul functions as a play within the play where John endeavours to familiarise Paul with new ways of seeing the world which he believes to be opened up to himself by receiving the cut. In Michael Grandage’s production of the play at Donmar Warehouse, John has Paul take off his glasses, rotates him faster and faster on his swivelling chair and makes quite a show of circling him with his hands up in the air. He succeeds in getting Paul to allow himself to be carried away, but the experiment ultimately fails since Paul has altogether misinterpreted his message. Whereas John meant to celebrate the “darkness” and “void” resulting from the dissolution of the body with incantations such as “Darkness is light. Void is everything. You are truth” (The Cut 18), Paul is merely reminded of his suicidal despair, and thus represents a less serene attitude to what may be read as a postmodern attempt at a dissolution of binaries. He is “twisting everything” (20) John had wanted him to recognise. In spite of John beseeching him “And you have no body. Your body has dissolved. [...] The cage has vanished. And you are free” (17), Paul obviously has not managed to forget his own body and remains trapped in his own perspective. The hypnosis scene can thus be interpreted as a problematisation of theatrical identification in as far as literature (and, we may add, theatre) “takes as its own subject the problem of Imagining Others” (Scarry, “Difficulty” 48, emphasis original). By having Jimmy Akingbola, the black actor playing John, appear barefoot and in an orange jumpsuit reminiscent of Guantanamo prisoners, director Michael Grandage deliberately stresses his physical presence while Paul, dressed in a three-part suit, inspects John and looks him up and down the way a theatregoer might.

The final scene, however, realises Paul’s identification with John: this time, Paul is no longer wearing a suit as is his son Stephen who comes to inspect him in his prison cell, and just as John has been fascinated by the
instruments of the cut, Paul now also wants to “see the blades before [him],” “to Cut out [his rottenness]” (*The Cut* 51). Paul has turned from inspector, observer or even spectator into one inspected and observed. Spectator and cutter can in turn become objects of spectacle and cutting, thus proving false what Paul claimed to be everlasting true in the first scene: “I Cut. You are Cut. […] Nobody’s ever changed that” (15). Grandage’s production unfortunately failed to emphasise this meta-theatrical dimension: the hypnosis scene might have been more effective if it had been addressed not only to Paul, but to the off-stage audience as well, and the staging of the cut itself, apart from being accompanied by red light, was rather unspectacular and failed to make the most of the tension and shock potential that had been built up to that point.

Whereas, in Ravenhill’s earlier plays, the body was essential for its, however subjective, grasp on reality, *The Cut* emphasizes its potential transcendence of physical boundaries, for moving outside and beyond itself — most substantially so when exposed to extreme and violent pain. The experience of pain may tip over into shock, a state where one sees oneself from the outside and where pain is momentarily not registered physically. More than Ravenhill’s previous plays then, *The Cut* seems to acknowledge this hyper-real mediation of shock built into the supposed authenticity of experiencing pain, although, as I have tried to make clear, his theatre in general characteristically and continually oscillates between pain as the powerfully and inherently subjectively ‘real’ and the shock effect that unites it with and, at the same time, distances it from its spectatorship.

As a representative of contemporary drama, Mark Ravenhill most certainly and very obviously engages with postmodern discourses, as can be seen by the preoccupations of his plays with hyper-reality and its potential alternatives, but, quite clearly, none of his plays welcome or celebrate postmodern ideology. The characters who do so initially are always firmly put in their place, as Alain is by Pete in the final scene of *Faust* in the latter’s final judgment on Alain’s unashamedly postmodern philosophy: “But you offer despair, you know that? And it may be true, but it doesn’t get us anywhere” (140). Postmodern despair hardly ever allows for any shared experiences that would still enable human contact
and community. Nevertheless, as Fredric Jameson writes, “we are within the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt” (111). Ravenhill manages to avoid either extreme: Drastically exhibiting his characters’ desperate and painful search for a palpable reality, he exploits theatrical mediation and manages to allow audiences a share in the reality of the characters’ pain — however shockingly.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


Postmodern Theatre in Canada —
the Art of Robert Lepage

Lepage is, without doubt, the leading Canadian theatre-artist — and I use such a broad term deliberately, since he is a theatrical auteur: a director who writes his own scripts, in which he then stars, having also designed the sets and plotted the lighting. In short, if anyone today deserves the label “artist of the theatre”, which Gordon Craig created at the beginning of the 20th century, it is probably Lepage. As well as running his own company in Quebec, he has established a stellar international reputation — almost single-handedly putting Canada on the world theatre map — and he has brought his shows to the Edinburgh Festival, directed for the National Theatre in London and in Paris, as well as creating a completely international piece in Tokyo (where he evolved a show about Hiroshima, Seven Streams of the River Ota) and several of his pieces have toured world wide. Right now for example he is in London, performing a piece originally created for the Hans Christian Andersen two-hundred year celebrations in Copenhagen.

In addition, ranging as it has done, from highly personal one-man “chamber pieces” to mammoth, multi-lingual, epic productions, lasting up to nine hours of performance time, his work is highly unconventional. It is also unconventional stylistically, integrating film with stage action, sometimes combined with puppets, or even robots — and varying between the two extremes of theatrical presentation: from a bare stage to a completely mechanized performance area. At the same time,
within this apparent fragmentation there is a clear personal signature, so that his work is always uniquely identifiable. This absence — or rather deliberate avoidance — of stylistic consistency is itself one of the factors that qualifies Lepage as a postmodernist. But it also links him with the older avant-garde of the twentieth century, leading all the way back to the earlier Modernists.

Indeed, Lepage has frequently been compared with leading avant-garde directors such as Peter Brook and Robert Wilson; and there are certainly parallels. Like Brook, Lepage's aim is to evolve a radically non-traditional form of theatre, and the choreographed mime in one of his recent works, Geometry of Miracles, was explicitly based on “dance-movements” created by Gurgjieff, whom Brook has acknowledged as his spiritual guru. The connections with Wilson are even closer: for instance, Wilson’s theatre was hailed by the Surrealists as fulfilling their ideals, while Lepage specifically claims to be the heir of Surrealism — and particularly of Jean Cocteau, whom he personates in one of his early pieces, Needles and Opium.
When Lepage presents himself as Cocteau, however, he does so in a quasi-reproduction of a famous image of Cocteau, published as the cover of *Life* magazine in 1949. The gesture is a clear homage to an artistic forerunner. But contrasting this 1991 gesture with the original picture shows also the typically postmodern attribute of ‘quoting’ earlier art. Quite obviously, it is not an exact reproduction of the *Life* photo, but an allusion, designed to bring the original to mind, even a parody. Yet how many of the original audience — over 40 years after that photo of Cocteau was published — would have ever seen, or even been aware of the original photo? A contemporary audience in 2004, when asked that question, responded with an overwhelming negative: precisely two out of over seventy people had any recollection of the photo from *Life* — so: a strikingly unusual, but completely obscure quotation. That element of elitist exclusion, or obvious ambiguity, which can be perhaps associated equally with both the Modernists and the Postmodernists, is standard in Lepage’s work.
Christopher Innes

Lepage, of course, is a younger generation than either Peter Brook or Robert Wilson; and this is something that in a sense might be seen as symbolizing Canada. Not only because in theatrical terms Canada is an extremely young country, but also because drama written by Canadians is itself a fairly recent phenomenon. It was only in the 1960s that a body of Canadian playwrights emerged. Most observers link this with the Centennial of Confederation in 1967 — and Lepage, just 10 years old at the time, was very much a child of the Sixties. He is also characteristically Canadian in other ways. For example, Canada is (notoriously) both a bilingual country and geographically spread out. So one of Lepage’s early pieces (in 1989) was a production of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliette — staged in the middle of the Trans-Canada highway (one stretch of the road was closed for the performance) with the actors using cars and trucks as (moving) platforms. And in this geographically extended production he represented the two cultures of Canada by having the Montagues speak their lines in English, while all the text for the Capulets was in French, so that the conflict and resulting deaths of Shakespeare’s lovers graphically embodied the tensions between Quebec and the rest of the country. Canada is also very much an immigrant country, with multiple ethnic minorities forming a cultural mosaic; and some of Lepage’s shows have addressed this directly: notably The Dragons’ Trilogy (developed between 1985 and 1990, and restaged in a touring version that reached London in 2006), which presented the experience of Chinese immigrants and their changing fortunes over two centuries. Similarly, his 1988 Tectonic Plates focused on cultural shifts and the social clashes produced by migrating populations.

Canada is also a highly technologized society, with a large film industry (sometimes called “Hollywood North” because of all the times Vancouver or Toronto double in American films for Chicago or New York — much to the amusement of Canadian movie-goers, who recognize their own neighbourhoods in scenes set in Central Park). And Lepage’s trademark is the use of highly contemporary, cutting-edge technology in his performances. Indeed Lepage is one of the media generation living in a postmodern age of rootless movement; and his characteristic works
display a radically non-linear structure. So, the first scene of Lepage’s “Itinerary” in his one-man piece, Vinci, is titled “Decollage” (in French: point of departure, but also colloquially “coming unstuck”); and the “journeys” his audiences undertake in his shows are multi-media montages — as with his production of Faust, where the divisions of the stage were designed to mirror the successive frames of a film-strip. In this piece, as in his other work, the action is aligned with cinematic principles, specifically in order to capture a contemporary mind-set.

Perhaps the most striking quality of contemporary life is its rapidity: the sheer pace of cultural and scientific change, transcontinental travel and instantaneous communication. And high-speed movement is a central image in several Lepage pieces. Airplane flights are physically evoked in The Dragons’ Trilogy and Vinci as well as in Needles and Opium. Sometimes this representation is graphically literal, in a deliberate use of simple cliché. As in Needles and Opium where Lepage, representing Cocteau flying across the Atlantic in one of those turbo prop planes of the 1940s, appears suspended in mid-air and backed by a whirling airplane propeller. Other forms of transport include the cars and Trans-Canada highway in his Romeo and Juliette; railway trains (in the form of miniature models, or created out of the actors’ bodies) in The Dragons’ Trilogy, Tectonic Plates, and Vinci — which also included the image of Lepage in the sort of wings envisaged by that Renaissance superman, Leonardo da Vinci, soaring upwards in a graphic suggestion of transcendence. In fact a road-map provided the structure for his first piece, Circulations, in 1984. For Lepage, movement is both an action and a metaphor — but the geography in his pieces is psychological; and each journey through space is also simultaneously a move through time (decades and generations in The Dragons’ Trilogy and Seven Streams of the River Ota, centuries and continents in Tectonic Plates).

At times this psychological focus becomes programmatic, as with Lepage’s direct dramatization of the subconscious in his production of two short operas: one by Bartok (Blue Beard’s Castle) and the other by Schönberg (Erwartung — Hope). Lepage’s production emphasized the connection with Sigmund Freud, whose first psychological studies coincided with the original performances of these two operas. So he described his aim in Schönberg’s Erwartung as “trying to treat [the piece]
in a [...] hyper-realistic way, trying to get inside the woman’s id, as if it were a close-up of what’s inside the singer” (Carson 131). It is worth noting that this was the first-ever proper staging of the Schönberg opera. Up to then it had only been presented as a concert piece, because it’s a solo for soprano — no other singers; and no action since it all takes place entirely in the imagination of a lonely woman longing for a lover who never comes to her. But Lepage filled the stage with movement, expressing this theme in striking symbolism where naked men crawled out of solid walls, the (totally silent) psychiatrist from time to time swivelled his chair to sit at 90 degrees to the vertical, and the woman, presented as a mad Ophelia figure in a straitjacket, rolled down the sharply sloping stage. But more usually for Lepage this subconscious level is the revelation of autobiographical resonance in exploring a broad cultural context. (The title of Lepage’s award-winning 1995 film, Confessional, could also be applied to his theatre.)

![Image of Erwartung performance](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig. 3: Erwartung**: Canadian Opera Company, 1992. Design Michael Levine
Throughout his career, Lepage has been consciously attempting to re-shape the whole theatrical experience; and on the surface his work presents an audio-visual collage of apparently disconnected images, which deconstructs conventional representations of reality: a deconstructionism that aligns his approach with literary postmodernism. At the same time on a deeper level, his aim has been to reintegrate the fragmented experience of modernist cultural dislocation into new forms of meaning.

One of the clearest examples is his one-man show, *Needles and Opium*, which he first performed in 1991 — then developed and re-staged in 1993, and again in 1995. The script of *Needles and Opium*, written by Lepage himself, sets up parallels between drug-addiction, psychological obsession and art. The figures of the American jazz musician Miles Davis and the French Surrealist poet Jean Cocteau are envisaged at a moment in 1949 when each visited the other’s country. These artistic icons are linked in the mind of a Francophone North-American in the present (forty years later) alone in a Paris hotel room and making frantic transatlantic telephone calls to an estranged lover. Placing the American trumpeter and the French poet together is an image of disjunction and displacement, because they never actually met each other historically in real life. And this sense of separation — of things falling apart — is intensified by the modern-day figure of the young Quebecker who literally cannot connect at all.

Miles Davis was on his way to Paris, where he fell hopelessly in love with the actress Juliette Greco and then spiralled into self-destructive heroin abuse. At exactly the same time Cocteau was flying to New York, high on opium and mourning the death of his lover (the novelist Raymond Radiguet) while writing *Lettre aux Americains*. Each is moving in the opposite direction — while Lepage’s alter-ego (named Robert, which of course is Lepage’s own name) is cut off in his hotel room, and taking cocaine as well as suffering from the disorienting effects of hypnosis therapy.

Yet underlying this geographical and psychological fragmentation is a net of coincidental correspondences. Cocteau made a film with Juliette Greco immediately after her relationship with Miles Davis broke up;
both Cocteau and Davis were high on derivatives of the same drug — as is the modern-day Robert. In addition the art of both Cocteau and Miles Davis changed in response to meeting an alien society for the first time; while their music and poetry are integrated in the cultural context of the present. As Lepage has said: “It’s important to see all these old European surrealist roots and newer things like jazz and black culture that’s actually embedded in everything [now]” (cit. Wolf). As we have seen, the homage to Cocteau is clear, with Lepage identifying with and acting the part of the French Surrealist. In one striking sequence Lepage, suspended on wires that allow him to summersault in midair, is placed against a filmed background of the windows and fire-escapes of a New York apartment building, while the camera pans upwards, then plays in quick reverse. This gives a completely convincing illusion of Lepage’s figure ascending like a human balloon to the top of the Manhattan skyscrapers, then tumbling back down to the bottom, transforming the background into symbols of Cocteau’s effortless transcendence — an acrobat of the soul indeed — then into the fall of Icarus (tumbling from the heavens back to the earth like the mythological Greek who made himself wings and flew so close to the sun that the wax holding on the feathers all melted): one of Lepage’s recurring images. By contrast, Miles Davis, who is central to the whole story, in fact never physically appears. Instead, the action is integrated with the musical score; and the sound of a blues trumpet substitutes for the character of the jazz musician himself.

Since today’s society has a film education, Lepage insists theatre must “use the capacity of an audience to read things in fast-forward, jump cuts […]. People have a new language, and it’s not all linear” (cit. Ouzounian). And another aspect of Lepage’s postmodernist structure: the use of cross-media intertextuality. In fact, a great deal of Lepage’s work is intertextual — including his most recent piece, The Andersen Project, which integrates Hans Christian Andersen’s trip to the 1867 Paris World’s Fair, with his fairytale of “The Dryad.” This tells the troubling story of a tree spirit’s seduction by the excitement of the Fair,
her wish to experience “Human life, human happiness [...] [if only] the one night” (Andersen), and her fatal search for fulfilment in Paris. It was written during Andersen’s visit there. So the biography and the fairytale intersect in Lepage’s text — quoted rather than performed as a consecutive whole — because Lepage’s central figure is a Canadian writer in Paris exactly a century later, in 1967. Like Lepage himself (and very similarly to the Lepage character in Needles and Opium), this young author is from Quebec and has been commissioned by the Opera Garnier to adapt one of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales into a musical for children; and he imagines himself as the famous author whose work he is borrowing.

But Lepage plays an aged and openly fake version of the author: as photographs of him show, even as late as 1869 — two years after his trip to Paris and just six years before his early death —, the real Hans Christian Andersen was a dapper figure. Lepage presents him as a shaggy-haired ghost, who has survived long beyond the grave, living on through his celebrity. And there is one moment in the show that captures the complexity of these multiple levels: At the end, just before the whole cinematic scene (and the Paris Opera which it reproduces), Lepage, as his modern character, appears on the stage — defined very simply by a row of footlights — facing the magnified projection of Lepage’s face with the make up and wig of his Hans Christian Andersen character, superimposed in green on the rows of balconies and neo-classical pillars of the auditorium in the Paris Opera, where Andersen is taking his bow before his cheering contemporaries and posterity. It offers a striking image of multi-media inter-textuality, and the way Lepage uses this to highlight the element of performance itself through metatheatre.

The Andersen Project was commissioned as part of the Hans Christian Andersen Festival in a Danish national celebration; and this was deliberately reflected in the piece, making it metatheatrical in theme as well as form. In addition to some 100 shows elsewhere across Denmark, specially created for this Festival, there were 26 major new theatre pieces mounted in Copenhagen by both Danish theatres and invited international stars, such as Lepage. Almost all of the Danish contributions staged in Copenhagen used multimedia technology — maybe reflecting
Fig. 4: Lepage dressing as Hans Christian Andersen: Copenhagen, 2005.
the influence of Lepage, whose epic *Seven Streams of the River Ota* and one-man show *The Far Side of the Moon* had both been recently seen in Copenhagen — and like Lepage, a number of shows in the Festival (fuelled by a controversial new biography: the revisionist *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller* by Jackie Wullschlager) focused on Andersen’s ambiguous sexuality and on the darker side of his fairytales.

But Lepage’s piece also had a public side: depicting the whole international arts bureaucracy, in a farcical and very pointed satiric send-up of not only the nepotistic EU co-production network, but also of the H.C. Andersen Festival and Fund — the very organization hosting and subsidizing Lepage’s performance. In addition, since Lepage already knew that after Copenhagen the show would be going on to tour Paris and London, he included pointed references to French workers continually going on strike, while the focus of his satire is the figure of a would-be director general of the Opéra Bastille — a man concerned only with raising cash from the EU, and not with art at all, whose moral/artistic status is symbolically represented by his self-destructive addiction to pornography. This is given a careful naturalistic rationale in terms of the storyline: having borrowed a friend’s apartment in Paris, the Quebec artist discovers it has peepshow cubicles in the basement; and coming to tell him that there will be no money for his project, the director (played in a particularly oily and sanctimonious way by Lepage) gets sucked in, spending more and more time literally (as the audience are shown) jerking off until, as his cell phone conversations reveal, his wife leaves him and his personal world falls apart. On one level the symbolism is crudely blatant: as with the “Red Light district” being referenced by the red light that casts a baleful glow over this subterranean sleaze, underlined by the cliché that this “hell” is underground. But beneath this overtly over-obvious satire we are also being subliminally reminded that there are many levels of performance, with an unbroken continuum running from the “high art” of opera — prostituted by its commercial, and indeed by its cultural context — all the way down to strip show porno clips.

1 Indeed, in place of a standard review of the piece, one Danish newspaper complained that Lepage was hypocritically biting the hand that subsidized his work (see Christensen).
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As Lepage remarked: “It didn’t help that *The Andersen Project* also satirises the world of international co-productions — the very people I collaborate with.”2 Still, most of the reviews had high praise for Lepage’s “breathtaking and big chaotic play” (Rottsten) — appreciating his delightful ironic self-reference” in which “each story grows out of the other, like a Chinese box, where all parts mirrors sides of H. C. Andersen’s life and authorship” (Wern).3 Indeed, like much of Lepage’s earlier work, *The Andersen Project* is multi-layered, reflecting what he sees as the contemporary mentality produced by today’s video and television culture in the way different stories are inter-cut in a non-linear sequence. So, here are three distinct planes of action, all of which mirror each other.

1. On the literary level Lepage gives us a literal reading of a well-known Andersen fairytale: “The Dryad” — a creature of nature who gets displaced to Paris during the World Exposition of 1867, and attracted by the bright lights, sacrifices her life for just one day as a woman viewing the marvels on display. There is also a second tale — “The Shadow”: a sinister, nightmarish fable of a man whose own shadow takes over and eventually kills him — which emerges as a subtext to all strands of the story. The Dryad (who also appears on stage, played in a cross-dressed role by Lepage, wearing the gown that represents Jenny Lind) is associated with her creator, Hans Christian Andersen, who wrote the story in response to his own visit to the Exposition — while as Lepage has pointed out, “Like Freud and Jung before their time,” “The Shadow” “suggests that each human being has a shadowy part that will, if you let it, destroy you;” and this is reflected through the contemporary figure of the Parisian opera manager whose addiction to pornography “eventually eats him up” (Gardner).

2. On a rather different literary level — in the original Danish staging at least, though this was changed in at least some subsequent versions — as one Danish review complained the action was interrupted by a “museum-exhibition reading of the Andersen fairytale ‘The Dryad’ from

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3 All Danish research and translations from Danish are by Brigitte Bogar (Copenhagen University).
1868 and a case-recorded voice about Andersen’s sexuality, arranged for the striking voice Ulla Henningsen [a Danish singer and actress]” (Christensen).

3. On the historical level the show presents Andersen’s trip to Paris in 1867 — where he visited brothels (always as an observer, never as a sexual participant) — and his passion for the famous Swedish singer and dancer Jenny Lind whom he met in 1843. However, despite Andersen’s obsessive pursuit, she never returned his love, and their relationship was never consummated.

4. On the contemporary level we have the story of a Quebecois playwright and popular musician (very much like Lepage himself) here named (biliguously to mirror the Canadian context) Fredéric Watson, brought over to France by the wheeler-dealer manager to create a light operetta for children based (like this show itself) on “The Dryad.” He gets sent to Copenhagen to try and sell the project to the Royal Theatre board, then fired when they turn it down. In repayment for borrowing the apartment, he has agreed to look after his friend’s dog. He feels compelled to take it to a canine psychologist in an intensely comic scene, when the dog reveals itself to be uncontrollably sexually incontinent.

Lepage of course, in a magical display of acting, plays all the characters himself: the artist from Quebec, the Opera manager and the Moroccan immigrant who has to clean up the mess left in the porno booths, Hans Christian Andersen, plus the Dryad. And when he costumes himself as Andersen, taking the 19th Century uniform of top-hat, cravat and tailcoat from an old traveling trunk — plus a length of rope, which Andersen was known to carry for fear of fire — the journeys between Copenhagen and Paris seem also to be a trip through time. Of course the single figure of Lepage automatically creates a sense of correspondence between all these figures — with one critic commenting that “there is more Lepage than Andersen in the narcissistic story” (Christensen). But on a deeper level what Lepage focuses on is deeply personal: the relationship between sexual fantasy and the creative imagination. This has been a constant theme in almost all his work, and can only be given authenticity by this kind of autobiographical involvement with his characters, which also recurs in all his one-man shows.
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The Andersen Project is thematically more complex because of the greater historical distance between the modern Quebecois and the artistic icon from the past. As Lepage put it in a post-show interview at the Barbican in London: “The 19th century feared imagination, masturbation was forbidden, sexuality a taboo […]. It’s not a bad thing to be obsessed with sex, it’s very creative.” And all the figures Lepage personates either are forced or choose to sublimate their desires; not a single one has their passion returned. Only (as Lepage’s self-immolating writer laments at the end), only the animals have children — and therefore a successful sex-life, despite the efforts of their masters to curb their insatiable desires (and Lepage being pulled around by an imaginary dog on the end of a leash is one of the most comic scenes in the piece). But then, dogs are not known for creating art.

This focus on sex and imagination is not simply intended to provide an insight into Andersen, even though the whole Festival was a celebration of his life and work. (As Lepage discovered, Andersen’s journals contain special Greek symbols indicating the frequency of his masturbation, which are scattered liberally through the entries, sometimes even in the middle of a word). But however relevant to his creativity Andersen’s problematic and sterile sexuality may be, to Lepage this is also what makes him so relevant to today: “Everything today seems to get told through sex. You sell a car using nude women. Personal relations and business is set through the pattern of seduction. It seems like the world is created to oblige the need for sex, even though a lot of people end up with lonely masturbation.” And this international — as well as inter-temporal — perspective can be traced back to the 1867 Paris World’s Fair: the first international industrial display of its kind, which represents not only the wider European context but also the beginnings of industrial and economic globalization. And seeing Hans Christian Andersen in such a context ruptures the tie between Andersen as an icon of

6 While the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London was over a decade earlier (in 1851), it had showcased only Britain and the colonies of the British Empire.
Danish culture (which the popularity of his tales has made him into) and a way of promoting Denmark as a nation-state (which the bi-centennial Festival was designed to celebrate). A sign of which is the extensive international touring of *The Andersen Project* after its obligatory performance in Copenhagen: not only Paris and London; but Madrid and New York to come.

At the same time Lepage, who comes from Quebec (still only a province within Canada), can identify with Andersen, coming from the even smaller country of Denmark — as he has commented: “A lot of artists in the 19th century felt that they had to travel outside their own country to be recognized [like Andersen going to Paris][...]. If you are a Quebecois artist, as I am, you feel the same impulse. Even an English-Canadian feels he has to be approved by London, Paris or New York” (cit. Gardner). And Lepage’s characteristic doubling — which weaves together the figure of Andersen, in Paris in 1867, and the figure of a young Quebecois writer, also in Paris over a century later, who is a clear projection of Lepage himself — gives the whole piece a strong autobiographical emphasis. In fact, Lepage identifies with Andersen on all sorts of levels. As he has commented: “It’s no coincidence that it was Andersen who wrote “The Ugly Duckling”, a metaphor for the awkwardness of childhood and the blossoming of adulthood. I can identify with this, too: where Andersen was tall and ungainly, I had alopecia [total hair loss]” (cit. Gardner). And his character in the play, Watson, is equally an outsider, as an albino. This autobiographical refraction also qualifies as a postmodern quality; and the self-referential aspect carries over into Lepage’s whole oeuvre, being underlined by the way *The Andersen Project* directly echoes *Needles and Opium* from the beginning of his career.

Lepage’s progress has been an on-going search for the kinds of meaning that will both reflect and express contemporary consciousness. And a central aspect of this is the deliberately unfixed quality of his work: performance as process. Only two of his texts have been published; stage photos are (generally, at least) restricted; and each theatre-piece exists in a state of constant evolution and re-evaluation. *The Dragons’ Trilogy*
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expanded from a 90-minute performance in 1985, to a 3-hour version in 1986, ending up as a 6-hour piece in 1987, then reverting to a 2 hour touring version (performed everywhere from Bergen to Berkeley and Dublin to Tokyo) between 2000 and 2005. There are two completely distinct scripts for both Vinci and three for Needles and Opium. With major changes in the cast as well as the cultural context for its three separate productions, performances of Tectonic Plates altered radically from Montreal to New York to Glasgow, mirroring the content of the show, which Lepage summed up as being “about expanding and contracting.” The seven-hour (but still incomplete) Seven Streams of the River Ota is explicitly labelled “a work in progress” (cit. Gregson 11, see Lepage iv), even though now published. And it is this quite deliberate and conscious choice — emphasizing transience and change — that perhaps more than anything else marks Lepage as being on the cutting edge, post-postmodern, maybe.

At the same time, as we have seen, there are repetitive echoes throughout Lepage’s work. Linda Hutcheon of course, in her book on The Politics of Postmodernism, defined postmodernism in terms of irony:

Irony makes these intertextual references into something more than simply academic play or some infinite regress into textuality: what is called to our attention is the entire representational process […] and the impossibility of finding any totalizing model to resolve the resulting postmodern contradictions. (95)

And one could describe Lepage’s work in much the same way. In his separate pieces, Lepage’s intertextuality and atomized filmic structures highlight the form (the staging itself), as well as the way Lepage always avoids the creation of a fixed artistic product signalling in a very direct challenge to any sort of totalizing resolution. At the same time the juxtapositioning of one piece against an earlier piece — in terms of imagery repeated with variation, structural parallels, echoes in characterisation and story-line — forms a series of ironic contrasts on a macro level.

But there are other criteria for postmodernism in addition to ironic resonances. The dominant subject of Lepage’s work has been art itself, which corresponds to the self-reflexivity that is one of the defining marks of postmodernism. But Lepage has turned this into a continual interrogation of artistic form and function. From his earliest one-man show, Vinci, where the actor announces that “the plot follows the cre-
ative evolution of a visual artist” and the slogan of “Art is a Vehicle” (cit. Hunt 106)\(^7\) appears as a toy train circles the screen, to the seven distinct styles of theatre (including Brecht and the Wooster Group, as well as Feydeau-style farce and Naturalism) in which *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* is acted out, the focus is on defining art and exploring the way performance communicates, sometimes to the point of blatant exclusivity. For example: one scene from *Seven Streams* is set in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt — but rather than concentrating on the Holocaust, we are shown a performance by a fairground magician imprisoned in the death-camp, who saves the little girl crouched in a box behind him (appearing elsewhere in the piece as the photographer of contemporary Hiroshima) through sheer sleight of hand that allows her to magically escape the notice of the guards.

Similarly in *Vinci*, the Narrator (played, as with all the other characters in the piece, by Lepage) introduces himself as a constructed character “played by an immensely talented actor” — and what he states may also have an echo of the death camps, in the trainloads of victims transported across Europe; but here the image is transposed into a purely intellectual key: “At the outset, the cars of a sentence, like those of a train, are empty. They must be loaded with meaning” (Hunt 106). Lepage/the Narrator goes on to compare this type of communication to the sub-titles of a silent film; and he concludes that since “art also serves the function of casting light on the chaos of our society, it is to a certain extent a SUB-TITLE” (Hunt 107). This obliqueness — and the mixing of media, inserting written text into visual action, as well as using a technique that calls attention to style, in this case by its anachronism — is not only typically postmodern, it is also characteristic of Lepage’s work. And his most recent project, in connection with a Canadian scientist (John Mighton, who is also a prize winning playwright) is dealing with string theory and contemporary physics: moving the goal-posts again.

\(^7\) The text of *Vinci* remains unpublished.
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Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
Fulfillment comes not in the promised pleasure of orgasm, but rather through the relay of continuous consumption and display of the sexualized characteristics of commodities — a flaccid dispersion, already an unfulfilled expectation, resulting in frustration and the eternal need for more. (Lowe 134)

I’m not interested in philosophy. Just tell me how it ends. (Jenkin, *Dark Ride* 120)

Len Jenkin’s 1986 *A Country Doctor* is not a straightforward dramatic adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *Ein Landarzt*. Rather, it is a contextualization of it in a postmodern landscape. Instead of the desolate, depopulated waste that the Landarzt finds himself traversing at the end of his tale, Jenkin’s country doctor’s story unfolds in a crowded physician’s waiting room and a twenty-four-hour convenience store, on the highways and along the strip developments of contemporary America, a physical landscape that is further overlaid with the circulation of mass market magazines and the emission of radio signals. In this landscape, Kafka’s Landarzt does not have to be updated into a twentieth-century physician; his textual existence as narrative can exist within it easily, just as easily as a paperback copy of Kafka’s tales can be carried into a McDonald’s. Any and all narratives exist simultaneously within a single world, constantly jostling and interrupting each other in their bids for attention.
Jenkin’s plays develop in a world of narrative supersaturation, a world in which it is impossible to imagine a narrative in isolation. In his works, the salient aspect of postmodernity is the endless proliferation of narrative in our world of web- and channel-surfing. Barely has the name of the play been announced as “A Country Doctor” (6) when it is immediately interrupted by a new narrative: a man tells us that he is under pressure; he must visit his doctor for a medical appointment before he heads off into the country to attend the wedding of two of his former employers, and is already behind schedule. Here, major motifs of Ein Landarzt are quickly disassembled and reassembled into a new narrative that is redolent of the earlier one. The elements — ‘doctor,’ ‘country,’ ‘travel,’ and ‘difficulty’ — remain, but in a new combination.

Jenkin uses an English translation of Ein Landarzt with some cuts, some repetitions, and many additions, including two new narrative lines that become as important as that of Kafka’s Ein Landarzt. One tells of the errant wanderings of the “Wedding Guest” as he makes his way to the wedding celebration in the country. The second is a highly episodic narrative showing incidents, real and invented, from Kafka’s life, telling the story of his journey to a sanatorium. In each of the three plots, telling a story is synonymous with making a journey. Thus, A Country Doctor becomes a play of travelers’ tales.

Beyond the narratives of the Country Doctor, Kafka, and the Wedding Guest, the play repeatedly splits off into yet other narratives or fragments thereof, which are read aloud, overheard, broadcast, exchanged, or thrust on unwilling auditors. They keep echoing the motifs and themes of Ein Landarzt: sickness, travel, loneliness, and desire. Although Jenkin imposes no strict hierarchy of narrative genres, some stories are clearly more popular among the characters than others. The superabundance of narratives, however, puts them all in competition with each other: while a piece of pornography rivets the attention of its listeners, an incident related by Kafka draws boos and hisses. A carnival exhibitor (called “The Pitchman”) explains how to draw an audience through “the ability to treat ordinary subjects in a grand manner, to invent tinselled and impressive lies about them” (25). In the highly saturated market of postmodern narrative, the lurid and meretricious definitely have a competitive edge.
Most importantly, however, the proliferation of narratives can act as impediments to our own narrative quests. The Wedding Guest is import-
tuned by the Country Doctor, who wants to tell the traveler his story. Clearly this Wedding Guest has wandered into the play from out of another literary narrative: Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, one of the most celebrated metafictional texts in all of English literature. There, as in Jenkin’s play, the telling of a tale stands between the Wedding Guest and his destination, the Wedding Feast, with all of its apocalyptic connotations drawn from the New Testament. The telling of the story of the Country Doctor threatens to overtake the Wedding Guest, displacing his travel narrative with that of Ein Landarzt.

The result of this Coleridge/Kafka *contaminatio* is to embed Ein Landarzt, with its open ending, within the closure provided by the Wedding Guest’s arrival at the Wedding Feast. This final movement toward closure is further strengthened by that fact that, in the penultimate scene, the Country Doctor, who has been played by a succession of actors throughout the drama, is played by the same actor who has been playing the Wedding Guest. The Wedding Guest seems to have become totally possessed by the story he has sought to avoid; like Coleridge’s Wedding Guest, it seems that his reception of a stranger’s tale will render him forever an outsider to the Wedding Feast. But, just as he delivers the last lines of Ein Landarzt, we hear singing, and all the wedding guests, as well as the Minister, Bride, Groom, and Kafka, enter. The Country Doctor-cum-Wedding Guest alights from his carriage, and what was hopeless alienation only a moment before suddenly becomes incorporation.

But incorporation into what? The Minister begins to stammer out the pronouncement that the bridal couple are now man and wife, but never gets beyond the first few words. Despite the visual strength of the matrimonial tableau, and its status as the long-deferred place of arrival for the Wedding Guest, we are left suspended at some moment before the event’s consummation. In its place, we are presented with a hodgepodge of lines reprised from earlier scenes. The Wedding Feast is the

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1 For the role of *contaminatio* in American postmodernism, see Gross 19–23. 199
container for a multiplicity of narrative fragments, none of which display the least chance of reaching completion. It is as if the closer we move toward the completion of the narrative, the more it is impeded, leaving it, like Zeno’s arrow, with ever less hope of reaching its target than before.² The Wedding Guest tops this narrative Babel with “I do not want to think about it any more” (32). Although his “it” lacks a clear antecedent, it seems a gesture that wishes to negate everything that has gone before.

Suddenly the Patient, who has not been a part of the marriage ceremony but has remained in a bed at its fringes, steps forward and delivers one of Kafka’s most famous aphorisms:

You need not leave your room. Just lie in your bed and listen. Do not listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your [sic] feet. (32)

The title is announced, once in German, once in English. Curtain.

The Patient offers a vision of a beatitude that manifests itself, not in the ceaseless motion that has characterized A Country Doctor but in the relinquishment of it; not in the endless rehearsal of narratives but in the relinquishing of the desire to tell one’s story. In a play that has been predominantly about narration, the conclusion suggests an alternative to the frustrations of narrative hypertrophy.

In A Country Doctor narrative is routinely equated with unconsummated desire, beatitude with the rejection of it. Although every story begins with the promise of fulfillment and an energy that initiates it, bringing with it the expectation that it will triumph over the threat of entropy, it ultimately proves to exacerbate it. No tale can ever finally satisfy either the desires that led to its genesis, nor the desires it has aroused in its hearers.

The most vivid example of this narrative frustration is Jenkin’s parody of a pornographic fantasy, purportedly published in the pages of

² Thiher, interestingly, also uses the image of Zeno’s arrow to describe Kafka’s Landarzt – “the doctor is then another of Kafka’s figures, who, like the arrow in the logical paradox of Zeno, flies but cannot move through space” (74).
Voyeur magazine. In it, a freshman at a midwestern college picks up a luscious and sexually aggressive young woman and takes her to a motel. No sooner does their foreplay commence, however, than the young woman asks him to get her some champagne. He rushes off to a nearby liquor store and buys the champagne, only to find that he cannot remember in which of the motels along the strip she awaits him: “Now I drive forever up and down the motel strip, wondering if she’s still out there somewhere, waiting for me. The hotels flash by, one after another, one after another” (8). The tale of the frustrated student, we are told, is known by heart by the other characters, and is a narrative that they much prefer to Ein Landarzt.

This unabashedly heterosexual narrative is a parody that cuts in two directions: it is a pop culture simplification of a high art narrative, with the sexually driven student taking on the endless peregrinations of the Landarzt, and a high art frustration of a popular narrative which is rendered amusingly ‘artistic’ by being deprived, both literally and formally, of its climax. While the Voyeur fantasy functions as a comic variation on Ein Landarzt, it also provides a model of how Jenkin rewrites Kafka’s text in the interests of heterosexual normativity.

Regardless of what one may believe about Kafka’s own sexuality, Ein Landarzt is a queer text. It is structured around the radically unstable center of the boy’s wound, a wound that is a locus of both abjection and fascination, and a vortex for the work’s ambivalent energies. Evoked with a meticulousness and detail beyond anything else in the story, the wound impresses itself upon our memory even as it repels. “Crowned by a rose,” writes Henry Sussman, “the wound is the site where the text itself folds and feeds on itself” (130). The wound, by turns object of putrefaction and a “Blume” (Kafka 151), fascinates and repulses, blossoms and decays. Seen by interpreters as a female genital (Koeb 205) and a male anus (McGurk 114–115), just as the boy himself has been seen both as the object of the Landarzt’s homosexual desire (Golomb-Bregman 81) and as a substitute for the Landarzt’s heterosexual desire for his housemaid Rosa (Koeb 205), the wound destabilizes the sexual dynamics of Ein Landarzt. Incapable of containment, the wound spreads to both the Landarzt and the tale. As Clayton Koelb observes: “This rhetorical wound grows to engulf the entire text” (205). Henry Suss-
man’s titles his essay on *Ein Landarzt* “The Text That Was Never a Story.” For, as Sussman explains, “[t]he results are so inconclusive, the characters so blurred as to deny any pretense to narrative cohesion on the part of this brief work” (123). The frustration that the text generates by its repeated disruption of the reader’s attempt to interpret it mirrors the frustrations of its eponymous figure (Golomb-Bregman 82–84).

While *Ein Landarzt* is a wounded narrative, one that, as Sussman observes, “never becomes what might properly be called a story” (123), the dynamics of *A Country Doctor* work to heal it. The wound, so often the center of critical explications of *Ein Landarzt*, becomes strangely peripheral to the dramatic adaptation. Jenkin betrays anxiety in his response to the wound, muting its intensity and normalizing its sexuality. Although conventional wisdom would have us believe that theatre is a more embodied form than fiction, in this case, we see that the wound is primary in *Ein Landarzt* and subordinated to a thematics of narration in *A Country Doctor*. While Kafka’s description of the wound in the present tense demands that we envision it close up and in detail, displacing everything but the wound in a moment of vivid description, Jenkin’s description of the wound in the mouth of the Country Doctor is narrated in the past tense, displacing our interest from the wound itself to the act of narration. We do not see the wound, merely the doctor describing the wound. As a result, we are distanced — the doctor’s speech displaces the wound even as it represents it. We are drawn to the voice, the face, the body of the doctor, all of which are more immediate to us as spectators than the wound. Kept as a verbal action within the performing body of the Country Doctor, the wound’s destabilizing power is contained.

But Jenkin does not stop there. He carefully excises any suggestion of homosexuality from his adaptation by renaming the clearly sexed „Junge“ of Kafka’s text (148) with the gender-neutral term “patient” (2), and translating „Junge“ in the Landarzt’s moment of discovery of the wound (151) with the gender-neutral term, “chil” (24), leaving only a single “boy” (26) as a vestige of the original gendering. Jenkin further stipulates in his prefatory note to the play that this ‘Patient’ must be played by a woman (2). Finally, although the Country Doctor is played by both men and women in the course of the play, Jenkin instructs that
the scenes in which the Country Doctor discovers the wound and is put in bed with the Patient be played with the male actor who otherwise plays Kafka taking on the doctor’s role for that scene. So, the most extended scene of intimacy in the play, the one in which a body is most carefully scrutinized becomes a scene played between a man and a woman — an image that reverberates off the Wedding Feast that both provides the impetus for the Wedding Guest’s journey and the final scene of the play. It almost reads like a story out of *Voyeur*.

While the wound is the image that “folds and feeds on itself” (Sussman 130) in *Ein Landarzt*, the corresponding image in *A Country Doctor* is an interview on the nighttime radio show, *Loveliner*. *Loveliner’s* host (or hostess, the text does not specify gender) interviews Maxine, who is looking for romance. Maxine describes herself, and then hesitantly discusses what she is looking for in a male partner. The interview is transformed into one with the entire cast, as they stand quietly apart from each other onstage, while the Loveliner asks them questions — “Read books, Joe? Any children, Jane? Describe yourself, Bill. Beard? Moustache? Height. Weight. Taking it off, eh. Good. Tell us what kind of girl you are looking for, Franz […]” (18).

Here are the questions that elicit the endless personal narratives, even Kafka’s, all positioned on a grid of heterosexual desire. The common aloneness of the Loveliner clients stands as a foil to the celebration of the Wedding Feast, the other instance in which the entire cast is brought together. Here, heterosexuality becomes figured as the common presupposition for narrativity, the alpha and omega of storytelling. For narrativity in *A Country Doctor* is spawned from sexual difference.

Jenkin’s shoring up of a heteronormative imaginary makes itself felt in the gendered division of narrative functions. The men travel and tell tales. The women wait. From this perspective, the appearance of the Patient as a woman is overdetermined. She is female not only so the Country Doctor does not have to get into bed with another male; she is also female so she can be the voice of stasis at the end. She plays Solveig

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3 The sole exception is the woman on page 28. But revealingly, she does not travel, the story she tells is of two men and their deaths, not of her own desire.
to the Wedding Guest’s Peer Gynt; Penelope to his Odysseus. She is not only the alternative to striving; she is the goal of it as well.

Jenkin’s presentation of the heteronormative imaginary, however, is less somatic than linguistic, since the self-descriptions broadcast over the airwaves by Loveliner are virtual bodies, of textuality rather than physicality. While Kafka employs language to summon up the wound of corporality, Jenkin arranges actors’ bodies onstage to summon up a matrix of language. The wound has given way to the chat room. Jenkin’s dramaturgy moves away from the performing body and toward a narrative one. Enactment is replaced by narration, mimesis by diegesis, the body by information systems.

Loveliner points up the entropy inherent in *A Country Doctor*: although the narrative line is capable of being diverted endlessly from teller to teller, all the diversions are revealed to be repeated versions of the Same, competing for attention and degenerating into Babel.

‘Play doctor’ Len Jenkin works to heal the woundedness of Kafka’s text by replacing exhaustion with incessant movement, displacing the wound as something to be talked about and moved past, but increasingly realizing that there is no healing to be found in the flight that animates it. For all of its humorous inventiveness, *A Country Doctor* is plagued with the specter of exhaustion. In this respect, it exemplifies the mannerism that Gleb Aleinikov has identified in postmodernism, and that Giancarlo Maiorino has identified as “neo-mannerism” (65). Aleinikov explains:

What is mannerism? It is the forced approach to creativity of a movement that is living out its era by imitating something. Of course this does not imply rote copying. Collage, commentary, quotation, mixing of genres and styles — all of these are paths of flight from one such space to another, which conjures up the illusion of freedom. But the limit will suddenly be reached, and the mannerists will realize that all their variety of combinations and multiplications are finite in number. (335)

As an adaptation, *A Country Doctor* repeatedly creates illusions of flight by diverting itself from Kafka’s tale. But the flights turn out to be illusory. The tale has already been told. All the characters already know the story of the Country Doctor, and most of them would rather not hear it again. The process of dramatic adaptation becomes, from this point of view, an attempt to revitalize an exhausted narrative. *A Country Doctor*
hopes to generate a ‘proper’ narrative where there was none, vitality out of entropy, and closure out of openendedness.

Jenkin figures the process of adaptation primarily as opening up an early twentieth century European narrative onto a late twentieth century American terrain. In so doing, Jenkin foregrounds the site of exchange at which he receives and refashions Kafka’s text. Jenkin stresses the contrast of the realms of textual origin and reception through the use of music. While the scenes with Kafka and the Landarzt are to be accompanied by Klezmer music, scenes with the Wedding Guest use American country music. The differences in music cannot be mediated; they suggest a silent boundary across which certain elements of Kafka’s text can move, while others cannot. The motifs of travel, narration, and longing can emigrate, while the motif of the wound, most notably, cannot. The radical alienation and queerness of Kafka’s text reaches the border only to be caught up in the social networks and heteronormativity of Loveliner and wedding celebrations. A Country Doctor ‘doctors’ Ein Landarzt, by bringing the Landarzt and Franz Kafka to an American wedding.

At the same time, however, the adaptation is figured as a kind of theft; the postmodern dramatist becomes a grave robber, who achieves his status by despoiling earlier texts. In his introduction to the volume of plays that contains A Country Doctor, Jenkin is oddly impelled to make the gesture of effacing himself and restoring the play to Kafka as its genuine author. “For Kafka, my love, respect, and admiration across the years. The play is yours through and through. I’m just backstage, making faces in the shadows,” writes Jenkin (v). Stepping aside to allow Kafka to assume the role of author, the adaptor performs an imaginary act of restitution and renders himself a spectral presence, one that is not only invisible but gratuitous as well. This gesture appears disingenuous: A Country Doctor is clearly not Ein Landarzt. Why do Jenkin’s diversions from Kafka’s narrative need to be disavowed?

If Jenkin’s work as playwright/doctor suggests superiority to the adapted text, this gesture of supererogation suggests a guilty denial of the act of dramatic adaptation. The play establishes Kafka’s counterfigure in the Pitchman, who boasts of his ability to gain the attention of audiences by rendering banal objects lurid and spectacular. The Pitch-
man is American, not Czech, and represents a contemporary world of narrative hypertrophy in which stories need to compete for audiences. As the American stage adaptor of Kafka, Jenkin is uncomfortably allied with the Pitchman, caught in a process of theatrical adaptation that he deems inevitably coarsening. So Jenkin at once denies that he has changed anything and at the same time tries to distance himself from the adaptation, taking on the alienated position of the Landarzt, impotently grimacing in the offstage darkness, while what is now Kafka’s play is being performed. Jenkin’s predicament becomes that of the mannerist, postmodern playwright: he is an agent in the proliferation of narrative without a narrative of his own.

_A Country Doctor_ exemplifies a strain of (and strain in) American postmodernism which tries to embrace the decentering devices of postmodernism while remaining incapable of accepting the decentering devices of queer theory and practice. So, while _A Country Doctor_’s narrative hypertrophy might superficially appear more postmodern than _Ein Landarzt_’s severe, elliptical style, its insistence on strict gender divisions ultimately appears far more normative than _Ein Landarzt_’s queerness.

But even more revealing than Jenkin’s conservatism in matters of gender and sexuality is his strong overall movement away from embodiedness to narrativity. _A Country Doctor_ is an artifact of American postmodernism at its most sexually anxious. Written after the heyday of the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s (with their almost instantaneous commodification), and after the increasing trauma of widespread HIV infection in the 1980s, the play reveals a panicked retreat from the body into talk about the body. It reflects a period in American culture in which, as Donald M. Lowe observed, “[g]ender and sexuality are more demanding and more confusing for most of us than ever before” (143). As such, the wound of physical sexuality is so threatening, so indicative of the sexual body’s vulnerability and decay, that the mediated sexual pleasures of _Loveliner_ and _Voyeur_ become the norm in _A Country Doctor_, and its much-anticipated wedding is better off being interrupted before its consummation. Of all the many flights in Jenkin’s play, the ultimate flight is away from the body and into endless storytelling about it, a flight, which for all of its humorous inven-
tiveness, is marked by desperation, contagion, exhaustion, and, at the end of the line, a longing for stasis.

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Primary Literature


Secondary Literature

Robert F. Gross


A Feminist Theater of Transformation: Rochelle Owens’s Postmodern Play ‘in the Process of Becoming’

Quite remarkably, drama and theater play ancillary roles at best in many of the classic commentaries on postmodernism, as, for instance, Jean-François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition*, David Harvey’s *Condition of Postmodernity*, or Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations*. Ihab Hassan piles up a lengthy roster of, mostly male, artists from various disciplines, who epitomize postmodernism for him; there are, however, very few playwrights on his list: Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Handke, Bernhardt, and only Sam Shepard and Robert Wilson as American dramatists. I will take the disregard of drama by contemporary theory as my point of departure and argue that it is precisely drama that lends itself ideally to a postmodern frame of analysis. In which ways has American theater responded to postmodernism and to the problems of representation raised by postmodern discourses? In my discussion, I use American feminist theater as an example and discuss the relationship between postmodernism and feminist theater. Presenting Rochelle Owens’s *Emma Instigated Me* as an example, I argue that transformation — well-known as an acting exercise of the Open Theater — is a major technique and metaphor of feminist American drama and, more precisely, of a postmodern feminist theater of transformation (see also Schmidt, esp. ch. IV).

The so-called classical postmodernism of the 1960s in America appears to be a predominantly male movement. John Barth, Donald
Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick, Robert Coover, Richard Brautigan, Ihab Hassan, Leslie Fiedler, along with many others, readily prove this suspicion — and Susan Sontag would probably be an exception to the rule. Even though the situation has changed considerably since then, this explains in part why the relationship between postmodernism and feminism has been rather problematic. Both movements, however, could benefit greatly from a reciprocal influence: Postmodernism would, among many other things, acquire very concrete political goals and thus be better equipped to meet the frequent challenge of its supposedly apolitical nature, whereas feminism would benefit from postmodernism’s extensive theoretical framework. Feminism and postmodernism meet precisely at the intersection of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodern critique of master narratives.\footnote{In the essay “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” Craig Owens investigates the frequently contested relationship between postmodernism and feminism. He corroborates the view that feminism and postmodernism cover common ground to a large extent and argues that their conjunction would bolster up both.\footnote{A number of critics of the alliance between feminism and postmodernism have brought up this argument. See, for example, Meaghan Morris’ study, The Pirate’s fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodern.}} And yet, if feminism adopts the anti-foundationalist impulse of postmodernism, it also runs the risk of cutting the ground from under its basis in political action, that is the foundation of a politics based on difference of gender. Ultimately, a postmodern feminism is thus in danger of eradicating itself. Many critics have tried to combine, if not to reconcile, feminism with its attempts at political action and postmodernism with its by and large philosophical agenda. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson discuss the possibilities of a postmodern feminism trying to integrate “their respective strengths while eliminating their respective weaknesses” (415). They conclude by calling for a “postmodern-feminist theory [which] would be pragmatic and fallibilistic” (429).

This debate raises the question of the ways in which the ‘crossing’ of postmodernism and feminism can be fruitfully put into — theatrical — practice. In this context, the French critic Hélène Cixous makes an interesting observation with regard to women, feminism, and the con-
temporary theater. In “Aller à la mer,” Cixous deplores that she stopped going to the theater long ago. “It was,” she says, “like going to my own funeral” (546). A better theater, according to Cixous, would require “one woman who stays beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be” (547). Cixous’ requirement could be met most productively by using transformation as an adequate method for a postmodern feminist theater. Transformation as developed by the Open Theater serves a seminal postmodern concern and proves a most effective theatrical method of transferring postmodern issues to the contemporary stage.

As an acting technique, transformation was practiced most prominently by Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater (Pasolli, esp. 20–22). It meant the abrupt taking on and dropping of different roles without any accompanying changes in setting, costume, or lighting. The technique itself, however, is said to go back to the famous Chicago workshops of Viola Spolin, renowned theater teacher, whose handbook of teaching and directing was soon to assume quasi-biblical status for theater groups of the time. Transformation becomes even more significant for the specific concerns of postmodern feminism. It provides a method of reacting against the dominating representational system which admits only one vision, namely that of the constitutive male subject who bases his authority on the claim to universality. This claim is in turn applied to the respective aesthetic form used for artistic representation. Transformation challenges both the artistic form and the ideological concept of the subject and fixed identities by continuously transforming them. Transformation is thus able to cause both an implosion and an explosion of a formerly stable sense of self, character, and identity.

In order to show in which ways postmodern transformation and postmodern feminism have met, I will discuss Rochelle Owens’s *Emma Instigated Me*. Owens is devoted to the feminist cause and uses the method of transformation for staging her postmodern feminist concerns. In a commentary on her work, she explicitly acknowledges the creative freedom her work suggests and relates it to the significance of theatrical collaboration and transformation:
I am interested in the flow of imagination between the actors and the director, the boundless possibilities of interpretation of a script. Different theatrical realities are created and/or destroyed depending upon the multitudinous perceptions and points of view of the actors and director who share in the creation of the design of the unique journey of playing the play. There are as many ways to approach my plays as there [are] combinations of people who might involve themselves. (Shragge 452)

Thus Owens not only acknowledges, but explicitly calls for an openness of the dramatic text, which ultimately challenges the authority of the writer. And it is this challenge of authority that describes the main thrust of her feminist plays. Owens identifies herself as “proto-feminist” in an interview (Coleman 20); by this term, she indicates that she sees herself as part of a generation which brought the feminist movement on its way. She confirms time and again that writer and work are thoroughly rooted in a feminist context:

My writing is feminist because it has much to do with my personal and social identity as a woman in a patriarchal culture, and because it resists both the form and the idea of absolute power of organized doctrine, principles, and procedures. One ought to question the assumptions of the culture which created the social role of women. (Coleman 20)

Apart from documenting Owens’s feminist agenda, this passage indicates a thorough interest in postmodern playwriting: it emphasizes the continual search for new forms and a critical attitude towards traditional art while focusing on the relationship between artistic modes of expression and the status of women in society. In other words, Owens writes as an act of resistance. Dismantling established discourses in the sense of Lyotardian master narratives, Owens “questions the assumptions,” the “absolute power” of traditional writing, be it in form or in “doctrine” and “principles.” Owens’s postmodern feminist theater displays pronounced political concerns and defends the political and social objectives that feminism shares with other so-called minority discourses.

With regard to much of contemporary theater, Owens deplors that feminist concerns are expressed in culturally approved conservative modes instead of in a spirit of “re-definitions and experimentation” (Coleman 21). She continually stresses experimentation as a prime means to challenge dominant literary forms of expression. Like Jean-Claude van Itallie and many other postmodern dramatists, Owens de-
fends that content and form are contingent upon each other and cannot be separated, which explains the emphasis she puts on the development of dramatic form. She describes writing as a process of continuous assembly, destruction, transformation, and re-assembly of subject matters by multiple voices — a strategy that characterizes both her poetic and dramatic oeuvre.\(^3\) Meaning, for Owens, is “non-linear, transmitted, placed and displaced, scattered, textured and re-textured in an endless, complex system of designed irregularity.” (Coleman 21)\(^4\) Her postmodern and metadramatic agenda comes out most clearly when she holds that “[m]y business as a playwright, therefore, means challenging the established categories of theater” (Betsko and Koenig 344).

‘Instigated’ by the life of Emma Goldman, famous anarchist, feminist, and revolutionary, Rochelle Owens wrote the play *Emma Instigated Me*, whose matter-of-fact title clearly explains its source of inspiration and alludes to the play’s main concern.\(^5\) Published in 1976, the play focuses not so much on the presentation of a finished piece for the theater; rather, it thematizes the process of dramatic production and the act of writing a play, in other words, the play demonstrates the ‘instigation’ that prompts the finished work. In a metadramatic movement, it stages the tension between product and process and the transformative processes from one to the other. As the conditions of a play’s existence have become the play’s major topic, this self-referential metadramatic

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\(^3\) This description of Owens’s writing seems a direct answer to the request by Cixous as discussed above. In “Aller à la mer,” Cixous calls for “one woman […], experiencing herself as many” (546).

\(^4\) In this interview, Owens refers to her series of poems called “Discourse on Life and Death.” However, the passage seems an equally valid description for most of her dramatic works.

\(^5\) The play has received almost no critical attention, which explains the scarcity of further references to critical articles on the play. Even general accounts of Rochelle Owens as a writer neglect the play to the extent of ignoring it altogether (e.g. Margolis).
thrust characterizes Owens’s *Emma Instigated Me* more than anything else.

The play *Emma Instigated Me* repeatedly refers to Goldman’s writings, to her autobiography and numerous political essays and lectures. Owens’s historical biography of Emma Goldman thus also centers on the notion of writing and (auto)biographical writing in particular. More precisely, it puts the issue of authorship center stage and problematizes (textual) authority. As a consequence, the itinerary and particular details of Goldman’s life figure only in passing in this play which nevertheless is about Emma Goldman. Pieces of biographical information pervade the play but never constitute its main thrust. They are treated as mere tools to explore more theoretical aspects of writing the story of a life. The figure of “The Author” is central to the play’s exploration of writing, transformation, and authorship. In a statement preceding the play, Owens introduces author and play thus:

*This play is about a play in the process of “becoming.” The line of the play follows the author who is writing a play about the life of Emma Goldman, the 19th century revolutionary and anarchist.* (71)

Owens consciously writes a metadramatic piece for the theater, and the play’s plot is determined by the author’s train of thoughts as s/he is in the process of writing. In that same statement Owens also propagates transformation as the prime technique in which “the play unfolds” (71). By using transformation, Owens writes, “[p]eople change from one character to another, from character into actor into bystander and back to character” (71). This transformative principle does not exclude the author in the play who as an active player joins in the action on stage.

In accordance with the patriarchal discourse of male control, the author takes great pains to uphold and defend his position of superiority, thereby acting as a ‘father’ to the text, or to the story of this woman’s life. The Author’s voice chronologically precedes that of the

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6 Even though The Author is addressed as female in very few incidents in the play (78, 85–87), the figure of The Author by and large focuses on the representation and problematization of male patriarchal authority and will thus be referred to as male for the purposes of this essay.
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(textual) child which entitles the Author to intervene in the story as soon as it does not follow the path he has carved out:

AUTHOR: Stop. This is the creator. The maker of your adventure. I’m speaking. Stop. Stop. (75)

The Author as creator and God-like ontological founding principle asserts his voice and his command, and maintains his epistemological superiority. The recorded voice of the Author also leaves no room for doubts:

RECORDED VOICE – AUTHOR: I’m the author. I know best. (74)

Importantly, in this passage, it is not the Author’s live, natural voice that asserts his position of superiority, but a pre-recorded voice. Owens here posits a relationship of antecedence: the moment when the voice of the author made this utterance has passed, and the authorial assertion is nothing but a pre-recorded ‘thing of the past.’ As much as the above passage seems to corroborate authorial superiority, the recorded voices firmly announce at the beginning of the play that:

RECORDED VOICE 1: This is a short dramatic piece.
RECORDED VOICE 2: By Judith the Brazilian. (73)

Any effort to identify clearly the author of this play is thwarted by such contradicting assertions that in the end allow for only one conclusion, that authorship is an ambiguous notion and ostensibly contested in Emma Instigated Me. In the play, Emma Goldman insists on the “facts of my life” which are for the Author to be retrieved from her autobiography, and, accordingly, she repeatedly commands the Author to do his duty, namely “authentic research” (79). The issue of authenticity is already introduced in the play’s prologue: The actors walk up to the Author, who is on stage, and say key phrases such as: “NO AUTHENTIC RESEARCH. WHAT IS IT ABOUT? […] THIS IS NOT A REAL PLAY ABOUT

In an interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, however, Owens betrays a quite firm belief in authorship and textual authority, even in truth. Asked about her motivation for writing, she replies: “It was a way to take upon myself a great sense of spiritual authority as a writer. To claim the authority as a benevolent and just right to express truth” (Betsko and Koenig 352).
EMMA GOLDMAN. I HATE THE PLAY. I HATE THE PLAY. THIS IS SOLIPSISM” (72). This issue of historical accuracy and historiography features prominently as a recurrent structural principle throughout the play. The author contends in several passages — with Lyotard clearly in the wings — that grand narratives are an illusion. This illusion is then equally characteristic of the concept of truth and of the masternarrative called Anarchism, even though the latter seeks to overturn prevailing power structures in society:

**RECORDED VOICE – AUTHOR:** As an anarchist you presume to uphold and defend the truth. This is a gigantic deception. Airplane sound. (73)

Emma’s phenomenological approach to history clashes sharply with the Author’s. The following passage exemplifies the battled terrain:

**EMMA GOLDMAN:** When you’ve done the proper research on my life.

**AUTHOR:** Proper research – on your life! This play is the life of Emma Goldman. It is as real as the instinct of smell – you wooden flower! (77)

In such passages, author and ‘real-life character’ fervently contrast mutually exclusive views on art and representation, on reality and its simulation. Whereas Emma, in this context, defends the idea of art as mimesis and the truthfulness and objectivity of historical scholarship, the Author holds that the simulation has long superseded and replaced reality, leaving Emma as nothing but a “wooden flower,” a mere unanimated copy that resembles Emma only on the surface. Emma exemplifies the confusion between supposed original and copy: the play features Emma Goldman as Actress but also Actress as Emma Goldman. To add to the confusion, the position from which the supposed historical Emma Goldman might speak remains obscure. Is she the actress, the character on stage or the historical Emma, the imaginary foil onto which the author projects his or her ruminations? On closer scrutiny, we see that Emma occupies many subject positions in the play which challenge and counteract her own claim to be a historical personality fully in charge of her life. The indecision and uncertainty that are part of the process of writing a piece of literature have been included into the final script as a metadramatic comment. Beyond delineating the typical problems of composition, such passages communicate a high degree of textual openness which deliberately confuses actress, character, and identity. In the
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following exercise of transformation, Emma speaks as actress and character in the beginning of the play and her words are repeated verbatim towards the end:

ACTRESS as EMMA GOLDMAN or EMMA GOLDMAN as ACTRESS: Almost everything in the way of correspondence, books and other material that Emma Goldman had accumulated during the thirty-five years of her life in the United States had been confiscated by the Department of Justice raiders and never returned. [...]  
ACTRESS as EMMA GOLDMAN or EMMA GOLDMAN as ACTRESS: I suspect that it was something other than the desire to earn money that made me want to be an actress. (72; see also 93)

While the matter-of-fact, objective voice of the first quotation sounds as if it was taken from a scholarly source, a newspaper article, or from an introduction to the collected works of Emma Goldman, the second quotation leaves the subject of Emma Goldman’s life entirely and delves into the mind of a particular actress who muses on past professional decisions. Transformation leads abruptly from one context to an entirely different one and seems to subvert major rules of traditional structure and composition in drama. In the course of the play, the battle over authorship intensifies and aggravates by using the technique of transformation. At times, the Author simply interferes in Emma’s life-story, not unlike the stage manager in the Epic Theater, at other times, the Author will actively and aggressively reshape the story and exert his textual dominance. The debate between Emma and the Author culminates when she threatens to kill him, as the following section shows. The Author makes it clear that he sees Emma as his creature, property, and invention and that, consequently, he can instill her with life or destroy her:

EMMA GOLDMAN: I want the cause, Anarchy – my ideals, honoured – or I’ll kill you with my bare hands. [...]  
AUTHOR: Don’t antagonize me.  
EMMA GOLDMAN: I’ll dismember you!  
AUTHOR: Emma, do you want to be merely a sardine in a tin can? I’ll put you in with all the other small accidents of fate. In the unfinished plays file. [...]  
EMMA GOLDMAN: Capitalist. You are my enemy.  
AUTHOR: You are my invention. (78)
The Author threatens his creature with oblivion and eventually with dissolution. Emma, in turn, menaces him with mutilation and dismemberment. If Emma intends to punish the Author by dismembering him, she at the same time appeals to a related penalty, the loss of memory and ability to remember. The two combatants eventually engage in a physical struggle (93) which results in a blending of Emma’s and the Author's identity. The two formerly separate entities have collapsed and have become interchangeable. A given line by a player can thus no longer function as an idiosyncratic expression of a particular character. Rather, the dramatic dialogue has been turned into a shared text that can be appropriated at will by any figure in the play:

**RECORDED VOICE:** You insufferable lunatic. Stop this farce.

**EMMA GOLDMAN:** You insufferable lunatic. Stop this farce. (93)

In a metadramatic commentary, Emma Goldman repeatedly attacks the Author and argues with him about technical aspects of writing:

**EMMA GOLDMAN:** The characters you write have fuzzy edges! They constantly threaten to explode out of character... your voice also... hysterical... inappropriate... you avoid linear structure... a cohesive rational method of writing a play... Stick to one thought and carry it through! (73)

Emma challenges the author in his very own field, that of writing. She attacks him for violating major traditional principles of composition, such as “linear structure” and “cohesive rational method.” Characters, she says, “explode” in his writing, thus the concept of a stable character itself and, by analogy, of a viable self fall apart. The play deconstructs these very categories and replaces them with concepts of text and language that increasingly act as performers, assuming the function of traditional characters. Put differently, identity increasingly gets lost in writing, which brings to the center the notion of the text as a “tissue of quotations,” a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 146).

Refusing to pay due respect to the Author as grounding principle of the text, subverting the ‘law of the father’ — even if the father, subver-

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8 In the play, Emma Goldman even desires a bomb in order to rid herself of the despised Author: “The so-called author. I longed for a bomb to destroy her” (86).
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sively, turns out to be a mother in this case — as well as struggling for a voice not controlled by the author reveal the play’s feminist agenda. Transformation as a technique most vividly serves to express these feminist concerns. It functions, among others, as a means to escape the limitations imposed on the text by an alleged author and thus defies closure: “To give a text an Author is,” as Barthes reminds us, “to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147).

According to Owens’s introductory stage directions, the play is designed to “manifest the reality of theatre as a part of life” (71). Based on this claim, the shifting of personalities in the play, acted out in frequent transformations, suggests that personal and social identities are not immutable entities or natural givens. That women should enjoy the ability of imponderable change, that they may transform themselves at will without prior notice is expressed in the following lines:

RECORDED VOICE 1: The texture changes before our tongues. Emma Goldman is a blacksmith!
EMMA GOLDMAN: I’m a blacksmith. Call me the maker of transformation. The woman of revolution. (75)

Emma Goldman here explicitly situates herself in a revolutionary, feminist realm which she clearly associates with self-directed transformation. Transformation as ultimately serving the feminist cause also surfaces in the call to “[m]ake it new. Make it new” (82), which, in turn, echoes the paradigmatic modernist battle cry by Pound that the later postmodern “tradition of the new” (Jencks) resorted to.

As soon as the text becomes independent and escapes the control of an authorial figure, however, the writer/author/character is turned into an absence of a supposed presence. In this context, transformation proves to be an ideal method of oscillating between absence and presence. In *Emma Instigated Me*, transformation serves to defy the closure of master-narratives, of a definitive version of a person’s life-story. It points out that every reading is a writing that composes the text anew, produces itself and turns itself against the ultimacies of Emma Goldman’s story and the claim to originality. Transformation here deconstructs master discourses and fixed gender ascriptions. Rochelle Owens, like many other feminist playwrights at the time, conceives of plays in
terms of their possibilities of combination and thus asserts the notion of the text-in-flux as opposed to the author-centered work as a finished product.

Transformative practices, as identified in this paper, ensure that postmodern plays do not rest at simply destructuring dramatic constituents or destroying the communal orientation of theater. They rather evoke these constituents while, at the same time, challenging and problematizing their possibility: Postmodern feminist drama disturbs and subverts these features and constituents by transforming them. Transformation assumes the role of the connective precisely when traditional techniques of making plays are called into question. As a method to defy closure, transformation is postmodern drama’s answer to the questions of feminism and a major technique in the development of a postmodern language for the feminist stage.

Works Cited

**Primary Literature**


**Secondary Literature**


WOLFGANG FUNK

Queer(ing) Traditions — Cracking Boundaries in Bryony Lavery’s Plays

1. Introduction

Die Begriffe, die man sich von was macht, sind sehr wichtig. Sie sind Griffe, mit denen man die Dinge bewegen kann.
(Bert Brecht, Flüchtlingsgespräche)

Bryony Lavery has never aspired to be a queer writer, because she rejects being restricted to any category whatsoever. According to an interview with The Independent, the only epithet she would happily accept is that of being ‘prolific,’ which is “better than ‘women writer’ or ‘lesbian writer’” (Benedict). I will nevertheless try to point out how her plays convey notions of queerness, sometimes even avant la lettre.

Queering takes place at two levels. First, I want to demonstrate how Lavery uncovers and challenges some of the norms governing the traditional dramatic discourse as such (one could refer to this as ‘meta-queering’), before I will turn to the content of selected plays to exemplify something like an applied queerness, i.e. the practical realisation of queer thinking in (dramatically simulated) real-life situations.
The rules governing the production of theatre are not nearly as strict nowadays as they were in previous centuries. The twentieth century has witnessed a broad range of dramatic writing in various forms and with highly diverse intentions, from the didacticism of Brecht’s epic theatre to the classicism of Christopher Fry, from Beckett’s theatre of the absurd to Pirandello’s meta-drama, from Artaud’s theatre of cruelty to Ravenhill’s in yer-face barrages of abuse and violence. Consequently, it is no longer justifiable to assume a unified dramatic discourse. 1 Yet, there are still a number of conventions in use intended to make sure that the communication between author and reader is successful, which in traditional discourse means that the reader follows the action presented by the author and is guided towards the happy or tragic ending. Lavery is by no means the first playwright to challenge the means by which the theatre ensures its signifying authority, nor is she interested in destroying the communication between writer and reader completely, since most of her plays carry a rather strong and straightforward ‘message,’ such as the systematic exclusion of women from historical discourse through patriarchal structures in her play *Origin of the Species*. Nevertheless, she constantly questions the conventions governing dramatic practice, which include the maintaining of the theatrical illusion and the linear depiction of a dramatic action in time.

*Ophelia: A Comedy* is a play that not only transcends the boundaries of its Shakespearean foil *Hamlet*, but also the confines within which the production of drama usually achieves meaning. Towards the end of the play, the band of actors, as known from Shakespeare’s play, one of whom happens to be Ophelia herself, destroy the illusionary world they

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1 For a much more elaborate account of this, cf. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatisches Theater*, where he explains the diversification of theatrical forms with the dissociation of theatre with dramatic structures.
have upheld throughout both Shakespeare’s and Lavery’s plays. They take off their costumes and even dismantle the stage until it is “bare of all the Elsinore effects” (341). It is only after the world of Hamlet and Claudius has been deconstructed, that Ophelia can break the chains that have tied her to her (tragic) Shakespearean role, and rewrite the play of her life as a comedy instead of a tragedy:

**Ophelia**

Then ‘Tragedy of Ophelia’ it is not
and she must rewrite
and bend her pen to scrawl its ink
upon the next page blank and white… (ibid., my emphases)

By having Ophelia talk about herself in the third person, Lavery leaves the reader to guess how far the demolition of illusion really goes. Is the woman on stage still meant to be a representation of Ophelia, who has, in the act of rewriting her life, been able to cast off the oppressive presence of her male antagonists, or has Ophelia herself been a dramatic impersonation by an actress, a symbol only for the power of imagination, which has finally succeeded in creating a new ‘reality within a play’ as opposed to Shakespeare’s ‘play within a play.’ Both readings invite comparison to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic as the realm of the feminine in contrast to the male authority over the symbolic, for as soon as the symbolic accoutrements of dramatic illusion (clothes, props) are done away with, Ophelia/the actress can finally leave the role assigned to her by male authority, in this case represented on various levels by Polonius, Hamlet and Shakespeare.

and all the lies, betrayals, unkindness, woe
will henceforth happen only here upon the stage,
and in no other many-blessed worldly place! (ibid.).

The traditionally separate spaces of dramatic action and reality are not distinguishable anymore and the final stage direction mirrors the loss of direction brought about by the dissolving of spatial certainty: “The players and Ophelia carry cases, boxes, carts into the future. Music swells…” (342). The linear development of time, on the other hand, is never questioned in Ophelia. The play depicts a sequence of events that change the conventions of the past and ultimately lead unto the brink of a promis-
ing future. There are plays, however, where the temporal structure is not quite as clear. Lavery tends to confuse the reader as to the succession of events in order to challenge the notion of causality which underlies traditional blueprints for dramatic action, such as the classical scheme of potasis, epitasis and catastrophe or Gustav Freytag’s triangular design. In Her Aching Heart for example, Lavery merges two plots — one set in the present and the other in the eighteenth century — at the crucial point when the modern-day protagonists Harriet and Molly spend their first night together, and the 18th-century counterpart Lady Harriet Helstone arrives at Molly Penhallow’s cottage, wounded from her duel with Lord Rothermere. At this particular point it is not clear anymore to which time frame the two women belong. Awaking from disturbing dreams, they find themselves freed from the transitory limitations of time:

HARRIET What?...
MOLLY No...
HARRIET How?...
MOLLY Plea...
HARRIET Here...
MOLLY Now...
HARRIET Yes...
MOLLY Yes... (128)

It is only in the here-and-now, in this state of virtual timelessness, that they can consume their mutual passion. As soon as time sets in again:

MOLLY No...it’s the dawn...the day races on apace...what brought you to my bed last night? (130, my emphases),

it brings the unforgiving regime of cause-and-effect with it. Harriet Helstone tells of her swordfight with Rothermere, as a consequence of which she has to leave England, thus spoiling every chance for a happy ending.

Lavery has already identified time (the ultimate symbol of linearity and causality) as one of the regulatory regimes introduced by man to shape the world according to his wants in Origin of the Species. In an allegorical story Molly tells to her foster-child Victoria, a clock becomes the all-powerful tool of a boy who “had a string of fine names ... he was called Plato Aristotle Copernicus Galileo Bacon Descartes Newton”
Only with the help of this clock (which again invites comparison with ‘the symbolic’ in the sense of Lacan or Kristeva), man can make sense of the world around him, as he assumes that everything works in the same way as his clock does, culminating in the observation “I think my mother is a clock!” (44)

The most startling case in point for Lavery’s calculated distortion of time comes at the end of her play *Two Marias*. After Marguerita has recounted the tragic story of the confusion over her daughter Maria del Morte, who had wrongly been exchanged for another girl — Maria del Amor — after a car crash, Julia’s daughter, also named Maria, gets herself ready to drive to the beach to meet her girlfriend, and the reader realises that Maria, Julia’s daughter, had been Maria del Amor all along. The tragic events involving the two Marias are just about to happen and Marguerita has given an account of the future rather than the past. Again, the reader can only speculate about the motives for this suspension of linear causality. Can Maria del Amor escape the hands of fate? Is her accident Julia’s punishment for not accepting her daughter’s lesbian desires? Is Marguerita’s story only an allegory of the ideal relationship between mother and daughter? None of these explanations really adds up and the reader is again left to his/her own devices. The process of signification can no longer rely on the causality of time, encouraging the reader to find new ways of making sense of the world.

3. Beyond Categories — The ‘Incidentity’ of Being

> You’re on earth. There’s no cure for that.  
> (Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*)

The process of signification via a reciprocal influencing of normative centre and ‘abject’ (a term introduced by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*), which — according to queer theorising — has always been at the heart

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2 An incident eerily similar to the one imagined by Lavery (also involving two young women – one dead, one surviving in a coma) happened in Michigan in April 2006, lending a quite unexpected authenticity to the play.
of our culture’s sexual discourse, is not restricted to sexuality alone. As the sexual aspect in anyone’s personality (or what we think of as our personality) is only one of many components of the self (albeit one that seems to have become ever more important in our society), the centre/abject dyad can be applied to various other cultural and personal discourses utilised by everyone to establish her/his place in society and his/her feeling of selfhood. Class and race are similar socio-cultural parameters that produce categories of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ similar to those generated by sexual discourse, while on a personal level binaries such as workaholic/bonvivant, sportive/bookish or liberal/conservative (to pick only a few random examples) set up a framework within which the individual can position and defend her/his own personal identity. When queer theorising tries to undermine the foundations of signification via binary categorisation, it thus not only calls into question the validity of distinct sexual categories, but also the existence of a stable personal identity, since the core of this identity, which can only be established by way of exclusion and negativity, remains as empty and void of essence as the dead centre of male heteronormativity, which Lavery very poignantly symbolizes in her play *More Light* by creating on stage a vast underground tomb for an Emperor with all sorts of sophisticated devices to keep the tomb from being found or entered, only to protect what is essentially no more than a dead and decaying body.

One way for Lavery to depict the ultimate insignificance of stable identities, sexual or else, is to let the characters such as Molly and Harriet or Ophelia move between, or even merge, different identities regardless of temporal or spatial limits as discussed above. Yet Lavery also comes up with an alternative way of positioning oneself in and to the world. Her characters appeal to a broad range of people (her plays have not only received rave reviews in both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, but have also met with enthusiastic response when performed at various schools) just because they are not primarily defined by certain

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3 That the word ‘identity’ has come to be an eminent marker of individuality, is most amazing, since it derives from Latin *idem* ‘same.’ Identity thus is ‘the quality of being the same,’ a notion that runs counter to our modern ideal of an individualised rather than a conformist society.
character traits, but by their individual responses to everyday reality, which happen to be as diverse and illogical as life itself. I propose the term ‘incidentity’ for this continual re-evaluation of the individual self and its connection to its surroundings at every moment, which does not fall back on binary terms of self-identification, but remains in constant flux as it deals with the vicissitudes of human existence. Incidentity helps the self to reconstitute its own signifying system all the time, forever preventing it from becoming rigid. The supposed security of stable signification patterns is traded in for the freedom of individual ‘world making,’ to use a term frequently brought into play in queer theorising by among others Annamarie Jagose and Michael Warner. I will now try to outline two of the strategies Lavery employs to exemplify manifestations of this ‘incidentity.’

3.1. Myths of Normalcy? — the Reality of Being Lesbian

Although desire, love, jealousy and attraction among women are regular features in Lavery’s plays, the word ‘lesbian’ itself is hardly ever uttered. Just as she refuses to be regarded as a lesbian writer, her plays (with the possible exception of Her Aching Heart) can hardly be said to be lesbian plays in the sense that they focus exclusively on the perils, plights or glories of being lesbian. Lavery’s plays are not about women who love other women, they just happen to feature them. The desire for other women is never treated as a fundamental disposition that places its bearer in a different or abnormal signifying system, according to Foucault a defining feature of homosexuality since the nineteenth century (cf. Foucault 43). In many cases, the sexual inclination of the characters involved is only mentioned in passing, while the play itself is concerned with very different aspects of human existence. Although Two Marias begins with a massive shouting match between Julia and her daughter Maria over the latter’s attraction to a girl (cf. 52f), this subject is soon abandoned. As soon as Marguerita and Maria del Morte appear, the play shifts its focus towards questions of grief, imagination and the mysteries of mother-daughter relationships. A similar case in point is More Light, where the awakening of lesbian desires in the youngest of the interred women, Playful Kitten, is only hinted at (cf. 50f) without ever being brought up again.
A Wedding Story (2000) is a play that marks Lavery’s shift towards the treatment of loss and illness in her work, a shift brought about among other things by the death of both of her parents in the space of one year. In an interview with The Independent in 2001, she looks back on the development of her writing:

When I wrote Her Aching Heart [1991] I was in my 40s and I thought the worst thing that could happen to you was a broken heart. But since then I’ve had life-changing events and I know better. I now write about the things that terrify me as a sort of comfort to see them worked out on stage. (Lee)

Even if Lavery’s main focus in A Wedding Story is on the consequences of Evelyn’s Alzheimer’s disease for her family (husband Peter, daughter Sally, and son Robin), a subplot portrays Sally’s relationship to Grace, a black girl she meets at a wedding reception. In what can pass as a neat illustration for society’s spatial segregation of abject groups (both a literal and a symbolic separation), Sally recounts the seating arrangements:

Seating Plan had me
on the table where they put
all the Flotsam…
The Divorced, The Widowed
The Gay…
The Low-Marriage-Potential Crowd…
The Difficult-To-Slot-In-The-Big-World Brigade… (14)

While the wedding ceremony goes through the motions customary for the celebration of such an event (champagne, best man’s speech, invocation of love and connubial bliss, etc.), Sally and Grace go through motions of their very own. They leave their allotted marginal space for a short but very intense sexual encounter in a cubicle in the Ladies Room. Sally’s comment that “[t]hey expect Our Table to behave badly. That’s why they invite us to weddings” (18) expresses a certain liberating aspect deriving from their abject position, while their worries about being caught in the act is a powerful reminder of the ever threatening intrusion of the normative regime (in the very fitting disguise of the bridesmaids) into the realm of the abject:

SALLY
The Ladies Powder Room at
Queer(ing) Traditions – Cracking Boundaries in Bryony Lavery’s Plays

The Saracen’s Head Hotel Bickley
is Ours Alone for but a moment…
…the young bridesmaids
are pattering this way… (19)

Sally and Grace continue their relationship beyond the cubicle and very soon they begin to refer to their liaison in terms redolent of the allegedly heteronormative institution of marriage. During their first major altercation, Sally cries out: “I know this…this is the honeymoon! This is the easy bit!” (31, emphasis in original) The signifying value of marriage for the perpetuation of binary categories of gender and/or sexual orientation becomes more and more dubious when Grace asks Sally to marry her, a proposal which Sally first rejects on the seemingly paradoxical grounds that this would be too ‘lesbian.’ She tells her brother Robin: “It’s like one of those dodgy fucking low-budget independent lesbian films… She said ‘Let’s get married’” (55).4 Later on, she describes marriage as

two people like…coupled
like a…chain…chains!…it’s
concave…not…convex…
looks in
not out (72, emphases original).

They do get married in the end, but it is a hardly a marriage ceremony that serves to propagate traditional norms. Held by a Danish woman minister, its emotional climax is not constituted by tear-jerking vows of fidelity and mutual support, but by a loud fart from Evelyn, who has by now reached the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease. She starts clapping, apparently very proud of her achievement, and soon the entire wedding crowd joins in and the play ends on a cheerful, if somewhat grotesque, note. The traditional concepts of ‘marriage’ and of ‘lesbianism’ are both

4 Sally and Grace here express two contrary positions on same-sex marriage. While Grace demands an equal right for every human being to partake in the benefits of being married, such as legal and social acceptance or financial advantages, Sally regards the institution of marriage generally as a tool for the proliferation of heteronormative ideology, which only reaffirms conventional categorisations like ‘lesbian.’ For a balanced discussion of this issue, cf. Jagose and Warner.
collapsed in this scene. In re-appropriating the supposedly heteronormative institution of ‘marriage,’ Lavery succeeds not only in blurring the boundaries between normative and abject behaviour, but also in revealing the ultimate futility of establishing those boundaries in the first place. In the face of illness and personal tragedy, the boundaries themselves become literally insignificant.

Another play that exposes the invalidity of binary categorisation in view of individual fate is *Nothing Compares to You*. Again, the same-sex orientation of some of the characters is casually revealed, as the family and friends of Mary are trying to deal with her death in a car accident. Lily, Mary’s long-time companion, is on the phone to her father:

She was my lover, Dad.
My lover.
I’m feeling so… bad.
I can’t tell you but it’s probably just a phase I’m going through.
Yes, it is probably nearly as bad as losing a husband or a wife, yes.
I’m in pieces. (*She smiles.*)
So is she.
The M4.
I don’t know which turn-off.
Car’s a write-off but what can you expect if you don’t buy British. (171)

The importance of the fact that his daughter had a female lover is eclipsed by technical niceties about the exact setting of the disastrous crash and the state of the car involved. As in *A Wedding Story*, the process of coming to terms with personal misfortune is coupled with the depiction of the sex and love life of those most affected by it. Helen is Lily’s platonic friend from childhood, who now comforts her over the fact of Mary’s death. Due to a technical *incident* involving Mary’s answerphone, Lily learns that Mary had cheated on her for some time before her death. She insists on meeting Rachel, Mary’s secret lover, and at the end of a long evening Lily and Rachel end up in bed together. Lavery offers the reader no clue as to the motives behind this, other than Lily’s answer to Rachel’s question what this was all about: “Life” (196), she says. Eventually, Lily gets together with Helen, again for no obvious reason except that “I want us to fall in love and live happily ever after” (208). The ultimate pointlessness of life, which at the same time is the
only timeless certainty about it, is finally confirmed by Mary, who has watched the action unfold from ‘above,’ accompanied by the Fylgias:

Dying yes yes yes!!
You end you end you end
We just die because we just die
simple as that simple...(209)

It is telling that in this moment of ultimate self-resolution, of the essential realisation of life as meaningless beyond itself, language itself disintegrates. The apprehension of final truths (and with it the definitive annihilation of binary classifications) can never be achieved in language. This fundamental incongruity of life and language is one of the major issues in queer theorising and also a driving force behind much of Lavery’s writing.

3.2. Laughing at Life — the Importance of Not Being Earnest

When human beings are confronted with a situation they cannot cope with, their most common reactions are aggressiveness or laughter. As I have tried to point out above, Lavery frequently explores real-life situations which transcend the framework of signification imposed on humanity by language, such as intense grief or the mysteries of love. It is therefore little wonder that one of the strategies of her characters under such extreme condition is humour, a humour that can seem grotesque or even perverse at times. Humour usually arises from an intentional mis-signification of signs, and it is exactly this controlled transgression of boundaries set up by good taste, propriety or morality (all of which are covert tools of any normative regime) that make humour such a powerful tool for challenging norms and conventional structures. Laughter could be argued to be the ideal soundtrack for queer theorising.

Lavery has an extraordinary talent for finding funniness under even the most tragic and hopeless of circumstances. Michael Billington has called this her “compassionate understanding of life’s erratic mixture of

5 The Fylgias are guardian spirits from Norwegian folklore who “often appear in dream-form in animal shape. If one sees a Fylgia while awake it indicates death. When someone dies, the Fylgia passes on to another member of the family” (144).
farce and sadness.” Out of the many possible examples for her amazing handling of humour, I will pick two instances from a play already discussed in this paper.

One of the recurrent symbols in *A Wedding Story* is a whoopee cushion, which Sally gives to Grace as a token of her affection, thus both revealing and re-appropriating one of the traditional customs of courtship:

_SALLY_

> The bits of you you take and give to them
> you’re so generous when
> you’re courting...
> ‘here’s my best bits…
> I’m Adorable’
> okay, now you put it on a chair
> and somebody sits down on it…  (38, emphases original)

The conventional patterns of courtship are seemingly undermined, since a whoopee cushion is not usually taken to constitute an appropriate present for a lover. On a closer look, however, the cushion is a powerful symbol for a lost feeling of innocence and security for sale. While Grace experiments with her present, Sally recounts the story of a particularly enjoyable past Christmas, when she herself got a whoopee cushion from her parents, who would never tire of sitting down on it, wondering where the rude noise came from (39f). This highly improbable combination of farting and redeeming fun reoccurs in the play’s final scene, when Evelyn’s fart and her subsequent clapping give a surprising and merry finale to Sally and Grace’s wedding ceremony. But it is not only the traditional discourse of love and marriage that Lavery wittily counteracts. Humour is also the only viable strategy with which to tackle the pointlessness and desperation of Evelyn’s illness. Towards the end of the play, Peter, Sally and Robin are preparing their wife/mother for the wedding ceremony:

_PETER_

> ...She would hate this…Sally!...
> hated being seen nude…Robin!…your mother…
> such a degrading Sal!…no, darling…Robi…
> Sally, pass me…
> Robin, get me that…
Half way through, exhausted, they drop their guard. Evelyn wanders off…
Robin!…Sally!…she's off again…
They start laughing…reluctantly…then in the next stage…a lot…until, by the end…all three are laughing.

ROBIN (all old jokes)
I’ll head her off at the pass, Kimo Sabe…!
PETER
No…you stay here, I’ll surround her!
SALLY
It is a far, far better thing we do now, than we have ever done!

Following speeches at once…Evelyn is enjoying herself. Laughing delightedly…

There is no way of making sense of Evelyn’s illness within the traditional framework of linguistic binary signification. Lavery highlights this earlier when she lets Evelyn, herself a specialist on neurological diseases, explain the exact workings of Alzheimer’s (44f). Her excellent knowledge of the structure of the disease does not prevent her from eventually succumbing to it. Logic (another pillar of traditional patterns of signification) fails in the face of tragedy, leaving irrationality (one form of which is humour) as the only possible way to create meaning for the individual.

Lavery deliberately refuses to offer the reader temporal linearity and logic causality as possible means of signification, mainly because of their essentialist nature. Instead of this rigid structure of signification, she displays individual strategies of how to re-evaluate one’s own identity, i.e. one’s existence at any given moment. It is because of this emphasis on individual strategies of world-making that Lavery’s writing can stand as an apt illustration for queer theorising.
Wolfgang Funk

Works Cited

Primary Literature:


Secondary Literature:


Staging ‘Death(s) of the Author:’
David Lodge’s Plays *The Writing Game*
and *Home Truths*

*Dying
Is an art, like everything else,
[...].
It’s the theatrical
Comeback in broad day.*

(Sylvia Plath)¹

1. Introduction: Author, Author, or David Lodge, ‘Alive and Kicking’

David Lodge’s by all means ‘vital’ writing spans four decades. Born in 1935, the retired professor of English literature now belongs to Britain’s pre-eminent novelist-critics, whose name is usually mentioned in the same breath with Malcolm Bradbury (Reckwitz 199–217; Widdowson 5–32). Lodge’s *oeuvre* includes thirteen novels, a considerable amount of essays, articles and several volumes of literary criticism, such as *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1971) or *After Bakhtin* (1990), to mention but two of his probably most influential collections. It would go far beyond the scope of this article to enter into a discussion of the major ideas

¹ The quotation is taken from Sylvia Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus” (*Collected Poems* 246).
exposed there. The following contribution, however, is neither going
to explore Lodge’s achievements as a critic nor as the author of exhaust-
ingly funny, even pointedly satirical, so-called ‘campus novels.’ Instead,
metaphorically speaking, it attempts to accompany ‘the novelist crossing
the road,’ following him into ‘uncharted territory,’ when intermittently
trying his hand at playwriting.

Lodge’s stage debut, The Writing Game: A Comedy, was produced at
the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (BRT) and first performed on May
12, 1990. The second one, Home Truths, also premiered at the BRT on
February 13, 1998. Both plays form part of a planned, though still in-
complete, trilogy dealing with the contemporary ‘writing business’ in
Britain in general and the issue of authorship in particular. In the “In-
roduction” to his second play, Lodge pinpoints his topic as follows: “In
[…]
The Writing Game, the situation with which I started was a short
residential creative writing course […]. In […] Home Truths, which also
focuses on professional writers, it is the journalistic interview” (vii).

As the reference in the chapter heading, Author, Author, taken from
the title-phrase of Lodge’s recently published fictional biography of
Henry James, already indicates, his preoccupation with questions of
authorship in general and the death of the author in particular (still)
figures prominently in his work (Ahrens 293–295). Even more so as it
ironically says at the beginning of the opening chapter that “the distin-
guished author is dying — slowly, but surely” (Author, Author 3). Sub-
sequently, the main argument of this article will be that Lodge not only
addresses but also dramatically enacts a number (self-imposed) ‘ways of
deaths of the author’ shaped by issues pertaining to the literary market,
as well as literary criticism and literary theory. Thus, his plays shall be
discussed with respect to various self-reflexive dramatic strategies.
However, before exploring this topic more closely with regard to The
Writing Game and Home Truths, I would like to briefly outline some
theoretical and aesthetic assumptions in order to establish a coherent
frame of reference for the following analyses.
2. Beyond Postmodern Authorial Mortification: The Comic Author as Critic — Comic Authorship as Criticism

With regard to the present overall topic, “Drama and/after Postmodernism,” the question whether or not Lodge may by called a ‘postmodern author’ in the strict sense needs some qualification. In a 1989 interview with Raymond H. Thompson Lodge declared: “As an academic critic, I’m a modernist.” An interview given to the Romanian literary scholar Lidia Vianu in 2001 shows that this opinion has not considerably changed over the time. Asked about his favourite type of criticism Lodge admits that he “dislike[s] criticism (i.e., poststructuralism) which is motivated primarily by literary politics” (Vianu). Thus, despite the fact that David Lodge is definitely a theoretically informed writer, the aforementioned statements sufficiently illustrate that it would be wrong to subsume him under the label ‘postmodern author.’ To put it bluntly, the discussion of Lodge in this context appears to be misleading and, paradoxically, appropriate at the same time. It is misleading because, mainly by his reputation as a witty campus-novelist, Lodge can be clearly categorised as a writer of, to use Peter Paul Schnierer’s term, “conventional comedy” (23). So it does not come as much of a surprise that his dramatic works, too, show a marked tendency of the same kind. This is especially relevant in view of the subtitle “A comedy” attached to The Writing Game and the fact that Home Truths may be characterised as a tragi-comedy of authorial revenge.

Evidently, Lodge’s work in general and his plays in particular are fundamentally indebted to ‘realism.’ In consequence, from a formal aesthetic point of view, Lodge’s dramatic works have not much in common with the contemporary experimental forms of comedy we come across, for example, in the works of Peter Barnes, Edward Bond (Innes 7–22), Peter Shaffer (Schnierer 23–44), or Tom Stoppard (Corballis passim), let alone the ‘in-yer-face comedy’ displayed by Sarah Daniels, Caryl Churchill or Timberlake Wertenbaker (Carlson 303–316; Dymkowski 33–44). Thus, in Lodge’s plays jokes or puns are neither employed as an aesthetic means to give the impression, for instance, of a violated chronological order or blurred spatial boundaries, nor is irony used as a psychological strategy to subject characters to fragmentation.
Accordingly, in his theoretical writing, Lodge questions the impact of Barthes' idea of the ‘Death of the Author:’

This proclamation, startling in 1968, is now a commonplace of academic criticism in the fashionable ‘deconstructionist’ mode, but has had little or no effect on the actual practice of writing outside the academy, which remains obstinately author-centred. Books are still identified and classified according to the author. The value attributed to books brings kudos, prizes and royalties to their authors, who are the object of considerable public interest. (“Milan Kundera” 156)

In view of the aforementioned statements, the following question comes to mind: What may the format of conventional comedy have to offer for the highly sophisticated field of postmodern drama in general and for topics dealing with the ‘mortification and/or survival’ of the author in particular? Even more so as Christopher Innes maintains in his article, “The Cutting Edge of Comedy” (1994): “[A]t least in England, comedy has the reputation of being unthreatening and cheerfully optimistic” (17). Obviously, Innes’s polemic highlights the format’s inherent — effectively counter-postmodernist — ‘lack-of-cutting-edginess,’ in other words, its tendency towards compromise, reconciliation and harmony. Subsequently, returning to the question of appropriateness, I would argue it is precisely in the reverse sense of Innes’s verdict that Lodge’s choice of the conventional comedy-frame gains significance. For all its allegedly affirmative potential hovering on the surface level, I would like to suggest that conventional comedy offers as uncompromising strategies as it appears supposedly reconciliatory and/or harmonising. Therefore, in the light of ‘conventionalism,’ what shall be examined more closely is how Lodge dramatically confronts the consequences of the postmodern theoretical premise of the ‘Death of the Author’ with the effects of postmodern cultural change, which manifests itself in the democratisation and commercialisation of the writing business.

3. Centre-Staging Varieties of Authorial Mortification

Generally speaking, Lodge’s concern in The Writing Game and Home Truths respectively, as, in fact, in most of his novels before and afterwards, is the life of upper-middle class academics and intellectuals whose
institutions become the target of satirical or comic transformations. The institution most thoroughly explored in Lodge’s plays, however, is the professional author being cruelly exposed to the demands of the reading public, the economic means of the writing business and jealousies of fellow writers. Thus, in his dramatic texts, Lodge deliberately focuses on the ‘struggles for survival’ of contemporary novelists equally troubled by facing the excesses of the market, mass-readership and messed-up literary criticism. In view of dramaturgy, his aesthetic scheme only partly ties in with the almost inflationary employment of, to use Martin Middeke’s expression, “specimen[s] of metadramatic frame-breaking” (172). Unlike the intentional deconstruction of dramatic illusion by means of, for example, intertextual or adaptational metadrama, Lodge is not interested in formal experiments of that kind. Instead, he draws on a number of comical self-reflexive strategies in order to disclose and emphasise the notorious ‘theatricality’ of the novel-writing business and its occasionally mortifying effects upon the authors involved in that system.

3.1. Facing Death by Distress in The Writing Game

Writing fiction […] is a difficult art, but it is also a fascinatingly private one.
(Malcolm Bradbury)²

The title, the setting and the character conception of The Writing Game³ are equally vital as they are already suggestive of the aforementioned agenda: Composed of two acts, the dramatic action roughly covers the time span of four days and is entirely set at the “Wheatcroft Centre, a seventeenth-century farmhouse and barn in Dorset, converted to accommodate short residential courses in creative writing” (WG, no page number). This location carries a tinge of Pinteresque claustrophobia, as one of the characters compares its atmosphere to “a pressure cooker” (WG 10). Obviously, the setting deliberately evokes another ‘small

² The quotation stems from Malcom Bradbury’s introduction (9) to his collection of plays for television written in September 1981 (published in 1982).
³ The title will subsequently be abbreviated to WG.
world.’ In this respect, Lodge’s ‘writers-survival-camp’ strongly resembles Totleigh Barton in Devon, “an isolated farmhouse surrounded by several acres of land” (Feinstein 216), which in 1968 became the first seat of the Arvon Foundation, where the idea of residential courses in creative writing originally gained momentum.

The cast consists of six characters: Jeremy Deane is a British poet and the organiser of the course. With his “cardigan and corduroy trousers” (WG 1), he makes much of a Ted Hughes sort of appearance, whose name, in turn, is closely associated with the pioneering activities of the Arvon Foundation towards the democratisation of the writing scene. According to the liberal Arvon-scheme, the participants of the course are, as indicated in the stage directions, “Housewives, retired people, unemployed” (WG 8). This heterogeneous group is represented by a young, rather ambitious woman in her late twenties, called Penny Sewell. The action, however, is centered around three writers-in-residence invited to join the course. They are currently suffering from carefully disguised writer’s blocks, the perhaps most common ‘lethal cause’ for what might be called authorial self-extinction. The first one, Leo Rafkin, is a campus-based Jewish-American novelist, aged about fifty, married, with three children by two wives, whose stories about “Jewish hang-ups about sex and the holocaust” (WG 70) bear some striking similarities with the public writer-image of Philip Roth. Furthermore, there is Maude Lockett, whose character profile appears to be fed by the career-figures of Helen Fielding (“Bridget Jones”) and Rosamunde Pilcher. Accordingly, Maude is a highly successful and sexually attractive author of nine novels, comprising “[c]omedy of manners plus love interest plus a little gynaecology” (WG 43). Her sales figures, as Leo jealously acknowledges, lately boosted up to “twenty thousand [copies] in hardback, [and] eighty thousand in paperback” (WG 24). On top of it all, she has four children and is married to Henry Lockett, an Oxford don. Henry, in turn, being left at home unguided, facing the vagaries of domestic routine, is not able to stand on his own feet. His physical absence on stage is compensated ironically by the notorious presence of his disembodied voice on the answerphone. With his frequent calls, Henry becomes much of a nuisance to Maude during the course of the play, and his behaviour conveys additional evidence to the
expression that behind every strong ‘writer-wife’ lurks a weak ‘scholar-
husband.’ However, the vicious writers-in-residence triangle is com-
pleted by ‘the asshole’ (WG 64) Simon St. Clair. Simon is dressed to
the latest fashion and is “good-looking in a slightly Mephistophelean
way” (WG 64). On the one hand, his appearance together with his sex-
ual appetite and a disrespectful but amusing cynicism gives him an air of
a prototypical ‘Dandy-intellectual’ novelist. On the other hand, his for-
amal-aesthetic “orgasms of self-loathing” (WG 87) which manifest them-
selves in “metafictional tricks” (ibid.) additionally mark him as the
stereotypical emblem of ‘the’ postmodern author. This synopsis clearly
reveals that the protagonists Leo, Maude and Simon form part of a set of
stock-like ‘contemporary-writer-in-distress’ characters. Furthermore,
the contrasting scheme at work here equally functions as a strategy to
underline and to further extend the established oppositional relationship
between the protagonists by means of gender differences on the surface
level, that is to say, the vital, i.e. proliferating female author pushes out
two male blocked authors. In short, the character conception and con-
stellation epitomise clashing viewpoints on the postmodern status
and/or state of the author respectively. Subsequently, it will be shown to
what extent Lodge manages to ‘centre-stage’ this complex issue.

Evidently, Lodge believes in the primacy of language. In conse-
quence, he must be at odds with postmodern theatre, which is de-
emphasizing verbal communication, prioritising physical performance.
Lest such a comment be seen as ‘reactionary,’ in an interview Lodge
conceded: “I need some structural principle […] to make the story hap-
pen” (qtd. in Thompson). This notion manifests itself not only in the
‘well-madeness’ of the characters or the plot-structure sketched above,
but also in the idea of dichotomy. Let me illustrate this point by drawing
attention to the following excerpt from the opening dialogue of the first
act:

JEREMY. You can make yourself a cup of tea or coffee here. (He pulls the plug out
of the sink and peers in) Oh Gawd!
LEO. What’s the matter?
JEREMY. Last community of playwrights seem to have clogged up the sink with
their Lapsang Suchong. I told them to use teabags.
LEO. D’you have a, whaddyacallit, plumber’s helper?
Ines Detmers

JEREMY. I think we call it plumber’s mate. […] Ugh. I suppose one could call this a particular unpleasant form of writer’s block.

Jeremy chuckles at his own joke, but Leo seems to think that writer’s block is no laughing matter. […]

JEREMY. Would you like a cup of tea?

LEO. I could use a cup of coffee. (WG 5, underlined emphasis added)

Obviously, the dialogue is designed to gain a few bursts of laughter from the audience. But apart from the aspect of simple diversion, one recognises that the comic effect is based on what during the course of the play evolves in recurring patterns of opposition. Belonging to different semantic fields, though, both highlighted word-pairs, “tea/coffee” and “plumber’s mate/plumber’s helper,” pinpoint binary transatlantic cultural differences, and thus metonymically indicate oppositions on a larger formal as well as ideological scale. This is to say, dualities of that kind determine and affect the treatment of a number of key issues, such as cuts across the lines of national identity (English vs. American) and gender, or attitudes towards love and sexuality. However, Lodge’s strategies of twinning and splitting are perfectly suited to give dramatic form to his thematic preoccupation with the ‘lethal status and/or state’ of the novelist.

In this respect, playing off the old conflict between ‘English amateurism’ and ‘American professionalism’ against one another, two diametrically opposed, though equally hypocritical literary value systems are fought over by the two leading male characters, Leo and Simon. According to their nationalities, Leo, for example, epitomises the American elitist ethos of progression, symbolised by a “portable word processor” (WG 6) he carries all around. Furthermore, he is constantly complaining about the “the rotting corpse of English literary life. […] The trouble with England is that it’s too damned small. […] Everybody knows everybody else in the charmed circle that runs the literary world” (WG 86–87). In contrast, Simon, embodying ‘Cool-Britannia’ understatement, “still depend[s] on the good old fashioned fountain pen” (WG 70). Accordingly, he expresses his dislike of the economic situation associated with the typical American writer as follows: “Nine out of ten work at a university. An entirely bogus academic subject has been invented to provide jobs for them. Fat salaries, pensions, grants” (WG 90).
Whereas Lodge explores the ‘lethal effects’ of the socio-economic state-of-the-art debate by means of dialogue, the play in addition formally reflects ideas of literary criticism, evidently the ‘Death of the Author,’ by means of the play-within-the-play device. In order to provide the battleground for literary theory, however, three entire scenes throughout the play are devoted to reading sessions where Maude (I.4), Leo (I.6) and Simon (II.2) are supposed to present some of their works-in-progress to the course participants. Leo and Maude perform during the course of the first act and read excerpts from realistic texts. Both of them, although for different reasons, entirely fail with the onstage audience. Maude, who is “seated in an upright chair […] lit by a spotlight” (WG 39), is literally pushed out of the limelight and thus silenced by Jeremy’s alarming announcement that Penny is missing after a harsh dispute about her manuscript with Leo Rafkin. The following evening, Leo reads from a pornographic and sexist short story tellingly entitled “Soap:” “Stripped, in the perfumed steam of the shower, she was pink and spotty and overweight. He soaped her all over, feeling her nipples spring to life under his slippery fingers. She moaned with unsimulated pleasure as he lathered her mousy quim” (WG 54). Leo’s ‘juicy’ performance ends up in a disaster: a morally hurt, door-banging audience leaves him deserted on stage. In contrast to that, they highly appreciate Simon’s radically experimental text called Instead of a Novel, delivered throughout the second act. It turns out to be a virtual piece of improvised metafiction, as Leo disgustedly puts it, a “do-it-yourself postmodernist novel […] Two hundred and fifty blank pages for the reader to write his own book” (WG 93). Apart from 250 blank pages, it exclusively consists of a number of paratextual elements including the title page, the blurb, sophisticated instructions on the dust jacket and an extended list of “Acknowledgements” (WG 81) which Simon uses to show off both his gorgeous intellect and his bi-sexual success. Thus, his radical neo-avantgarde format of the unwritten text not only figures as the practical formal-aesthetic correlative of the idea of the ‘Death of the Author,’ but at the same time provides the key to reverse the ‘process of mortification’ in order to revive creativity.

Subsequently, towards the end of the play, this incident triggers off a heated discussion among the writers. Reassured by his success, Simon
Ines Detmers

argues that the realistic novel is in crisis, mainly because, compared with his postmodern avantgarde-like fiction, it lacks innovative formal potential, and thus allegedly leads to nothing but dead ends. On the contrary, Maude and Leo strongly hold up the genre’s economic success. This final dispute, however, redirects the dynamic of the plot. It results in a peripeteia, used as a “special effect of marked ironic force” (Leech 64), by means of which rather unexpected but nevertheless satisfying solutions of the conflict are established. Thus, Maude becomes finally able to acknowledge that her marriage problems are responsible for her writer’s block. To account for this revelation she chooses the term Dis-suasion (WG 105) as the title for her new book and thus clearly associates it with Jane Austen’s novel Persuasion. Thwarted in his desire to achieve perfection and permanence, Leo decides to quit the novel-writing business and instead try his hand at playwriting.

3.2. Facing Death by Character Assassination in Home Truths

_The spectacle craves melodrama not deep currents._
(Anthony Barnett)4

In the following paragraphs the analysis of The Writing Game will be complemented by an investigation of Lodge’s second play, Home Truths.5 Here, as a dramatisation of a different aspect of the equally controversial attitudes towards the status of the writer, Lodge explores two more ‘death-variations of authorship.’ Whereas his first play focussed on ‘lethal causes’ such as writer’s block and intellectual jealousy, Lodge subsequently concentrates on, metaphorically speaking, ‘death by cultural suicide’ and ‘death by character assassination.’ As he explains in his brief introduction, the intersubjective format of the celebrity-interview, an “effective means of imparting ‘human interest’ to the reporting of […] cultural events and trends” (HT vii), is perfectly suited to be adapted as a mediative strategy on stage. With a slight shift in perspective towards the conflict of authorship and celebrity, Lodge takes a harder,

5 The title will subsequently be abbreviated to HT.
more serious look at the subject of the ‘Death of the Author.’ In this respect, the idiomatic title-expression ‘home truth,’ meaning “a wounding mention of a person’s weakness” (HT, no page number), already indicates the main focus of the play. Lodge explores shared traumatic experiences among the so-called ‘celebrities’ caused by “‘jugular journalism,’ […] a general trend in the quality press [towards] a kind of gossipy spitefulness, a gloating pleasure in the imputed failings or failures of those who are newsworthy” (HT ix).

Nevertheless, the play does not come across as oppressively earnest. The audience gets a fair share of laughter, mostly generated by the dry humour of the central character Adrian Ludlow, a health-crazy, yet distinguished novelist with a book on the A-level syllabus. Adrian figures as a blatant example of early promise not fulfilled. At the age of 22, with a best-selling debut-novel to his credit, tellingly entitled The Hideaway, he seemed bound for literary glory. But since its publication in 1968, Adrian has not written a book which is only halfway convincing. Thus, he has been frequently targeted by journalist critics. Apart from nasty reviews of his work, Adrian had to cope with a good deal of speculation concerning the reasons for his constant literary failure.

With its equally small cast, Home Truths is entirely set at Adrian’s home, a spacious modernised cottage near Gatwick in Sussex, and involves only three more characters. Apart from his wife Eleanor, there is his university friend Sam Sharp. He began his career as a playwright and later became a famous screenplay writer who is about to leave for Hollywood at the beginning of the play. The cast is completed by the inquisitive journalist Fanny Tarrant, whose telling second name phonetically evokes the ‘tyrant’ she is. Fanny works for the Sentinel Review, a glossy weekly, famous for its celebrity interviews. Known for her provocative style and unmasking questions, Fanny belongs to “the new breed of Rottweiler interviewers” (HT, no page number). As Sam disgustedly informs the audience, she is an “Essex girl with attitude” (HT 15) who, above all, “calls herself a post-feminist” (ibid.).

The short synopsis already shows that both Adrian and Sam suffer from journalistic attempts at public character assassination. In this respect it is no coincidence that the dramatic action is set in the summer of 1997 and precariously covers the last three weeks in the life of the late
Diana, Princess of Wales. This “real time”-scheme (HT vii) is established from the very beginning of the play and functions as a hetero-referential plot-frame. It is composed of a number of press quotations suggestive of the latest popular-cultural events. Dated on Sunday, August 10, the opening scene shows Adrian and his wife talking over front-page news at the breakfast table. Besides the fact that “Tony Blair has taken Ivanhoe with him to Tuscany” (HT 2), Eleanor mentions the advent of The Full Monty, a “new British film [...] about male strippers in Sheffield” (ibid.), an exhibition by Damien Hirst showing a “decapitated art critic in a tank of formaldehyde” (HT 3). Finally she refers to “Diana’s holiday with Dodi Fayed [...] the ultimate silly season story. One of the tabloids has paid a quarter of a million for pictures of them kissing on his yacht” (ibid.). The end of the play on Sunday, August 31, falls together with the celebrity couple’s lethal fate. The closing scene refers to the ubiquitous press coverage of the events around their accident. This time it is Fanny who informs Adrian that “Diana’s dead. [...] A car crash, in Paris. She was in a car with Dodi, being chased by paparazzi. The car skidded in a tunnel, smashed into a concrete column” (HT 108). This situation of being h(a)unted by the media provides the contextual frame for the ‘celebrity interview’ scenario between Fanny and Adrian.

The action centres on the question why Adrian stopped writing, and the even more crucial fact, as his friend Sam Sharp notes rather dismayed, that he — to overstate the argument — committed cultural suicide when he “backed out of the limelight” (HT 12). In contrast, Adrian, who does not share Sam’s opinion, claims that quitting the “fame game” (HT 33) actually saved his life: “I’ve become much more health-conscious since I gave up writing novels. [...] I suppose while I was pursuing literary immortality I didn’t think much about mortality” (HT 55). Famous Sam, however, who is Fanny Tarrant’s latest victim, feeling as if “been shat on from a great height by a bilious bird of prey” (HT 10), is seeking revenge in order to restore his honour. Subsequently, he comes up with the rather immodest proposal of a “reverse-interview” to hoax Fanny. Sam wants Adrian to “[t]urn the tables on the bitch! Interview her when she thinks she’s interviewing you! Dig into her background” (HT 19) and “write a piss-take profile of her” (HT 18).
But, to cut it short, this ‘revenge plot’ somehow misfires. Fanny almost immediately sees through the plan “to find her weak point, her Achilles heel, her guilty secret” (HT 32) because Adrian’s interrogation is deliberately not inquisitive enough. Instead, the closing scene of the first act shows them nude, enjoying a sauna together. Adrian, however, takes the opportunity and proposes a second, fresh beginning: “Let’s start again after a sauna. Not an interview. No set questions, and set answers. No disguises. No pretences. No games. Just a conversation that takes its own course” (HT 58).

The far-reaching consequences of this new mutual agreement are explored throughout the second act. In this respect, the ‘state of nudity’ becomes meaningful, at least, in a double sense. On the level of content, with its obvious sexual connotation, Lodge introduces the sauna scene as an alleged means of comic relief. On a symbolic level, however, nudity equally signifies a break down of moral barriers, reservations, and prejudices. As the play progresses, differently from what one may have expected, this fundamental change of conditions does not function as an act of liberation but, in a rather negative sense, leads to a lack of restraint among the characters. Thus, metaphorically speaking, being ‘stripped off,’ they are drawn into an emotional turmoil, which brings to light their carefully disguised, undigested conflicts, frustrations, and traumatic experiences from the past. The first of the only two scenes of the second act, however, consists of closely interlinked, indecent ‘acts of confession.’ The opening scene shows Adrian and Fanny, dressed only in towelling bathrobes. They talk about the triangular relationship Adrian shared with Eleanor and Sam, while both of them have their tape-recorders running:

**ADRIAN.** […] One night we got very mellow on some good weed and ended up in my bed. [Sam] was furious. He accused us both of betraying him, of destroying the wonderful, unique relationship we’d had between the three of us. Ellie and I tried to tell Sam that we hadn’t planned it, that it had just happened, but he wouldn’t be mollified. Until …

**FANNY.** Until Ellie offered to sleep with him too.

**ADRIAN.** […] It was the sixties, you know; we thought we were reinventing sexual relationships. So the next night I made myself scarce, and Ellie went to bed with Sam. He and I never discussed it afterwards, and we went back to being a chaste, platonic threesome. (HT 69)
When Eleanor returns home unexpectedly early, she finds her husband and the journalist in an allegedly intimate situation. A second later, she notices Fanny’s tape-recorder and has a go at the recordings. After having listened to them, she accuses Adrian of having betrayed her. In turn, however, this incident triggers off ‘Eleanor’s confession.’ Without realising that Fanny secretly switched on the tape again, she informs her that Adrian’s decision to stop writing novels had nothing to do with a crisis in creativity or a writer’s block but merely with vanity and narcissism: “If you don’t enthuse about their work they sulk […]. He kept thinking it would happen again, that royal flush of rave reviews. It didn’t. Each novel was a worse ordeal than the one before” (HT 80). Even when Eleanor finally recognises Fanny’s betrayal, the journalist reacts unashamedly professional: “You were pissed off with your husband so you shopped him to me” (HT 82). To cut things short here, during their vicious playing off of secrets against one another, the characters are unexpectedly hit by the news of Lady Di’s death in Paris. Adrian’s statement suffices to explain, metaphorically speaking, the incident’s ‘deadening’ effect on their farce: “It’s so incredibly poetic. Like a Greek tragedy. You don’t expect life to imitate art so closely” (HT 112).

4. Conclusion

Life is too important.
We can’t afford the luxury of this artificial frivolity …!
(Tom Stoppard)⁶

To sum up, with Lodge’s stated affinity with an Aristotelean dramaturgy in view, both plays, The Writing Game and Home Truths, could just as well have been written before the advent of postmodernism. In turn, it cannot be overlooked that without the provocative, postmodern premise of the ‘Death of the Author,’ Lodge would have probably hardly ever

⁶ The quotation comes from Tom Stoppard’s play Cahoot’s Macbeth (qtd. from Corballis 133).
thought about the topic. As the analyses have shown, Lodge strongly pleads for the ‘resurrection and/or survival of the author’ and at the same time he increasingly side-steps postmodernist aesthetics. Thus, the release of the plays during the 1990s could most probably be regarded as a clear statement against the dominance of radical experiment in contemporary drama. On the one hand, with the Lodgean metaphor of the writer at the crossroads in mind, one might argue that David Lodge’s way leads into the direction of ‘re-conventionalization.’ This is to say that he in a sense discloses the conventionalism of postmodernism by unmasking its rather notorious striving for deconstruction, subversion, and/or de-stabilising as aesthetic means which — to rephrase W. H. Auden — “make nothing happen.” On the other hand, seeing things more relaxed, Lodge’s attempt at the stage might be viewed as an ironic epitome of what Tom Stoppard had in mind when he said in an interview: “I suspect that the whole trick is to undermine the audience’s security about what it thinks it knows at any moment” (Thirlwell).

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“Who’s youse?”
Issues of Language and Addressee in Minimalist Monologue in Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie*

Good authors too
Who once knew better words,
Now only use four letter words
Writing prose,
Anything goes.
(Cole Porter, “Anything Goes,” 1934)

*Introduction*

The title of this volume, *Drama and/after Postmodernism*, might suggest some malaise within the community active in ‘literary theory’ discussions and debate. Some may argue that one cause of the malaise is a feeling that for whatever reason the shelf life of ‘postmodernism’ is approaching, or may have even reached, its end. Postmodernism may have

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1 The spark for this paper lies in the realisation that foreign language students who appear to be at ease when working with Shakespeare and Donne, or with Austen and Shaw, have serious difficulties when working on the text of Mark O’Rowe’s 1999 play *Howie the Rookie* and in the wish to examine to what extent these difficulties have their roots in the language of the play.
by now made all the valuable contributions it is able to make to literary discussion, thus the need to move on. Others may argue that the problem lies at postmodernism’s ‘all embracing’ heart. If postmodernism is ‘all embracing’ then what can be its use or purpose when everything can be included under the same umbrella be it written by Cervantes, Sterne, Wilde, Borges, Eco, Lodge or Crimp?

The ‘malaise’ may well be found among those who feel a growing resistance to current ‘literary theory’ practices in general. There is an opinion that ‘literary theory’ is becoming too concerned with itself, with meta-theory, to be able to make any lasting and valuable contributions to the study of literary texts. The danger here is to assume that there is such a thing as a ‘literary theory’ in the same way that a ‘theory of relativity,’ a ‘theory of evolution’ or even a ‘theory of language’ exist or may have existed.

Jonathan Culler suggests that literary theory as such does not exist. He argues that literary theory is more an activity, a “body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define” (3). It is an activity that draws upon works from a range of different disciplines such as anthropology (Barthes), psychoanalysis (Lacan), philosophy (Derrida), social and intellectual history (Foucault), gender studies (Spivak), political theory (Althusser) and linguistics (Saussure), to name only a few.

This list covers not only a range of subject areas, it also covers a range of working practices. For example, Foucault’s work is analytical, intellectual. It is speculative and is not based on empirical evidence. Derrida’s discussion of Rousseau’s *Confessions* is philosophical. While it is based on a specific text, it is essentially a discussion of the ideas generated by the text rather than a discussion of the workings and nature of the ‘text’ itself. Saussure, and later Chomsky, sought to describe and explain the systems that underlie everyday use of language. Both these linguists figure regularly in the literary theory debate. But like Foucault and Derrida, in the end, their work is ‘speculative.’

If there is a malaise amongst ‘literary theory’ practitioners then, could it have its origins in an ever increasing lack of meaningful contact between the ‘data,’ the literary works themselves, and the debates generated around these same literary works where theory is central and the
‘literature’ itself in danger of being banished to the margins? Is it in any way detrimental to a ‘theoretical’ debate to include empirical evidence?

This paper will seek to demonstrate that theory need not necessarily be divorced from empirical evidence and that there are advantages in an approach that places its focus on the centrality of language within literary studies. To do this, it is necessary to turn away for a moment from the platonic, speculative work of the likes of Saussure and Chomsky to see what can be offered to literary discussion by a more ‘empiricist’ approach to language study. The paper will begin with some theoretical background to the approach to language analysis used and then, after a short introduction to Mark O’Rowe’s play Howie the Rookie, provide examples of the analysis in operation.

The Theoretical Background to Text Analysis

The theoretical background to the language analysis approach used in this paper owes much to the work of the British linguist J. R. Firth, who in the 1950s established a distinctly British approach to the study of language. Unlike Chomsky, whose work dominated the 1960s and 1970s and whose approach was to see language as a cognitive, biological phenomenon the study of which required a reliance on the ‘intuition’ of the researcher, Firth insisted that language should be studied in ‘naturally occurring contexts’ and that ‘meaning’ should be central. Firth’s early work was continued by Michael Halliday. Among other things, Halliday identified three central language functions, the interpersonal, the notional and the syntactic. He also developed the concept of ‘given and new’ which suggests that ‘successful’ utterances have an element of the ‘given,’ the information the participants in a communicative event share, and the ‘new,’ the information hitherto unshared which facilitates the development of the communicative event (cf. Halliday). Halliday also made a major contribution to early studies of ‘discourse,’ that is to say the study of language above the level of the sentence, with his work on coherence and cohesion in texts (cf. Halliday and Hasan).

It was in the 1970s that John Sinclair started to develop a computer-based corpus to extend his earlier work on the study of ‘discourse.’ For him, as for Firth and Halliday before him, ‘meaning’ was central to lan-
language study, which had to be based on ‘naturally occurring texts.’ Also, for Sinclair, ‘meaning’ and ‘form’ were inseparable. In anticipating the role the computer could play in the study of language he at all times remained adamant on the necessity of reliable evidence. Unlike Chomsky, Sinclair is an empiricist. His revolutionary work in lexicography in the 1980s led to the establishment of the 400 million-word ‘Bank of English’ corpus and changed the nature of language study and dictionary development thereafter.

Sinclair’s 1982 paper “The Planes of Discourse” is probably the first to seek to provide a theoretical basis for the study of all occasions of language use, which includes literary use. He writes:

Literature is a prime example of language in use; no systematic apparatus can claim to describe a language if it does not embrace the literature also; and not as a freakish development but as a natural specialization of categories which are required in other parts of the descriptive system. (51)

Sinclair also develops the concept of two ‘planes’ of discourse, the ‘interactive plane’ and the ‘autonomous plane.’

Language in use has two aspects; at one and the same time it is both a continuous negotiation between participants, and a developing record of experience. (52)

The ‘interactive plane’ of discourse is where participants manage their relationship with each other. The ‘autonomous plane’ is where the shared experience of the participants is developed. These two levels of discourse can to an extent, but only to an extent, be captured pronominally. The I, you, we pronouns can signal the ‘continuous negotiation between participants,’ the interactive plane, while he/she/it/they can signal the ‘developing record of experience,’ the autonomous plane.

Central to Sinclair’s theoretical work and analytical practice is the importance of lexis, both in terms of the individual word and lexical units larger than the word. He argues that, in the face of corpus evidence now available, it is no longer possible to sustain the long held principle in linguistic studies that syntax should have primacy over lexis. Sinclair holds the view that “collocations and idiomatic but very frequently occurring combinations were the real glue that held texts together” (Carter 3).
Monologue in Irish Theatre

The economics of theatre production in 1990s Ireland contributed to the production of a number of exciting plays by young Irish writers based upon monologue. Conall Morrison’s *Hard to Believe* (1995) and Michael West’s *Foley* (2000) are but two examples. Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie* is also a play based on monologue but, unlike the plays by West and Morrison, it involves two actors who appear on stage one after the other.

There are other essential differences between O’Rowe’s play and the works by West and Morrison. One of these concerns the degree of minimalism employed. In a sense, any play based upon monologue could be called ‘minimalist,’ it only presents one actor. But a quick look at the opening lines of each of the three plays reveals different kinds and degrees of minimalism:

*Hard to Believe*


*Foster:* Aah. Music to top yourself to. Scuttle yourself. [...] sad but happy. Oh, I’ve always been a cultured man. Too fucking right, I have. (311)

*Foley*

*Foley enters.*

I used to associate solitude with self-improvement and self knowledge [...] (1)

*Howie the Rookie*

**PART ONE**

The Howie Lee

Smoke.

Black smoke ahead there, north end of the field. Thick, billowin’ curlin’ up.

Somethin’ burnin’.

Me, The Howie, south end, amblin’.

Approachin’. (7)
Morrison’s stage directions together with the music are quite generous compared to West’s “A table and a chair. Foley enters.” O’Rowe’s stage instructions are non-existent. Also both the West and the Morrison extracts contain ‘fully formed’ readily recognisable grammatical clauses. This is not the case with Mark O’Rowe. In *Howie the Rookie* O’Rowe has, through reducing the language of his text to the absolute minimum, sought to heighten the ‘here and now’ nature of the action presented.2

The ‘here and now’ aspect of *Howie the Rookie* constitutes yet another major difference between O’Rowe’s play and those of Morrison and West. Both *Hard to Believe* and *Foley* can be likened to traditional ‘storytelling.’ They both tell a story about something that has happened. O’Rowe on the other hand seeks to present a story on stage that is happening before the audience’s very eyes. With Morrison and West, the ‘action’ of the play is predominantly the telling, in the present, of a story that happened in the past. O’Rowe’s play is the telling in the present, of a story that is happening in the present, the very ‘here and now.’ What is more, the storyteller is both storyteller and participant in the very story that is ‘happening/being told,’ a story that involves some twenty-six characters of whom all but four or five have ‘speaking roles.’ The demands upon the theatre audience’s imagination are enormous and the demands upon the imagination of anyone reading the text even more so.

*The Language of Howie the Rookie*3

*Howie the Rookie* is a play about youth in Tallaght, a working class area on the outskirts of Dublin. It is inevitable therefore that there will be language use at the level of lexis (vocabulary) that will be quite different from what many non-Irish readers will have experienced either as general language learners or indeed as students of more classical literature in

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2 Personal communication: in discussion after the 1999 Irish Times Theatre Awards ceremony where *Howie the Rookie* won the award for the best new Irish play.

3 I am deeply indebted to Dr Rolf Kreyer of the Englisches Seminar (Sprachwissenschaft) University of Bonn for essential technical help with the frequency counts and concordances for *Howie the Rookie* upon which this section is based.
English. They are unlikely to be familiar with such expressions as gaff, dote, youse, skit, jacks, nip or ninnies. This problem can be partially resolved by the provision of a glossary which is, however, not provided by O’Rowe.

More difficult to deal with perhaps is the occurrence of words that appear familiar to the reader but in fact are used in unfamiliar ways. One such word is fuck in its various forms. The word count for Howie the Rookie shows that fuck in all its various forms occurs 121 times, a very high frequency indeed. Of these fuck as a verb, meaning to have sex, occurs only three times.

In Part One of the play alone the form fuckin’ occurs 47 times. Whilst most of the occurrences would conform to the dictionary definition that suggests this form is used to express anger, annoyance or frustration, there are many occasions in the play when this is clearly not the case. Consider the following examples:

1. the/brother, you know?/He’s the fuckin’ brud, he is./Out the front door,
2. him like The Christie; like the fuckin’ Linford, flutes bouncin’/around
3. I’m like Tarzan./I dive./Like the fuckin’ Weismuller, I am./I dive, I sail,

Here fuckin’ is not at all connected to any negative emotion. Just the opposite in fact. Howie is very fond of his little brother. And he is proudly comparing his own physical prowess with that of Linford Christie (a British Olympic medalist and for a time the fastest man in the world) and Johnny Weismuller (who won five Olympic gold medals for swimming and is famous for his role as Tarzan in a series of Hollywood films of the 1940s). It might be more accurate then to see fuckin’ as an ‘intensifier’ which has no intrinsic meaning at all relating to positive or negative feelings. In Howie the Rookie most of the occurrences do in fact relate to frustration but we only know this from the context, not from any fixed ‘meaning’ of the individual word. It is also important to point out that ‘grammatically’ these occurrences in no way relate to familiar ‘-ing’ forms of words, as they are neither present participles nor gerunds. What might appear to the reader as a familiar word is in fact operating quite differently from the way the reader may have experienced up to that point. Fuckin’ is being used as an ‘intensifier’ but an intensifier that carries no ‘intrinsic’ emotional value. The answer to the
question whether *fuckin’* has positive or negative connotations has to be sought in the context and lexical patterning in which it occurs.

What is more, it is pertinent to mention that, whilst the examples above all occur in the pattern *fuckin’* + noun, the large number of occurrences in the play occur in the pattern *fuckin’* + adjective. Adjectives are often seen as ‘describing nouns.’ In fact adjectives, certainly those adjectives that can occur together with an ‘intensifier,’ usually describe what a speaker/writer thinks about a noun and they say little or nothing about the noun itself. Adjectives then constitute a powerful linguistic tool in the management of social relationships, especially when accompanied by ‘intensifiers.’ (Note the use, and function, of ‘powerful’ here!)

There is one regular, if infrequent, grammatical aspect of *fuck* that is of interest given the steadiness of the environment in which it occurs. Below are the occurrences of *fuck* as a noun.

(4) It’s your *fuckin’* fault./ The *fuck* can it be my fault?/
(5) trick again, grabbin’ me business, the *fuck* did you come out of?/
(6) lip into me womb, she says./Shut the *fuck* up, I says, take her hand off me
(7) Tell me who the *fuck* we’re after./After someone
(8) Stop, stand, cock me tush./ The *fuck’re* you burnin’?/Me mat,
(9) runnin’,/tryin’ to catch up. The *fuck’s* that? Spin ’round quicko./

Of the six occurrences four, (4), (5) (8) and (9), are in the environment of an interrogative and two, (6) and (7), an imperative (one of which also contains a ‘question’ in the subordinate clause). In minimalising the language of the text for the reasons given above, O’Rowe has not, on these occasions, included the question words what or where in the interrogative utterances. The printed text marks these as interrogatives using question marks but for a full understanding of the utterance the reader still has to supply the appropriate question word based on the context in which the utterance occurs.

Another point here is that, like the I/you pronouns, interrogative and imperative syntactic forms are also signals of the ‘interactive plane’ of discourse, the ‘continuous negotiation between participants.’ However, in two of the above cases, (4) and (9), not only does the reader have to supply the missing question words, s/he also has to work hard to establish who the ‘participants’ in the utterances actually are. In (5) and (6) Howie is speaking to Avalanche who has suddenly appeared behind him.
while he is in the pub’s urinal. In (7) and (8) Howie is speaking to Ollie. But neither (4) nor (9) is clear. Example (4) is in fact the last two lines of the first part of the play. Howie has returned home to find that his little brother has been killed and his mother is blaming Howie for his younger brother’s death. Confused Howie goes away from the house. It is not clear from the text whether he is engaged in an ‘inner dialogue’ as Howie or whether as combined ‘character/storyteller’ he is actually speaking directly to an addressee, the audience/reader. Either would seem possible though of course in a theatrical production the actor only has to decide which way to interpret the script and make it clear to the audience.

I will return to the question of the ‘who is talking to whom’ later. First, however, I would like to look at another similar example from the text which like *fuck* does underscore Sinclair’s position on the inseparability of meaning and form.

In the text the frequency of occurrence of the word *me* is the third highest of all, after the words *the* and *I*. *The* usually tops most frequency of occurrence counts for most types of ‘naturally occurring texts.’ But that *me* should rank so high in the count is at first glance quite surprising. After all isn’t *me* an object first person singular pronoun? It is clear why *I* should have such a high count. After all the text consists of two monologues in which each character both tells a story in which he is the principle ‘actor.’

After a quick glance at the concordance for *me* it becomes immediately clear why the frequency is so high and why the standard definition of *me* as a first person object pronoun is not at all adequate enough to fully account for the use of *me* in this text. On the basis of two samples, the first fifty occurrences and the last fifty occurrences, one can observe that *me* has uses other than as an object pronoun. In these random 100 examples *me* is used as an object pronoun 40 times, as a subject pronoun

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4 It is interesting to note here, though, that e.g. in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* both *I* and *you* occur more frequently than *the*, which is an indicator that this play is more about relationships between people than about what they have to say. In Sinclair’s terms there is a stronger emphasis on the ‘interactive plane’ than on the ‘autonomous plane.’
13 times and as a possessive adjective (first person singular) 47 times. Below are some examples of the use of *me* as possessive adjective and as subject pronoun.

(10) The Howie, fuck youse. Up to *me* bedroom, slide the bolt of privacy
(11) Aahhhh!/Flood from *me* cock. Piss. A nice one./Footsteps
(12) the oul’ one./Tryin’ to eat *me* dinner, sittin’, she’s at me.
(13) wake up, she’s fuckin’/poundin’ on *me* door./Get off the bed, over, slide
(14) At me goodo, she’s in *me* face; pop socks an’ cardigan.
(15) getting a new tat – A tat on *me* gat, she says – Ollie’s tryin’ to keep
(16) freezin’, cold enough to stop *me* heart – I love it –/dressed an’ down.
(17) The fuck’re you burnin’? *Me* mat, he says./Ollie’s flat befits
(18) back of Ollie’s flat, *me* mate/Ollie’s an’, Jesus, it is Ollie,
(19) Trip on the step, I go on *me* snot./Side of the road, I’m out
(20) nice./Dirty rags, polish *me* tool, nice one./Lie back,
(21) Stop, stand, cock *me* tush./The fuck’re you burnin’?
(22) Passin’ through the field, *me* way home./Field, the back of the
(23) curlin’ up./Somethin’ burnin’ *me*, The Howie, south end, amblin’.
(24) Makin’ sure it all goes up. *Me*, The Howie Lee, getting’ closer
(26) Mind Mousey./I’m busy./*Me* an’ ‘your oul’fella’s goin’ the fort.

The four occurrences of *me* as subject pronoun are particularly relevant in the discussion of the ‘interactive plane’ of discourse. The first two occurrences listed are examples of the text/actor addressing the audience (reader) and performing the function of establishing the identity of the character on stage. The second two occurrences are examples of characters in the ‘story’ addressing each other using *me* and not *I*. The first is Ollie talking to Howie and the second Howie’s mother talking to Howie. In choosing to write a play based on a minimalist monologue, O’Rowe has denied himself the common theatrical conventions for letting the audience know who is who on stage, the servant announcing the arrival of someone for example. In the opening moments of *Howie the Rookie* O’Rowe has sought to resolve the problem by simply using the pronoun *me* on two occasions, each very close to each other, with the second occasion repeating and slightly developing the first by adding the

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5 The examples of *me* in subject position are listed in order of occurrence in the text.
all important surname, Lee. Howie’s identification is then further underscored with the exchange of standard greetings between himself and Ollie:

[…] All right, Ollie?
    All right, The Howie? (7)

In these early exchanges in the play there is no real difficulty for a reader to identify who is speaking to whom, but as the play develops, as its story becomes more complex with the introduction of more characters and as the overall pace steadily increases, it becomes more problematic for a reader to identify immediately exactly who is speaking to whom.

Before looking at specific language aspects of this problem, it is useful to consider for a moment some of the characteristics of storytelling. Howie the Rookie is to a very large extent an exercise in storytelling and an awareness of some of the basic features of storytelling can help with the reading of the script. Whilst the play has many aspects of storytelling, there is one big difference. As mentioned above, the action of the story takes place in the ‘here and now,’ in performance the story is happening on stage in front of the audience’s eyes. When being read, the story takes place in the imagination of the reader as it is being read. With O’Rowe’s story there is no ‘Once upon a time’ to establish the events as having already happened and this difference can be a permanent source of difficulty for a reader. On the other hand, an awareness of the similarities between the play and storytelling can be of particular value. In storytelling, the storyteller will often put the storyline ‘on hold’ for a while in order to offer some background knowledge essential for a full understanding of the story. The storyteller will say things like: “Now remember, the queen did not know that the frog was really a bewitched prince.” Expressions such as Now remember signal to the listeners that there is a boundary of some kind within the structure of the overall discourse of the story. This use of the imperative together with now is an ‘interactive signal,’ a direct address to the listener who is immediately aware of a breaking away, albeit temporary, from the development of the story. There are many occasions in Howie the Rookie when the progress of the story is ‘interrupted’ in order to provide the audience/reader with an explanation, an evaluation or some background
In the extract below Howie is trying to persuade Susan to babysit for his little brother Mousey:

D’you wanna babysit for me brud? I says. For The Mousey Lee?
Bit of charity, you see?
The oul’one an’ oul’fella’s goin’ down the fort, need someone to mind him.
Em . . . she says. (14)

The you in the utterance Bit of charity, you see is a direct address to the audience/reader, not to the character Susan. For a very short moment the actor steps out of his ‘Howie as Howie role’ and into ‘Howie as storyteller role.’ On this occasion the direct address signals a departure from the development of the story to provide a ‘gloss’ on Howie’s action of offering Susan the babysitting job. This example is one of the telling of the story being put on hold for an extremely short time, just one utterance. The problem here for the reader is that there is no overt signal that signals the change of addressee. It is the reader’s ‘knowledge of the world’ that signals the change. Under the circumstances Howie is most unlikely to describe, to Susan’s face, his offer to let her babysit as a ‘bit of charity.’

Another example of the plot being on hold for the provision of background information is the following:

A) Tell me somethin’ first.
We go out first.
A morsel, man. Tell me who the fuck we’re after.

B) After someone, you’re lookin’ for them. Gonna give them a hidin’, hurt them, you’re chasin’ them.
Someone’s after you, you’re hunted.

C) Tells me we’re after The Rookie Lee. (11)

In this extract, Rookie switches from enacting the dialogue between himself and Peaches to explaining to the audience/reader the meaning of to be after someone. The layout in the play script page6 hints at three

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6 The labels ‘A) B) C)’ do not occur in the play’s script but the gaps between the utterances do.
different aspects of the discourse, direct dialogue in section A), a gloss of be after someone in section B) and reported speech with present tense tells in section C). The only linguistic signal of the change of addressee in section B) is the word you. You is not used here to refer specifically to the audience nor is it used to refer to a character in the story. You here is used in the sense of the neutral one.

These two examples of putting the story ‘on hold,’ of a change in the addressee involve the use of the pronoun ‘you.’ There are also many examples of change of addressee that are not signalled by pronoun use at all. Consider the following extract:

All right, Susan?
All right, she says.
Crashed her car into a wall, few weeks ago.
Gards an’ firemen pulled up, car was wrecked, but she wasn’t in it.
Men were sent to look around the area, see if she was wanderin’ ‘round, delirious or somethin’.

Was an hour ‘fore someone thought about lookin’ in the big yellow skip was behind the wall an’ there she was all wrecked to bits, unconscious. Must’ve wandered off an’ climbed in.

Shock, you know?

Poor woman had no insurance, nothin’. Damaged herself a bit financially too. She’s off work, single, not too mobile. (14)

The point at which the story is put on hold whilst background information is given, or, in other words, the point at which, in Sinclair’s terms, there is a ‘plane change,’ has no overt direct interpersonal address signal, no imperative form or discourse marker like now. There are, however, two very significant, if not immediately clear, linguistic signals, the move away from direct dialogue and the change from present tense to past tense. These linguistic changes signal the departure from the relating of the events in the story to the provision of some background information. Howie the storyteller is now addressing his audience/reader. Underscoring this, late in the explanation there is an embedded gloss on the ‘information’ explaining Susan’s behaviour with the direct address to the audience/reader in Shock, you know.
The question of the use of verb tense as a marker to distinguish between the ‘here and now’ development of the action and the provision of essential background information can be clearly illustrated by comparing the opening sequence of Part One of the play with the opening sequence of Part Two.

**PART ONE**
The Howie

Smoke.

Black smoke ahead there, north end of the field.

Thick, billowin’ curlin’ up.

Somethin’ burnin’.

Me, The Howie, south end, amblin’.

Approachin’.

**(7)**

**PART TWO**
The Rookie

Oul’fella left us for this tramp, this ten years younger hooer could slicken up better than the oul’ one.

Moved in with her treated her as his ever lovin’, neglected me the fuck – me sisters. The oul’ one hit it hard then, whiskey an’ vodka.

Thought it made him virile, he did, such a stud, but I showed him what a real stud is. **(30)**

Here the use of tenses is crucial. In Part One the minimal language with the shortened present participles immediately establishes the ‘here and now’ nature of the action/story. The action is happening as the story is being told. At the beginning of Part Two not only is there the use of the past tense but also the use of almost ‘complete’ sentences which signal that this section is providing background information rather than continuing with the ‘here and now’ story/action.

In the ‘Susan’ extract above, we have seen how ‘embedding’ of the gloss type can occur in the sections of the story providing ‘background information.’ There is another type of embedding involving a switch between tenses that might lead to confusion. In the extract below, Rookie Lee is explaining to the audience/reader why he needs to find a large amount of money quickly. When he suddenly developed a strong itch, he inadvertently knocked over a bucket containing some fish Ladyboy had bought as a present for his friend McGee.

Last week, I bumped into Ladyboy in the street, few lads crouched ‘round a clear bucket of betas, these little fish that’s supposed to fight, supposed to knock each other’s blocks off.
“Who’s youse?” Issues of Language and Addressee in Mark O’Rowe’s Howie the Rookie

Ladyboy tells us the fishes’re from Siam, which is Thailand an’ they fight them like cockfightin’. (33)

The use of *Last week* in the sentence initial position and the past tense is a clear signal that the ‘here and now’ has been temporarily abandoned. But while the story being told happened in the past and has been clearly signalled as such, the storyteller, The Rookie Lee, wishing to increase the impact of his ‘background’ story quickly switches to the use of the present tense. He first uses the present to provide a ‘gloss’ on the term ‘betas,’ and then, in what has often been referred to as ‘the historic present,’ he uses the present tense to make everything in the ‘sub story’ more immediate to the audience/listener. Embedding of this nature can once again make it difficult for a reader of the text to be constantly aware of who is actually speaking to whom. When is the text/actor a character in the story and when is the text/actor engaging in a direct address of the reader/audience?

Before considering the final example it will be helpful to look at what Sinclair says about written discourse structure. He makes two central points:

Language in use, whether written or spoken, is involved in the process of creating and sharing meaning between two participants. It therefore consists in part of features which organize the sharing of meaning, as well as features that create the meaning. (82)

[Each new sentence encapsulates the previous one by an act of reference. (83)]

Sinclair goes on to point out that where sentences encapsulate ‘clearly and explicitly’ the previous sentences, two distinct mechanisms can be identified, the ‘logical act’ (using logical connectors like *however, so etc.*) and the ‘deictic act’ (using pronouns and other deictic forms such as the verb *do*). The extract below is another example of the difficulty of identifying who is addressing whom whether it be in terms of characters within the story or of the storyteller/text listener/reader. This is a difficulty involving the ‘sharing of meaning’ rather than the ‘creation of meaning.’ It is a difficulty created by deixis which deixis then resolves.

In this extract, Rookie Lee, the day after his being beaten up by Howie Lee, is in the pub wondering how he will get together enough money to pay for the fish.
Wash me hands an’ go back in the pub.

Bushmills an’ ice, please, John. Good bloke. Sit in the corner, I’ll bring it over. I do and he does, double for a single, price-wise, ‘cos of me injuries, see, ‘cos he feels for me, gives me empathy. (32)

Here the central problem is *Sit in the corner*. After the frequent use of expressions such as ‘Wash me hands an’ go back in the pub’ where the subject *I* has been omitted, it is quite understandable that a reader reading linearly might well assume that the subject of ‘Sit in the corner’ is also *I*. Even the expression “I’ll bring it over” can be ambiguous in terms of who is speaking. It is only on reaching ‘I do and he does’ that the reading flow might be jolted. The deixis in this sentence is intense. It is both pronominal and verbal. Who is the *I*? Who is the *he* and what actions are referred to by *do/does*? Re-writing this section as a more traditional play script might be of help.

Rookie washes his hands and goes back into the pub.

**ROOKIE**: Bushmills an’ ice please John. *(to the audience)* Good bloke John.

**JOHN**: Sit down, I’ll bring it over.

**Rookie**: *(to the audience)* Sit down and John brings over the whisky, a double instead of a single.

**Rookie**: *(to the audience)* A double for the price of a single! ’Cos of me injuries, see, ’cos he feels for me, gives me empathy.

Whilst the complexity of the above example is perhaps one of the most severe in the play, it is not in any way an exceptional occurrence. The text offers many other similar if not quite so difficult examples that create problems for the identification of addresser and/or addressee.

**Conclusion**

*Howie the Rookie* is at times storytelling, at times stand-up comedy and at times deeply disturbing and tragic theatre. It is something like a theatrical equivalent of the Stuttgart Staatsgalerie. It tells a complex story involving some 26 characters. It explores the notion of representation in time. It has no stage directions. It has only one actor on stage at a time. It reduces language to the absolute minimum. For all these reasons it is a goldmine for ‘theorists.’

A theoretical discussion of the play, however much it may be able to enhance one’s appreciation through insights informed by the work of
e.g. Barthes, Lacan, Spivak, Althusser and Saussure others, would be doing the play a disservice if it missed the central role of language. And it would do so if any language discussion was only able to draw upon the work and insights of Saussure and Chomsky.

Literature in general, and theatre in particular, has human relationships at its very core. Language is at the centre of these stories. To discuss the language element of a literary work using as a basis an approach to language that focuses on 'ideal language' rather than on 'naturally occurring language' is like eating consommé with a fork.

If language and human relations are at the core of literature, then the study of language in literature should be based on a view of language that strongly embraces its use in literature, a view of language that would consider itself inadequate if it did not embrace literature. Work within the Firthian tradition provides not just a rigorous theory of language but also a set of analytical tools that facilitate both a greater appreciation of language form and a greater appreciation and understanding of its social, interpersonal, functions of language. Working within the Firthian tradition can bring empirical excitement that would enhance most theoretical work.

Working within the Firthian tradition might also ease some of the malaise currently abroad in literary studies. And since this tradition insists on the study of ‘naturally occurring language’ it might even, one day, be able to account for the use of the forward slash joining two words in the title of a literary conference.

Works Cited

*Primary Literature*


Secondary Literature


III. Drama (and) Politics after Postmodernism
SIÂN ADISESHIAH

Still a Socialist?
Political Commitment in Caryl Churchill’s
The Skriker and Far Away

The Skriker

What The Skriker is about was a question that many theatre critics puzzled over with some irritation after the play’s first performance at the National Theatre in London in January 1994. Firstly, it contains several modes of performance; acting, music, singing, dance and mime all form significant contributions to the event of the play. Churchill’s interpretation of the impact of this is that “a number of stories are told but only one in words” (Introduction viii). Secondly, many of the speeches — particularly the Skriker’s — seem impenetrable and thus a coherent narrative is difficult to identify. Furthermore the different mediums through which stories are told do not seem to form part of an integrated expression. James Christopher in Time Out writes:

What doesn’t work so well is Churchill’s greater ambition to marry disparate forms of theatrical expression: notably the ever-present Grimm fairies who dance and wander aimlessly around Annie Smart’s neutral, boxy set. Apart from the surreal swirling banquet party to welcome Josie to hell their presence is distracting, inexplicable, almost intrusive. (96)

Neil Smith in What’s On describes the play as “bizarre” although “bewildering and bewitching in equal measures,” the narrative as “pretty incomprehensible,” and the total theatrical event as an experience “that
quite literally defies explanation” (97). Michael Billington in The Guardian finds the play “strangely opaque” (96), Clive Hirschhorn from the Sunday Express is not sure if there is “any discernible thread of significance” informing Churchill’s “weird new play” (94), and Maureen Paton of the Daily Express calls it “a work of quite awesome pretentiousness” and like “some dreadful exercise to help actors lose their inhibitions about movement” (94).

In contrast, academics have tended to view the play’s supposed resistance to comprehension as a postmodern frustration of interpretative mastery. However, this reading of the play — as a frustration of interpretative mastery — is one of the approaches critiqued in the play’s narrative. The politics of The Skriker can be read as residing in an ironic commentary on the political stasis implicated in postmodern philosophy as well as simultaneously proffering a radical environmental discourse that warns of an apocalypse in contemporary capitalist development. The fragmented language, fractured and mutated identities, and incoherent speeches are as much a parody of the impasse produced by the logic of indeterminacy as they are reflective of the slipperiness of language and the hollowness of the contemporary moment. Indeed the dramatisation of the different discourses of speech, dance, mime and song, a dramatisation that so many critics found incomprehensible as an entire expression, is as much a satirical comment on the ever-increasing disintegration of the collective, the social unit, and the individual subject, as it is evidence of the altogether ubiquitous, but incoherent nature of political agency.

While language, subjectivity, identity, and political agency might be fluid and indeterminate within academic and cultural discourses, the non-human world is potentially determinate; in other words it can be destroyed. The revenging Skriker — “a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (The Skriker 243) as the stage directions describe her/him/it — is a repository of human and non-human attributes; the Skriker is a conglomeration of human myth and Pagan folklore, at the same time as signifying an altogether non-human dimension of the natural world. The Skriker’s reprisal is on the one hand the non-human natural world’s reaction to continued repletion and pollution of the environment, and on the other, a satirical response to the post-Marxist
Still a Socialist? Political Commitment in Caryl Churchill’s The Skriker and Far Away

alliance between the ideologies of capital and the liberal discourses that constitute cultural studies in the academy. In other words, as the French philosopher Alain Badiou discusses in his ‘Ethics’ essay, orientating cultural ethics around the concept of the Other, around the idea of alterity, tends to produce at best a politically restrictive self-reflexivity and at worst a politics of inertia and the maintenance of the political status quo. Indeed the Skriker’s bearing of a caricature of postmodernist preoccupations is presented as part of the problem: as contributing to a political impasse.

The Skriker reflects a complex engagement with the discourses of modernism and postmodernism. As many commentators have noted, the Skriker’s speeches bear a resemblance to Joycean prose, Ulysses in particular. The academic institutionalisation of modernist art has softened its radical edge; its absorption within the mainstream of culture prevents it from proffering the dissidence it once signified. Postmodern art seems largely to be what Fredric Jameson has described as “at one with the official culture of Western society” (56). This poses particular problems for the successful expression of political, radical, and subversive concerns within postmodern culture. Ann Wilson argues that The Skriker’s incoherence is its political expression; she says: “Churchill’s refusal to allow the audience access to a position of interpretative ‘mastery’ over The Skriker is an act of political resistance” (187). However, the notion of refusing interpretive mastery is limited in its effect as a performative act of political resistance. Some level of interpretative mastery is essential if one of the most repeated political concerns in the play — environmental destruction — is to be taken up by the audience.

Indeed, The Skriker is not entirely incoherent. The play offers enough moments of sense to be tantalisingly provocative. The Skriker’s first long monologue contains recognisable patterns of speech, most of which are cultural references. Several allusion to fairytales (Rumplestiltskin and Beauty and the Beast) are interspersed with cinematic and literary allusions — “chainsaw massacre,” “bloody chamber,” and “whale moby” (The Skriker 244, 245) —, some of which in turn are in the form of proverb and cliché — “loch stock and barrel” (The Skriker 244). The patterns of language mostly comprise metaphor, and this, in turn, foregrounds the topic of language, sense, and understanding. The slipping of
one hackneyed phrase into another and the fusing together of conventionally separate units of sense by drawing twice on the same word (in this example “do”): “Or pin prick cockadoodle do you feel it?” (*The Skriker* 244)) is also a common feature. There are some explicit allusions to political figures from the Right and Left; Enoch Powell is conjured up in “they poison me in my rivers of blood poisoning” (*The Skriker* 246) and Leon Trotsky’s infamous murder resounds in “ice pick in your head long ago” (*The Skriker* 246). This medley of mostly recognisable references, references that can be categorised in identifiable ways, challenges the spectator to consider the ways in which the Skriker’s speech speaks to contemporary concerns. Rather than refusing interpretive mastery (and in doing so constituting an act of political resistance), the Skriker’s speech can be read as both a comment on and a symptom of political inarticulacy.

The Churchill scholar Amelia Howe Kritzer discusses the politics of Churchill’s late plays in terms of their tendency to present a “subjectless tragedy, in which individuals are never fully revealed or defined.” She says “indeed, a sense of identity and coherence seems to be what these characters seek in their futile attempts to connect with others” (58). This seems to be applicable to *The Skriker*. Lily and Josie appear to be located outside of a wider social network. Unlike many of Churchill’s earlier plays these working-class women are no longer situated in a tangibly felt social context but are rather positioned outside of a shared sense of space. Indeed Lily and Josie’s inchoate identities are produced largely through the absence of social texture, except, of course, in the punitive form of Josie’s confinement to the mental hospital where Foucauldian codes of discipline and punishment are inscribed in the representation of her hospitalisation. This scene is a reminder of Connie’s confinement to a mental hospital in Marge Piercy’s socialist-feminist utopia *Woman on the Edge of Time* where she slips in and out of a utopian future; however, the utopian future that is oriented around equality, solidarity, and respect for the natural world in Piercy’s novel is substituted in *The Skriker* for a nightmarish dystopia with a toxic landscape and human regret.

Another important intertext contributing to the characterisation of Lily and Josie is Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*. Lily and Josie echo
Laura and Lizzie in their sisterly relationship (although the play does not state they are sisters) and resemble them in their proneness to temptation, the theme of which is introduced in the Skriker’s opening speech where s/he/it makes reference to “forbidden fruit” (The Skriker 245). In Goblin Market the sexualised danger symbolised by the fruit, which is associated with the depraved masculinity of the goblin men is initially yielded to by Lizzie; however, Laura’s saving of her — borne out of her unwavering commitment to their continued sorority and intimacy — results in Lizzie’s redemption. This nineteenth-century feminist tale is thus reworked in what Elin Diamond calls “Churchill’s ecological millennial parable” (36) to speak to the (anti-utopian) contemporary moment. The significant acmes in the feminist and socialist movements that coincided with the publication of Goblin Market and Woman on the Edge of Time seem long gone and The Skriker, instead, speaks to this loss, a loss that signifies in the absence of collective political commitment and the lack of a substantive sense of resistance. The so-called “third-wave” of feminism or “postfeminism” does not seem to figure in the play, or if present, does not appear to be something to celebrate. Indeed the politics of gender appear to be less visible as a driving force in the narrative of The Skriker. The audacious attack on misogynist mythmaking in Churchill’s 1976 play Vinegar Tom and the class-based critique of contemporary feminism in Top Girls (1982) do not seem to be superseded by something equally bold in relation to gendered themes here. That said, the play is concerned with mostly female characters and produces a variety of constructions of femininity. Claudia Barnett calls The Skriker “a revisionist fairy tale with a feminist twist” partly because of what she sees as Churchill’s “regendering” of the Skriker from a male shape-shifting death portent to a feminised figure, played in the original production by Kathryn Hunter, and a figure who “is more witch than goblin and [who] embodies maternal desires” (48). Katherine Perrault reads The Skriker through an engagement with chaos theory, a theory that she sees as complementing a deconstruction of phallogocentrism. Perrault states: “the chaos that ensues from Churchill’s systematic portrayal of matriarchal integers seeks to expose the historical oppression of women and deconstruct patriarchal ideology” (48).
Certainly *The Skriker*’s manipulation of dramatic form, its staging of mostly female characters, and the fairy underworld’s evocation of Julia Kristeva’s concept of the chora lends the play to feminist readings. However, gender oppression is not the primary object of the play’s political impulse. Nor perhaps is class, although, along with gender, the politics of class equally forms part of the play’s materiality. The play’s protagonists clearly signify as young and working class. Their single-mother and single-mother-to-be identities, their lack of economic power, and Josie’s confinement to a mental hospital also contribute to the reinforcement of their vulnerable location within the political economy. But while these two women, so resonant of previous Churchillian characters, seem especially defenceless in the cultural landscape of the play, their class and gender subjugation is symptomatic of the wider social neglect that has given rise to environmental destruction, alienation, and social discordance.

Jameson talks of postmodernism replacing Nature and the unconscious. He describes late capitalism — “this purer capitalism” — as abolishing “the enclaves of precapitalist organisation it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way;” he speaks of a “new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious” (78). The Skriker’s underworld is, of course, symbolic of both Nature’s base and the human unconscious. Several critics have discussed the Jungian collective unconscious reflected in the Skriker and the underworld. István Nagy suggests that the “delicate net of cultural references” indicates the Skriker’s containment of “pre-eminently the English,” but also “in a wider sense, the whole of Western culture in her unconscious” (239). Indeed, the Skriker itself asks Josie: “haven’t I wrapped myself up rapt rapture ruptured myself in your dreams, scoffed your chocolate creams, your Jung men and Freud eggs, your flying and fleeing?” (*The Skriker* 272)

The pollution of the natural world is also implicated in the representation of the dying underworld. The Skriker’s references to “wars,” “drought,” “sunburn,” “toxic waste,” “salmonelephantiasis,” and “poison in the food chain” (*The Skriker* 271) are the cause for disintegration, a disintegration symbolised dramatically in the crumbling of the feast. The echoes of Prospero’s disappearing feast are evident; however, in *The
Tempest Prospero loses control over his power momentarily, seemingly due to his recollection of Caliban’s plot of insurrection; contrastingly in The Skriker, it is not an individual’s loss of control but a collective retreat from environmental, social, and political responsibility that has produced this crisis in the underworld. The underworld seems to fuse the human and non-human natural worlds in its conglomeration of mythical archetypes and its close relationship with the non-human natural world, and as such the underworld is indicative, in its demise, of the noxious affect of human activity on the environment in the late twentieth century. The idea of the underworld containing within it a sense of (uneasy) fusion between the human and non-human worlds — and that this fusion is disintegrating — provides a sinister vision of the effects of the breakdown of this once less noxious relationship.

The sense of dislocation embodied in the underworld is also performed by the Skriker in its mimicking of human social organisation. The different human roles that the Skriker plays include a dowdy woman in her fifties (The Skriker 251), “a derelict woman shouting […] in the street” (252), “an American woman of about forty” (253), “a small child” (263), “a smart woman in [her] mid thirties” (275), “a man about thirty” (280), “Marie, a young woman about Lily’s age” (285), “a shabby respectable man about forty” (287), and “a very ill old woman” (288). This assortment of individuals makes up a community with a sense of dislodgement and alienation in common. These characters’ perversion of human traits does not come across immediately; indeed, they often seem like ordinary, albeit lonely or eccentric figures. In this way the Skriker reveals the normality and acceptance of damaged relationships and disturbing behaviour. The human roles the Skriker slips in and out of so convincingly, reflect the sense of isolation and ill-health that characterises the range of subject positions available in the late twentieth century.

More significantly is the dissipation of a coherent idiom that can facilitate the articulation of political resistance, and in this case resistance to the destruction of the natural environment. This leads inevitably to the climactic dystopian moment of permanent historical closure. Lily goes with the Skriker to what she thinks will be the underworld only to
find herself one hundred years in the future where she sees her grand-daughter and her great great granddaughter:

_The girl bellow wordless rage at Lilly._

‘Oh they couldn’t helpless,’ said the granddaughter, ‘they were stupid stupedfied stewpotbellied not evil weevil devil take the hindmost of them anyway.’

But the child hated the monstrous.

_Girl bellowes._

[...] So Lily bit off more than she could choose. And she was dustbin. (_The Skriker_ 290–91)

The “wordless rage” of Lily’s great great granddaughter suggests where the current trajectory of contemporary political (non-)intervention will lead. Her rage is wordless because we cannot hear: it does not signify within the anti-utopian parameters of our current modes of representation. It is also wordless because of the eclipse of collective political activity by a postmodern fixation with the representational nature of language and the demise of human agency.

**Far Away**

If the climax of _The Skriker_ provides a glimpse of the future as wasteland because of human destruction of the environment, _Far Away_, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, Upstairs in November 2000, dramatises an apocalyptic dystopia of global war with all constituents of the world — including the non-human natural world — participating. In many cases, _Far Away_ has been identified by commentators as an example of political theatre, but what the political narrative involves is perhaps more vague. While each vignette in the play explicitly resonates as politically meaningful (the sinister activities involving Harper’s husband and the violation of people in a lorry; the ominous threat of the corrupt hat company which is shockingly undercut by the flamboyant hat parade of prisoners before their execution; all-out global war involving the elements, humans, and the non-human natural world) the precise nature of this meaningfulness is less clear. Jameson argues:

Postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world:
in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror. (57)

Indeed *Far Away* expresses the relationship between the demise of the Left, the dominance of postmodern culture, permanent warfare, exploitation, and terror as constituting an inter-dependent political milieu.

The first scene of *Far Away* sets up the play’s dramatisation of the disjunction between the horror of the real world and the nonchalant response to it. Joan visits her Aunt in what seems like a house in the English countryside, only to discover that her uncle is active in sinister activities involving adults and children, a lorry, violence, and blood. Harper’s attempts to cover up these activities soon give way to her disclosure that Joan has “found out something secret” (*Far Away* 11). But Harper continues to shift uneasily as Joan persists in her questioning.

Christine Dymkowski thinks “Joan’s gradual but relentless revelations and Harper’s shifting responses have so destabilised the idea of ‘the truth’ that it no longer exists as a valid concept for the audience” (57). However, this aspect of the scene works precisely through its orientation around Joan’s and the audience’s desire to search for the truth of the situation. Joan’s representation of what she sees acts as a reliable report of what happens; Harper’s explanation (but not a refutation) of what Joan sees, serves to reinforce the “truth” of what Joan has witnessed further; it is Harper’s justification that the audience doubts — not because truth “no longer exists as a valid concept” but precisely the opposite — because Harper’s dubious response acquires its dubiousness through the sense that it masks the truth.

However, the sense of the obfuscation of truth is related to the dearth of political clarity that characterises the postmodern moment. In the absence of grand narratives that provide an explanatory framework within which political circumstances can be read, the politics of relativism dominate. Here the audience is not able to judge whether Joan’s uncle’s actions, are in Harper’s words: “part of a big movement now to make things better” (*Far Away* 14) and, even if Harper is telling the truth, the audience is denied the opportunity of judging the political perspective of this “big movement.” Without fixed coordinates of political principle, the ability to judge where power is located dissolves into ambiguity and ambivalence. The audience is disturbed by the sense of
menace expressed in the drama but what perhaps is more disturbing is the construction of the ideal spectator as one who is unable to translate the actions into a politically legible articulation. We sense things are wrong but no longer have the means to express this intelligibly.

The second scene begins with a familiar scenario in Churchill’s plays: the activity of work. The grown-up Joan and Todd sit at a workbench making extravagant hats that will be worn by prisoners in a gruesome parade before their executions. Todd and Joan are unusual in terms of their access to the means of creating meaning. Most forms of production, including millinery work, involve the division of labour, repetition, monotony, and regimentation; production workers do not have control over what they produce and are denied the opportunity of investing creativity in the product. There is a resonance of a trade union idiom in the conversations held by Todd and Joan — “we used to get two weeks before a parade and then they took it down to one and now they’re talking about cutting a day” (*Far Away* 17) —; however, unlike Churchill’s protagonists in many of her other plays, Todd and Joan do not fit easily into a working-class identity. In fact, their middle-class identity is prominently displayed through their dialogue, education, and artistic sensibilities. This scene does not just work, therefore, through an eerie satire on the insularity of syndicalist politics, it also makes connections between the privilege of a (middle-class) access to the means of generating meaning and the consequences of acting on that privilege in the most narcissistic and reckless way. The hats as metaphor — the means of signification — are created solely for the pleasure of their subsequent incineration; “you make beauty and it disappears, I love that” (*Far Away* 25) is Todd’s response to the weekly death rituals.

Joan indicates her regret of the destruction of the hats, but her regret — “it seems so sad to burn them with the bodies” (*Far Away* 25) — displays her grotesque disinterest in the ritualised killings of the prisoners. The parade is described in the stage directions as: “A procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution. The finished hats are even more preposterous than in the previous scene” (*Far Away* 24). This is undoubtedly a grim exposure of the potential of uncommitted art to be complicit with brutal practices; however, the power of the hats to signify as metaphor — as the means to create
meaning — serves to implicate not just art, but every creative practice that has a privileged access to the construction of meaning, together with all aspects of cultural production (including academic discourse). The preoccupation with signifying practices in postmodern culture is often at the expense of addressing the material reality of human experience, a human experience that, in some circumstances, is framed by exploitation, oppression, torture, and execution.

The last scene is set “several years later” (Far Away 28) in Harper’s house. The bizarre tenor of the scene is quickly established. From an exchange between Todd and Harper that grows increasingly strange it becomes apparent that all animals are partisans of one faction or another in a global war; “the cats have come in on the side of the French” (Far Away 29), says Harper. A familiar way of speaking about certain groups — “but some cats are still ok” (Far Away 30) — is made strange through its reference to animals as well as people, and a complex politics of allegiance is conveyed through an ever mutating set of identities:

TODD: But we’re not exactly on the other side from the French. It’s not as if they’re the Moroccans and the ants.
HARPER: It’s not as if they’re the Canadians, the Venezuelans and the mosquitoes.
TODD: It’s not as if they’re the engineers, the chefs, the children under five, the musicians.
HARPER: The car salesmen.
TODD: Portuguese car salesmen.
HARPER: Russian swimmers.
TODD: Thai butchers.
HARPER: Latvian dentists. (Far Away 30–31)

Echoes of Left factionalism in the dialogue are certainly identifiable, particularly through the use of a Left idiom to speak about different groups — “No, the Latvian dentists have been doing good work in Cuba” (Far Away 31). However, as Beth Watkins’ review of Far Away rightly points out: “clearly, Churchill has responded to a post-Bosnian world, where atrocities of unimaginable magnitude are made familiar and trivial by media saturation” (482).

Added to the critique of the multiplicity of conflicts that characterise the late twentieth century, this scene in Far Away continues to probe the postmodern fixation with language, representation, and identity at
the expense of activist politics. The ever-continuing splitting of subjectivity — “Portuguese car salesmen” (*Far Away* 30); “Russian swimmers;” “Thai butchers;” “Latvian dentists” (*Far Away* 31) — creates a ludicrous picture of unending difference. An identifiable paradigm of power is lost amidst this incessant mutation of the subject. The limitations of an identity politics dominated by the interminable notion of alterity are expressed through a breakdown in the social texture of human relations and through the creation of a hostile landscape where only temporary (and distrustful) alliances can be made. A proliferation of different forms of identity in this scene work to perpetuate suspicion, division, and alienation between the different groups of humans and animals. The logical extreme of a politics of difference both between and within subjects has led to a global community who mostly identify with each other through their common experiences of isolation, estrangement, and enmity.

*Far Away* and the last scene of the play in particular, is a vision of what happens when political critique remains an inward-looking, text-based activity. The anthropomorphic nature of the narrative of humanism is deconstructed by postmodern theory only to be replaced by an outlook that by implication is equally negligent of the non-human natural world. The identification that our self-realisation is mediated by text has served to produce a fetish of language, text, and signification in postmodern culture. Our “self-imposed incarceration in the prison house of language” as the ecocritic Lance Newman describes it, prevents us from exploring the “dialectical interaction between texts and […] the extra-textual material world” (7). In contrast, the extra-textual material world in *Far Away*, although it has no dialogue, has a concrete independence of its own. Not only does it display its agency through active participation in war but it is also given an autonomous, albeit amorphous, sense of presence. The last few lines of the play spoken by Joan, in particular, convey this well:

> But I didn’t know whose side the river was on, it might help me swim or it might drown me. In the middle the current was running much faster, the water was brown, I didn’t know if that meant anything. I stood on the bank a long time. But I knew it was my only way of getting here so at last I put one foot in the river. It was very cold but so far that was all. When you’ve just stepped in you
can’t tell what’s going to happen. The water laps round your ankles in any case. (Far Away 38)

Joan’s inability to decipher the river (“I didn’t know if that meant anything”) along with the ungraspable but material expression of the river’s subjectivity conjured up in the strangely opaque last phrase “the water laps round your ankles in any case” goes some way along a trajectory that attempts to redefine the relationship between the human and non-human natural world. Nevertheless, although there is a reverberation of Michel Serres’s thesis of the breakdown of the Natural Contract, the play’s politics work through a concern with human displacement, exploitation, and the corrosion of a social network, as well as through anxiety over the destruction of the natural environment. The natural environment, if you like, is the last frontier; it is, as the Skriker says, what is always assumed to be there, even though it is suffering constant erosion. Far Away’s ecocritical assault is framed within a wider attack on the imperialist projects that seems to define the historical moment within which the play is produced.

Churchill’s socialist inclination is present in Far Away; perhaps not with the same sense of palpability that figured in many of the 1970s and 80s plays, but nevertheless it is still discernible. A more conventional socialist narrative may not have found an admiring critical reception, since the language of socialism has been deemed anachronistic and irrelevant in postmodern culture. In order for political articulation to be effective — to get through as it were — it has to negotiate the contemporary idiom, however de-politicised that may be. Far Away does exactly this: it embraces the preoccupations of postmodern culture — multiple subjectivities, fragmentation, displacement, ironic art, the primacy of signifying practices — only to implicate them in the nightmare of the play’s political vision. The lack of unity, collective vision, and social responsibility is not recuperated as an invigorating jettisoning of humanist baggage, but rather serves as a haunting of the play, reflecting the sense of disruption and disturbance that forms its psychic and social texture. Far Away may not be a play that foregrounds a socialist narrative, but it is certainly a play informed by socialist politics, even if the politics are filtered through other modes of cultural expression.
Works Cited

**Primary Literature**


**Secondary Literature**


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Still a Socialist? Political Commitment in Caryl Churchill’s The Skriker and Far Away


ALEKS SIERZ

“The Darkest Place:”
Certainty and Doubt in Martin Crimp’s
Fewer Emergencies

NINA And I’m not sure a play’s really a play
unless it has some kind of message …
Don’t you think? …
(Chekhov, trans. Crimp, 9)

Fiction can sometimes offer the best critique of criticism. In Martin Crimp’s masterpiece, Attempts on Her Life, one scene knowingly satirizes popular critical discourses. As a group of critics discusses the work of the suicidal artist Anne, one of them says:

With respect to you I think she’d find the whole concept of “making a point” ludicrously outmoded. If any point is being made at all it’s surely the point that the point that’s being made is not the point and never has in fact been the point. It’s surely the point that a search for a point is pointless and that the whole point of the exercise — i.e. these attempts on her own life — points to that. (Plays 2 250–251)

It is easy to see why reviewers of the original production, directed by Tim Albery for the Royal Court at the Ambassadors Theatre in March 1997, pounced on this passage. Not only does it allude in a metafictional
way to the play’s title,¹ but it also seems to sum up the play’s central meaning: the point of Attempts on Her Life is to cast doubt on the idea that a play must have a stable, simple point. But things are not even as certain as that. The above speech ends: “It makes me think of the Chinese proverb: the darkest place is always under the lamp.”

— The what?
— The darkest place. It’s / Chinese. (Plays 2 251)

The joke is that actually it’s not. It’s French. Or Austrian. In Barthes’s A Lover’s Discourse, under the rubric “I want to understand,” we learn of the lover who is so overwhelmed by the experience of being in love that they can barely “think properly.” “I am in love’s wrong place, which is its dazzling place: ‘The darkest place, according to a Chinese proverb, is always under the lamp’” (59). Here Barthes is actually quoting from the Viennese Theodor Reik’s Fragments of a Great Confession. The subtle allusiveness, endless recession and constant shifts of meaning that lines such as these from Attempts on Her Life exemplify seem to sum up the central tension in Crimp’s writing, between his postmodernist sense of fun and his modernist mission. In play after play, you can identify Crimp’s moral imperative — to use satire mercilessly to expose the follies of a consumer society — coexisting with his postmodernist sensibility — his acute awareness of the impossibility of telling a simple, unproblematic story in a culture saturated by mediatized images. These tensions are clearly visible in Fewer Emergencies, Crimp’s recent afterword to Attempts on Her Life.

¹Such metafictional references, especially those in which a character refers to a work that they are reading or writing in a work of the same name, constitute an honourable European literary tradition going back to, for example, Don Quixote. More recently, Nathalie Sarraute’s 1963 novel Les Fruits d’or has a series of unnamed speakers discussing a novel called Les Fruits d’or. Crimp is a fan of her work (see Sierz, The Theatre of Martin Crimp 88), and one can occasionally hear distant echoes of her book in Attempts on Her Life: both writers habitually use “Exactly” as a verbal tag to start a line (e.g. Sarraute 7; Crimp 284).
Accidental Trilogy

Fewer Emergencies is a trilogy of short plays which are both experimental in form and offer a sustained satirical critique of what Crimp, following Galbraith, has called the “Culture of Contentment” (Sierz, “Interview with Martin Crimp”). In a sense, they are an accidental trilogy, for Fewer Emergencies began as a pair of short companion pieces — Face to the Wall & Fewer Emergencies — which were first published in 2002 when Face to the Wall was staged by Katie Mitchell at the Royal Court as a short play performed after her production of Jon Fosse’s Night-songs. Although they were first staged together in France and Germany, the British premiere of both took place after Crimp had written a third playlet, Whole Blue Sky, for the French director Hubert Colas, “who wanted to present Face to the Wall and Fewer Emergencies as part of a longer evening. This presented me with a task like that of an architect whose job is to extend an existing building. To change metaphors, the solution was to write a ‘prequel’” (Crimp, “Chaillot”).

As a trilogy, whose final sequence is Whole Blue Sky, Face to the Wall and Fewer Emergencies, the playlets have a thematic and dramatic unity: each comprises of dialogues involving three main speakers, numbered 1, 2 and 3, with an extra 4 in Face to the Wall. Each tells a different story, but each has a similar dramatic shape. Since the stories are narrated rather than shown, some readers and viewers have had difficulty in grasping what actually happens, so it is worth summarising them. In Whole Blue Sky, the speakers talk about a woman who “gets married very young” (Fewer Emergencies 7), “gets pregnant” (9) and stays with her husband despite doubts and misgivings. Suddenly, the story goes off on a tangent when the dialogue describes her conversation with her son Bobby, who keeps a pet, also called Bobby. He complains of hearing a noise and she suggests that it is the pet “cleaning out his nest” (16). But, no, in fact it’s a voice in his head which can only be stilled if Mummy

2 The Culture of Contentment completes Galbraith’s modern history trilogy, which began with The Affluent Society in 1958. In the last volume, he describes the contemporary phenomenon of the contented wealthy: a large class of affluent people who have no short-term interest in using their resources to help the poorer classes.
sings him “the little song” (19). But because it is Mummy and Daddy’s “private song” (19), she refuses. When Bobby insists, she tells him that it is not she who is refusing him, but the voice in his head. In Face to the Wall, the dialogue is about a horrific school shooting, in which the killer first “shoots the teacher right through the heart” (25) and then starts killing the children. When the discussion turns to the attacker’s motives, there is a moment when his anger about his postman being late is — incidentally — mentioned. Then the narrative veers away into a twelve-bar blues song describing the trouble that the postman has in waking up and how when his son tries to rouse him, turning his face “a-WAY FROM THE WALL,” he throws his “hot tea RIGHT IN HIS [son’s] FACE” (35). Finally, in Fewer Emergencies, a discussion about how “things are improving day by day” (41) gradually turns into the tale of Bobby, whose parents have left him locked up in the house for his own safety while they go boating. Although there are now “fewer/ emergencies” (48), there is “an emergency on right now” (46), with a riot happening in the street. And although Bobby has an array of wonderful possessions — which surreally include items such as “a wardrobe full of uranium” and “the city of Paris with a cloth over it to keep the dust out” (45) — he is not immune: a stray shot hits him in the leg and, as he crawls upstairs to get the key that will open the front door, and release him into the wider world, his absent parents sing “that little song” (48).

The playlets have a thematic and dramatic unity, but what kind of dramas are they? Clearly, they are not written in the great tradition of English naturalism or social realism. For a start, they have no named characters, only unnamed speakers differentiated by numbers. It is deliberately unclear whether these numbers refer to same individual in all three plays, although Crimp does specify that 1 is female in the first play and male in the second (Fewer Emergencies 5, 23). Still, some of the speakers have a certain consistency — in Whole Blue Sky 1 does offer a female perspective on the story being narrated, especially when she is correcting the views of the others. For example, 3 says that “her” life stretches out in front of her like a “corpse,” and she responds: “Corpse? — no — no — what? — no — that’s not the way she thinks” (7). Although this line shows a distinctly female point of view being asserted, it is simultaneously also identifiably Crimpian in tone: again and again, he
uses the device of the stop-start, the rapid interrogative “what?” and the speedy dash. In terms of character, the male 1 in Face to the Wall is similarly consistent: as he sketches the school massacre, he needs more and more prompting, presumably because of the disturbing effects of the horrors he is describing. It is clearly the same person speaking at the start as at the end. As regards the other speakers, however, they might be individually consistent, sometimes sceptical, sometimes encouraging, but none of them have any identifiable character in the naturalistic sense. None of them show any evidence of depth, subtext or back story.

The same difficulty pertains when we consider the characters that are talked about, although here there are significant similarities between the first and third play. In both there is a child called Bobby, in both he is called Jimmy by mistake (18, 45–46), and in both the parents are seen to enjoy boating: in Whole Blue Sky, one of the “pictures of happiness” is “the two of them on the boat” (12) while, in Fewer Emergencies, an example of the fact that “things are improving” is that “both of them are still boating” (42). In both, the couple have a “little song” (19, 48). Yet, despite these similarities, there is very little sense that we are being told the history of one family as opposed to another. All the usual markers of a naturalistic play are missing.

As well as having speakers who call in doubt the idea of character, Fewer Emergencies is also deliberately unclear about the where and when of its setting. The stage directions for time and place are “Blank” for all three playlets (5, 23, 39). Compared to Attempts on Her Life, which has no indications of time and place, this deliberate “Blank” is surely underlining a point. As far as the text is concerned, there is no reason why the playlets couldn’t be set on an Amazonian river in the 1970s, the Australian outback in the 1980s or be played by bored astronauts inside a space station or teenagers on a sofa. Finally, the plot action of all three playlets is narrated rather than shown, and Crimp is deliberately ambiguous about what is happening. This immediately raises questions: who is talking? Why are they talking? What are they really talking about? And Crimp declines to provide a simple answer. The overall linguistic style is, however, strongly suggestive of the possibility that these are theatre workers, media people or even arts commentators talking about a play or film or other media artefact. They could be in a script meeting, a
brainstorming session, a rehearsal or even performing (in *Face to the Wall*, for example, 4 plainly acts as a prompt to 1). Almost any interpretation — ranging from the speakers being students pretending to be media folk to them being voices inside the writer’s own head — is equally valid. Finally, each of the stories has a similar narrative structure: they start off as recognisable situations (a bad marriage, a school atrocity, a happy family) and then suddenly take an unexpected swerve into a different world. Given this form, with all its lack of certainty, readers and audiences could justifiably ask: what kind of play is this, and what does it all mean?

*Postdramatic Theatre?*

To answer this question, it is useful to consider a groundbreaking study of theatrical form whose English translation came out in 2006, coincidentally the same year that *Fewer Emergencies* received its first British production at the Royal Court Upstairs in James Macdonald’s production. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre*, first published in 1999, examines the new theatrical forms, such as those pioneered by the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor and Heiner Müller, that have emerged since the late 1960s. Looking at the variety of practitioners of live art and other experimental performance, Lehmann concludes — in the words of the blurb on the book’s back cover — that “Despite their diversity, the new forms and aesthetics that have evolved have one essential quality in common: they no longer focus on the text.” Lehmann prefers the term ‘postdramatic theatre’ to the more commonly used ‘postmodern theatre’ (as in, to cite just one obvious example, Kaye), and offers a definition based on a series of oppositions: traditional drama has plot and dramatic action, but postdramatic theatre instead offers “states” and “ceremony” (68, 69); drama has *dramatis personae*, postdramatic theatre has anonymous speakers; drama has dialogue, postdramatic theatre has, to use the term preferred by Austrian dramatist Elfriede Jelinek, *Sprachflächen* (juxtaposed language surfaces); finally, drama has a naturalistic time and place while postdramatic theatre has an indistinct setting. In short, postdramatic theatre puts the whole Western tradition of mimesis, drama as representation, into question,
and then takes it apart by means of performance. In this sense, the post-dramatic ‘text’ is not a playscript with characters, dialogue and stage directions, but rather the totality of the signs on stage (Lehmann 85).

At first glance, Fewer Emergencies seems to fit the model of post-dramatic theatre. In this, it is similar to Attempts on Her Life, which Heiner Zimmermann, for example, discusses as an example of a “post-dramatic play” composed “not of scenes but of scenarios. Its models are not drama, but film, performance and installation art” (77). Indeed, Attempts on Her Life is cited as an example of this genre in translator Karen Jürs-Munby’s introduction to Lehmann’s book (6). Both this play and Fewer Emergencies have unspecified settings; both have spoken narratives rather than plots; both have speakers who are not traditional characters. Yet, there is also one important difference: in Attempts on Her Life, none of the speeches are ascribed to anyone so it could have cast of two, twenty or two hundred. Fewer Emergencies does have specified speakers, although it could be played by ten actors rather than four, with a different 1, 2 and 3 for each playlet. Does this make Attempts on Her Life more postdramatic than Fewer Emergencies? I think not. In fact, both plays are problematic examples of postdramatic theatre for two essential reasons. One is that Crimp’s texts are playtexts in the sense that the author demands fidelity to his words, and so, if postdramatic theatre’s one “essential quality” is that it “no longer focus[es] on the text,” then Crimp’s work, which is all about the author’s individual vision expressed through his text in the great British tradition of new writing, could not be simply postdramatic. The second reason is even more powerful: the Sprachflächen — “which make no distinction between narration, dialogue, description, expository text and stage direction” (Zimmermann 74) — that are so characteristic of postdramatic theatre really have little in common with Crimp’s text, which is all conversational dialogue, and recognisable everyday dialogue at that. The language of Fewer Emergencies, from its first line — “she gets married very young, doesn’t she” (7) — to its last — “Watch the key swinging” (49) — is the language of the spoken word, the language not of poetic invention but of real people speaking, the language of daily life not of high art. In this sense, it would be quite wrong to label either Attempts on Her Life or Fewer Emergencies simply as postdramatic theatre. Both
plays certainly have postdramatic elements, especially since both are open texts that challenge readers and audiences to create meaning for themselves, but both are also supreme examples of an individually authored text that depends entirely on conversational dialogue to achieve its effects. They are much more similar to traditional naturalistic British drama than to the work of Müller or Jelinek.

Social Criticism and Collapsing Narratives

But even if these plays are not unproblematic examples of postdramatic theatre, they are good examples of the tension between postmodernism and modernism in Crimp’s work. The project of Fewer Emergencies is the modernist one of social criticism. The central theme, according to Crimp, is that each playlet explores different states of mind within the “Culture of Contentment.” The first is the portrait of a woman who accepts material comfort at the expense of her emotional well-being. In the second the narrators look (in vain) for the psychological causes of an act of “senseless” violence — child-murder. In Fewer Emergencies itself, the story-tellers imagine a world in which the “have-nots” are taking violent revenge on the “haves” (in scenes reminiscent of recent events [the 2005 riots] in the Paris suburbs). However, I would stress that these are theatre-works, not political tracts, even if they have been deliberately constructed on cultural fault-lines. (“Fewer Emergencies, Vienna”)

Clearly, Crimp’s social critique of the “Culture of Contentment” is articulated using the traditional device of satire. In Fewer Emergencies, the haves are constantly reassuring themselves that everything is okay: why should an unhappy wife leave her husband when material conditions are comfortable? “Look at the floors. Look at the walls. Look at the way the dining table extends and extends. […] all those things that make life worth living” (13). Deftly, the compensatory quality of material comfort is sketched out with an unmistakably satirical tone: “Money? Property? Family? — The things that make life worth living” (14). Crimp even suggests the sacrifices that are required to maintain a comfortable lifestyle: “Why shouldn’t her guests enjoy themselves under the tree? Haven’t they worked? Haven’t they struggled to extend this table? Haven’t they screamed at each other in private?” (14) All this suggests a
serious writer driven by a moral imperative to criticise contemporary society.

At the same time, Fewer Emergencies is clearly postmodern in its form and attitude to narrative. As each of the three stories veer off into increasingly bizarre directions, Crimp shows how impossible it is to tell a story coherently. Not only are these stories being told in fractured conversations, but they also never really materialise as complete stories with a beginning, a middle and an end. Instead, what happens is that each story collapses during the process of its own telling. The grand narratives of social criticism demanded by Crimp’s moral imperative simply do not arrive. Moreover, the grand narratives of social order by which a society confidently explains social deviance by bad upbringing or genetic disorders are themselves also constantly subverted by satire. For example, “And what’s more they’ve identified the gene — no — correction — they’ve identified the sequence — that’s right — of genes that make people leave burnt mattreses outside their homes and strangled [sic] their babies” (44). Here, the spurious correction about the gene sequence simply emphasises the satire. At the same time, in these playlets, the grand narratives of oppositional theatre, whether Brechtian or social realist, are completely absent.

At first, Crimp’s world in Fewer Emergencies seems Lyotardian in the sense that it concerns itself with “undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘fracta,’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes” (Lyotard 60). But just as grand narratives are consistently mocked, so the petites histoires which postmodernist theory suggests have taken their place are, in these playlets, also absent. Fewer Emergencies, like Attempts on Her Life, foregrounds not only the verbal struggle to create a story — and calls into doubt whether this process is happening inside the head of a solitary individual or is being shared between several people collectively gathered together — but also shows how even the smallest stories collapse: the play’s radicalism lies precisely in the fact that, while never departing from a normal conversational mode, it shows a crisis of representation. The form of the playlets deliberately requires us to question what is being represented to us, and by whom. This radicalism is even clearer if you compare Fewer Emergencies with, for example, Mark Ravenhill’s Product.
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(Paines Plough, 2005). In Ravenhill’s play, the monologue does manage to tell a whole story, even if it is exaggerated as a criticism of the Hollywoodification of the world. In Crimp’s play, the stories stubbornly resist their own telling.

Powerful Themes and Fleeting Images

But while the narratives of Fewer Emergencies are collapsing all over the place, their place is filled with powerful themes and fleeting images. The theme of social inequality, for instance, is very strong. Crimp says that the playlets are

[all] different kinds of anxiety about the fault line between the haves and the have-nots. There are more and more haves, but the people who have-not have much less than they used to. Polly Toynbee’s book is so accurate and so felt — the gap between poor and wealthy is getting bigger. Social mobility is not occurring any more. People are not having relationships with people from other parts of society. Interesting and frightening. Makes you realise what a special time the 1960s was. So all these things were in the back of my mind. (Sierz, “Interview with Martin Crimp”)

So although, in society, the dominant ideology is that, in the words of the third playlet, “things are improving” and “[t]hey’re improving day by day. Not just the light but boating too” (42), this does not prevent a riot from breaking out. And, at all turns, brutality peeks out from the sunny optimism of sheltered wealth: “Things are improving. The whole neighbourhood is improving. The trees are more established, they’ve kicked out the Mexicans, they’ve kicked out the Serbs, people are finally cleaning up their own dog-mess, nice families are moving in” (44). Because Crimp has chosen to articulate his theme of social inequality through hesitant and provisional dialogues, whose characteristic stops and starts suggest people thinking out loud or making up ideas on the spot, he is able to jump rapidly between ideas that are simultaneously hilarious and grim: kicking out social undesirables immediately follows the comment about trees, and is immediately followed by the mention of pooper scoopers.

Another theme is the terror of daily life in the wake of 9/11. In the original printed playtext of Face to the Wall & Fewer Emergencies, there
is a date at the end of the second playlet: 10 September 2001 (*Face to the Wall* 33). Crimp explains:

One of the three pieces, *Fewer Emergencies*, was written on 10 September 2001 — the day before 9/11 — which was very odd because here am I writing a play about the threat to the “Culture of Contentment,” which is precisely what that play is about, and the next day we see an act which embodies precisely that threat. That was quite strange. Recently I read a Japanese writer describe the novelist as a canary in the cage, so I felt a little bit like I’d been a canary in the cage and picked up these waves coming towards us. (Sierz, “Interview with Martin Crimp”)

The darkness of the play’s meaning comes from the meeting of information which is both within the text and outside of it.\(^3\)

In April 2003, Crimp’s *Advice to Iraqi Women* satirised the concern of parents in the West about protecting their children from any possible danger by offering the same advice to parents in Iraq, which at the time was being bombed by Coalition forces. But while in *Attempts on Her Life* “the threat of international terrorism” (241–244) is quite explicit, in *Fewer Emergencies* the threat of terror is never articulated as a direct threat, but appears more as a feeling of dread, discomfort and fear of unexpected violence. In the first and third playlet vicious or powerful phrases are casually dropped into the conversation like grenades — “say that one more fucking time and I’ll break your fucking neck” (14) and “when the swollen cock on the porno film goes into the swollen cunt” (43), an image which is then repeated (47). In *Face to the Wall*, to give another example, the narcissistic banality of the kids’ school pictures — “2 ‘My house.’ 3 ‘My cat.’ 2 ‘Me and my cat.’ 3 ‘My house,’ ‘Me and my cat,’ ‘Me in a tree’” (26) — contrasts with the violence of the shooting. And Bobby is upset because the voice in his head “doesn’t like him” (17). Finally, the random violence visited on Bobby is treated in an almost offhand manner: “And I’m sorry to say that one of those shots came through the kitchen window and caught poor Bobby in the hip” (47). In his latest book, *Liquid Fear*, Zygmunt Bauman talks of how human beings today fear not only actual threats but also the thought of threats, fearing uncertainty itself. According to this, “our harrowing

\(^3\) In the later edition, i.e. the trilogy (2005), the date was removed.
experience of insecurity” is “apparently incurable” (130), and we suffer from what he calls “the Titanic syndrome:” “The horror of falling through the ‘wafer-thin crust’ of civilization into that nothingness” (17). Crimp’s Fewer Emergencies takes up the project of Attempts on Her Life, which a decade ago portrayed precisely this kind of society. And, of course, the profoundest critique of these plays would be that their sensibility and images actually perpetuate the fears whose causes they aims to criticise.

Unknownable Others

Another example of the tension in Crimp’s plays between his modernism and postmodernism is the way he represents the idea of the existential Other. Although Crimp has written a wide variety of different plays, one theme that consistently characterizes his work could be described as an incredulity towards comprehending the Other. Typically, a Crimp play will have a group of perfectly understandable characters, with one oddball. In Dealing with Clair (1988), the sinister James — who has probably murdered Clair — is a mystery. The motivation for his crime is never explained; no policeman or psychologist arrives to help us understand what happened. The same is true of Getting Attention (1991), Crimp’s child abuse play: the obvious question to ask — why does the mother allow her new boyfriend to physically abuse her daughter? — is never answered. Like James, she is a mysterious Other. In The Treatment, Anne’s motivation for running away from her abusive husband is comprehensible, but the rest of her actions much less so. Here, the fugitive female Other eludes our capacity to understand her. Finally, in Attempts on Her Life, “Anne” is clearly an elusive Other, this time a feminist Other in the mould of de Beauvoir, constantly evading the controlling power of the male gaze. Even Four Attempted Acts, an unpub-

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4 By Other I mean the existential or phenomenological Other, those who are not oneself, of the tradition of Husserl or Sartre, rather than the Other of the postmodern, postcolonial, Lacanian or Derridean traditions. If, for Sartre hell is Other people, for Crimp the Other is not so much infernal as mysterious, unknowable and fugitive.
lished 1984 play whose structure of four related playlets anticipates that of *Fewer Emergencies*, has its unfathomable Others: in the first playlet we cannot know who or what Billy is; although this humanoid creature is being experimented on by a sinister doctor. But what are his motives? Such information is deliberately withheld. In these ways, Crimp purposefully introduces an element of doubt, a deliberate ambiguity and mystery about what makes the human being tick.

In *Fewer Emergencies*, this idea of the incomprehensible Other is best exemplified by the psycho-killer of *Face to the Wall*. Here, Crimp parodies the social discourses that are often used to “explain” the motivation of a psycho-killer, and explicitly rejects each one:

3 He’s never suffered.
1 No.
3 Experienced war.
1 No.
3 Experienced poverty.
1 No. (32)

Neither has the psycho-killer “been tortured,” generally “abused, then, as a child” or specifically “fucked up the arse as a child,” or “beaten by his dad breaking a leg off the chair in the kitchen.” Nor are his wife or children sick (32–33). In Crimp’s mind, it is safe to say, all these explanations of mass murder are both clichés and patently inadequate. We can never know, he implies, what really motivates a psycho-killer. He is the unknowable Other. Like Musil’s Moosbrugger, the crazy Other here stands for a crazy society: “If mankind could dream collectively, it would dream Moosbrugger” (Musil xvii).

Similarly, in *Whole Blue Sky*, the apparently happy couple is not as happy as they might seem. We are given a lot of information about the wife, yet her husband remains a mystery, and — typically — a sinister mystery. He “gets/ up to things” (10), and, what is more, his wife “knows he gets up to things” (11). She might know what kind of things he gets up to, but we do not. Is he unfaithful? Is he a paedophile? Or a

5 Cf Rebecca in Pinter’s *Ashes to Ashes*: “Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends” (41).
secret drug-taker? Or shop-lifter? We can guess, speculate or imagine, but we can never know. Crimp simply does not tell us. The husband is an unknowable Other. His eyes, Crimp says on more than one occasion, have a tendency to “slide away” (10). In the same way, certainty itself tends to suffer slippage.

Characters and situations such as these are the sites where Crimp’s modernistic absurdism meets his playful postmodernism. As Esslin argues, “[t]he hallmark of this [absurdist] attitude is its sense that the certainties and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away” and, quoting Ionesco, “[c]ut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (23). This sensibility, which has its roots in Crimp’s early love of Ionesco and Beckett (see Sierz, The Theatre of Martin Crimp), is reconciled with postmodernism’s suspicion of knowledge gathered from representation.

Children as Mysterious Others

The final image worth examining in Fewer Emergencies is that of the child. As Crimp says, “The plays are united in fact by images of childhood: in each, children are witnesses of events they can’t understand, and are viewed with hostility and suspicion by the adult protagonists. The child’s gaze is something that the adults find unbearable” (“Fewer Emergencies, Vienna”). As in David Mamet’s The Cryptogram (1994), the child is both witness to the adults’ pain and the site of their accumulated anxieties. And, in miniature, children in Crimp’s plays are symbols of the inability to truly know the Other. For the adults, children are mysterious and threatening, and probably incomprehensible. For the children, adults are exactly the same. They are mirror images of misunderstanding.

In Fewer Emergencies, the child is a constantly ambiguous presence. For example, in Whole Blue Sky, when 3 suggests that the “she” character “can’t love the baby” and “gets depressed,” 1 points out that “she” not only “loves it,” but also that “[l]oving the baby cements the marriage” (9). Clearly, the word ‘cement’ means both a union and suggests a weighing down. In Face to the Wall, of course, there is a lot about “dis-
tressed children” (30), including a gross joke about not rubbing butter on a child’s burnt skin (35). Finally, in Fewer Emergencies, poor Bobby wants love (47), but is “locked in for his own protection” (45).

In these ways, Fewer Emergencies builds on Attempts on Her Life, where children insistently make their presence felt. In scenario 3, for example, they are both killers and victims of war: “the little children have been disembowelled” (216) and “[t]hey set light to my little girl’s hair” (218). Little wonder that Anya calls the murderers: “You sister-fucking blaspheming child-murdering mindless fuck-faced killers” (219).

In other scenarios, the humour is grim: Annushka is dead, cut in two, and “no one questions why a child should be in two bags as opposed to one” (261). In another, the advert for Anny: “No child’s pelvis is ever shattered by a chance collision with the new Anny” (238). In scenario 10, it is the little children who first spot that their grandmother is crying, and then it emerges that “she is, yes indeed, crying her eyes out like a tiny child herself” (248).

Even in an early play such as Four Attempted Acts, the Crimpian theme of the child as victim and perpetrator is present in a nascent form. The creature Billy is described as a “vicious little sod” (3), and his inarticulate gibberings are reminiscent of a child’s babblings. His name seems to prefigure Bobby. Elsewhere, childhood is equated with vulnerability: when Mrs Lebrun is suffering helplessly in the dentist’s chair, she protests that “I’m not a child, Mr de A” (20) and, talking to her lover on the phone, Yvonne objects to being told what to do: “You make me feel like a child” (33). Otherwise, childhood is anarchic: while the dentist describes the rapist’s throwing of magazines around the waiting room as “rather childish” (26–27), he claims his new assistant has “an air of innocence,” “[a]nd I don’t mean the innocence of a child, which after all is a very dubious notion to my mind, but more the innocence of an animal” (20). The image of children bleeding makes repeated appearances. In one scenario, a little boy’s had an accident, and is “bleeding” (35, 43), in another, Rose, the child prodigy that is suspiciously old to be a child, has bitten her fingers so much that she bloodies the keys of the piano (50, 55). Rose is, of course, being infantalised by her mother. The effect is to make her speechless.
Conclusions

Perhaps the most tantalising words in Fewer Emergencies are the last we hear from the stage: “That’s right, Bobby-boy. Watch the key. Watch the key swinging” (49). As Bobby, with his wounded legging losing blood, crawls up the stairs to get the key that will release him, Crimp’s parting image reminds us that, as well as opening doors, keys usually release meanings. In this case, the key is just out of reach. It “swings” (49) in the air, thus suggesting that any definitive meaning that can be extracted from the play is also similarly ungraspable. But although Crimp’s open text gives directors and actors a wide margin of interpretation — his speakers might be anything from actors searching for a Strasbergian motivation to dreams being dreamt inside a writer’s head — the play is certainly not meaningless.

Crimp’s use of the evocative phrase “The darkest place is always under the lamp” neatly summarises the paradox of his theatre: under the bright lights of the stage, the audience expects to see things clearly. Instead, the playwright offers riddles, and doubt. Given that all the stories in Fewer Emergencies are not even Lyotardian “small narrative units” (xi), but are radically incomplete, collapsing narratives, the suspicion is that Crimp is a postmodernist prankster. Yet it would be a mistake to see Fewer Emergencies as a postmodern language game, a high-spirited theatre version of Brit Art. Clearly, its satire is seriously aimed at all aspects of life in a highly mediatized society, and enjoyable as its satiric thrusts are, they all play to one political point. As Crimp says:

The big criticism of the postmodernists is that they have no moral position therefore they have no position full stop. They embrace the world in a way that is implicitly uncritical. That’s not a position I could endorse because otherwise I couldn’t write a piece that is satirical because satire can’t exist unless it’s from an identifiable position. Your position is implicit in satire, I would describe my position as universally critical. (Sierz, “Interview with Martin Crimp”)

Crimp is also aware that:

When I wrote Attempts on Her Life (17 scenarios describing a woman whose identity seems constantly to shift) I realised I had unconsciously created a ‘postmodern’ artefact, since it was a received idea, now fading a little, that identity was ‘culturally constructed.’ But I must say, this wasn’t my intention. I was
more interested in satirising certain contemporary myths. ("Fewer Emergencies, Vienna")

*Fewer Emergencies* conveys its meanings on several levels. On the level of playtext, the first edition shows that Crimp recognized it as a partial prediction of the current fear of terror. On the level of content, the three playlets are all, in various ways, a critique of the culture of suburban contentment in Western society. But these modernistic political meanings are constantly undercut by Crimp’s enactment of the postmodern crisis of form, in which all narratives and representations are called into doubt. At the same time, in the background, are images of the unknowable Other, especially in the guise of a child. The essential tension in Crimp’s work, the tension that makes his dialogues fly and his work so appealingly ambiguous, is that between his modernist project and a postmodern sensibility. He wants to write in the tradition of Beckett and Ionesco, but finds himself in the age of media spin, reality TV and celebrity culture. In this atmosphere of simulation and hyperreality, the modernist project is constantly undercut by postmodernist temptations. At the same time, Crimp’s postmodern sense of fun is held in check by his modernist moral imperative. He believes that there is a foundation of truth, that language does allow us to communicate and that social critique is worthwhile. Yet his self-critical attitude means that he’s never self-satisfied. Whenever he thinks he’s attained certainty, he begins to doubt it: for him, the darkest place is always under the lamp.

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*Primary Literature*


Aleks Sierz

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Secondary Literature

1. Somnambulistic Facts

With the arrival of the New Journalism under a charismatic leadership of Tom Wolfe in the middle of the 1960s, some cultural critics announced a rediscovery of the Self; the opening of a new chapter in American individualism (Weber 21). The remarkable phenomenon of the New Journalism emerged unexpectedly when Wolfe, at the time associated with the New York Herald Tribune, wrote a perfectly standardised coverage story of the Hot Rod and Custom Car show at the Coliseum in New York. He hated the inflexible and rigid routine of his fact-based report, and in an act of inspired rebellion created a new style of journalistic writing widely publicised in his first book with a flamboyant title The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby. Wolfe is notorious for inventing contemptuous labels to deride the popular journalism of his time. “The somnambulistic totem newspapers” was perhaps one of the most biting apppellations coined about the daily press which, as Wolfe claimed, produced neat and square columns of factual pulp tailored according to the popular style sheet. As he described the term:

A totem newspaper is the kind people don’t really buy to read but to have, physically, because they know it supports their own outlook on life. They’re just like the buffalo tongues the Omaha Indians used to carry around or the dog ears the Mahili clan carried around in Bangal. (xi)
In contrast, more literary effects, which the New Journalism aimed to produce, were achieved in the process of a drastic reformulation of documentary, “non-fiction material;” in other words, as comes to be known, the New Journalism “renders literature from reporting and from fact” (Weber 14). Moreover, the New Journalism involves “refraction” instead of “reflection” of the outside world and remains a puzzling mixture of feature-story journalism, confession, mass-magazine fiction, middlebrow novel and narrative history (cf. Weber 16, 24). It emphasises the essentially literary character of writing, exposes the shaping hand of a writer who leaves “the mark of his distinctive consciousness” on the material he or she works with (Weber 20). The New Journalism was immediately baptised “the personal writing for the age of personalism” and as such was seen as a seismic wave of individualism in the time of the ‘mass man’ (Weber 21).

Tom Wolfe’s new style of writing had significant implications both for “literary journalism” (also known as “creative non-fiction”), which the New Journalism helped to define and put on entirely new tracks, and for the conventional journalism of the daily press catering for the needs of its mass audience. The traditional opposition between personalism and mass man, even more clearly defined by the appearance of the New Journalism, provides ample grounds for the discussion about post-war British verbatim drama because it corresponds with the literary genres with which most of the plays in question are engaged. My point here is not just to stress the hybrid and elusive character of British verbatim drama, which occupies the middle position between the two categories, but to argue that many documentary plays combine various aesthetics in order to reconnect with mass audiences and at the same time to aim at general and universal truths unavailable to standardised, popular journalism. The multifaceted character of verbatim drama makes it particularly suitable to combine the style of the “somnambulistic totem newspapers” — to use Tom Wolfe’s explosive comparison — with particular qualities of literary fiction or perhaps even historical writing.

To a number of critics, literary journalism is primarily characterised by a partial blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction and by assimilating the factual into the artistic (cf. Aucoin 6). It is thus considered to be a genre of literature and consequently deemed superior to
conventional, straightforward reporting. Other critics, however, point to a few journalistic standards which should define reliability and precision and which most genres of literary journalism fail to fulfil. In order to maintain accuracy of reporting and remain a reliable source of information, a copy should not contain composite scenes or characters, it is not allowed to misstate chronology, falsify the drift of events, invent quotes and characters or attribute thoughts to unconfirmed sources (Aucoin 7). A reliable newspaper reporter is therefore not allowed to indulge in any practices which practically constitute the workshop of such masters of the New Journalism as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer or Ryszard Kapuściński.

I would like to argue that the recent examples of British documentary drama reverted to what Wolfe termed “somnambulistic journalism” of standardised, mass reporting in a deliberate attempt to re-establish a broader and supposedly more objective rapport with popular audience. Yet, the manipulative intentions of verbatim drama lie mainly in the fact that both tribunal plays as well as the more literary creations — for instance David Hare’s documentary drama — employ a variety of rhetorical devices and literary tropes to universalize their message beyond the here and now of daily, vanishing sensationalism.

2. Objectified Fabulation

Although the concept of truth is anything but a precise one, all contemporary English verbatim and documentary plays openly declare that they will pursue the truth and reveal facts pertinent to the investigation of a given case. Bloody Sunday, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor, opens with a statement that the tribunal’s task lies solely in discovering the truth, “not the truth as people would like it to be, but the truth, pure and simple, painful or unacceptable to whoever that truth may be.” The opening statement ends with the expression of a firm conviction that “[t]he truth has a light of its own” (Bloody Sunday 7). Norton-Taylor’s

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1 Richard Norton-Taylor’s Bloody Sunday attempts to establish what happened on the fatal Sunday, 30 January 1972 in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The core of
The Colour of Justice expresses a conviction that the members of the inquiry into Stephen Lawrence’s murder “at the end of the day, […] will establish what happened” (19). In general, documentary drama and conventional journalism share the view that truth can be fully disclosed and objectively described once appropriate methods of investigating, recording and reporting of material are established. Consequently, the discussion of verbatim drama should not only concern the nature of facts presented but it needs to be preoccupied with the methods employed to talk about the facts and the narrative devices selected to approximate them. One of the characters in Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo’s Guantanamo complains about the impossibility of verbalising a traumatic experience, by asking “how do you tell it? How do ordinary words tell it?” (52) The task most documentary writers are faced with, then, is similar to what World War II survivors have to tackle, relating their testimonies of war atrocities to an ordinary listener.

However, speaking from a purely literary perspective, one cannot help thinking that the frenetic rush towards “objective” truth is a clear indication of the demise of fabulation. The death of a story, tacitly replaced by factual analysis, is represented in the documentary drama by the obsessive adherence to real events in whose confirmed reliability and

the drama is actually the reconstruction of a court room and a selected number of hearings which were presented to the Saville Inquiry between 1998 and 2004. The play presents evidence of civilians as well as soldiers, using authentic documentation appropriated from previous inquiries and the Irish Government investigation.

2 The play is an attempt to reconstruct the circumstances of the murder of a black teenager in London’s Eltham and establish whether the Metropolitan Police can be accused of negligence on the basis of hidden, corporate racism.

3 For instance, as Ursula Canton points out, some verbatim playwrights also strive to “establish the direct reference to an individual space,” by using toponyms. The use of a “clear reference to a place in the world outside the theatre,” as is the case with Guantanamo, changes the mode of reception (89, 88). Toponyms work as a powerful reminder that the play deals with real facts and physical space.

4 The entire play consists of stories and testimonies recounted by the families of a group of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. It makes use of authentic letters and documents which Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo managed to collect, investigating the cases of the British citizens suspected of terrorism and kept in the American detention camps.
The Colours of History or Scenes from the Inquiry into Verbatim Drama

verifiability the plays seek ultimate legitimisation. In Stuff Happens David Hare plainly asserts that “the events within it [the play] have been authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public. What happened happened” (Author’s Note). Similarly, as the note on the cover of The Colour of Justice informs, the text of the play was “based on the transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.” Guantanamo, in turn, was written “from spoken evidence” and David Hare’s Permanent Way originated from “countless meetings with individuals and experts” to whom the author is “indebted for their generosity with their time, their knowledge and their experience” (Permanent Way Author’s Note). Verbatim drama can therefore be seen as a stage in the steady decline of artistic and literary simulation, as it is clearly suggested to the reader that he or she no longer deals with a map of a given territory but with a thing itself — selected but original. Writers no longer allow themselves to theatricalise, invent, or simply re-create, sensations but consciously and overtly revert to the forensic effort of collecting them from external sources.

The withdrawal from strictly artistic and literary prerogatives of a writer, scaling down the personal and the fictional in fiction, and turning to the purely factual may be indicative of the hidden drive towards a more immediate and unobtrusive communion with larger audiences. As Adorno observed, writing about mass media messages: “due to their calculative nature, these rationalised products seem to be more clear-cut in their meaning than authentic works of art, which can never be boiled down to some unmistakable ‘message’” (479). Referring to Tom Wolfe’s totemic comparison, documentary drama can be perceived to have swayed decisively towards the pattern of a mass, “somnambulistic” form.

5 The play tells an ironic and bitter story of the run-up to the invasion on Iraq. Showing Blair, Bush and other prominent figures of the American administration in conflict about the unconfirmed evidence of the weapons of mass destruction, the play attempts to create a semi-documentary picture of the manipulation and hypocrisy in the governments of the two world powers.

6 The play presents various opinions on the contentious issue of the privatization of the British Rails. It dramatizes interviews and analyses of simple workers and executive managers revealing a shocking state of chaos and mismanagement in British public sector.
of writing. As a consequence, it goes down the well-trodden path of popular culture. The totemic somnambulism is a formal residue of transparent and clear style which, so to say, resembles writing degree zero in the realm of popular journalism. Instead of theatricality, verbatim plays boast the three-dimensional effect of no-nonsense realism in staging the clarity and accessibility of gathered material, which is to prevent any accusation of pretence. Additionally, they employ methods of mass communication which have been ingrained in the minds of mass audiences.

All verbatim plays, some of which were written by professional journalists, deliberately emphasise the standard journalistic structures of the ‘five Ws:’ the epistemological, political and moral judgement that documentary drama confidently pronounces is reaffirmed by a constant feedback of detailed, personal confessions. It is here that the five ‘w’ questions, that is ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘where,’ ‘when’ and ‘why,’ are regularly addressed, and it is here that the medium reaches its standard level of transparency which an average consumer of mass culture is conditioned to recognise as authentic and reliable (cf. Keeble 97–103). The examples abound and it is enough to mention Norton-Taylor’s *The Colour of Justice*, which opens with a detailed chronology of the inquiry into Stephen Lawrence’s death and then proceeds to present a map of the area where the murder took place. Similarly, *Guantanamo* begins with a statement from Lord Justice Steyn who elaborates on the issue of unlawful detentions and goes on to explain more complex details, claiming that “this episode must be put in context” (Brittain and Slovo 5). Furthermore, most verbatim plays stick to the other ‘w’ questions as well. Apart from clearly answering the question of ‘where’ the reconstructed events took place, they provide information about who was involved by naming the rank and function of people related to the narrated events. Such devices copy journalistic methods of establishing credibility and reliability of the report.

As such, most verbatim plays stress the informative value of dramatic communication, are based on clearly expository and explanatory models of rendering events in the way newspaper and magazine journalism does (cf. Aucoin 6). Furthermore, verbatim plays attempt to create an impression that they “represent events as events” instead of narrating them
as textualised meanings (ibid.). The confessionary evidence given by the characters is usually emplotted — to use Hayden White’s terminology — in such a way that it resembles a loose chronicle instead of a narrated story, that is, a spontaneous record of history itself in its seemingly undisrupted flow. Consequently, the information provided is usually polyphonic, intentionally chopped up, and issued from various interchanged sources. Clearly, taking all these combined strategies into consideration, verbatim drama consistently aims to represent reality as a transparent structure which finds its way onto the stage almost without any deflection. Therefore, while the new journalism used to be described as ‘art of fact,’ verbatim drama should rather be seen as ‘fact with no art,’ meaning no artificiality or artefact.

3. Journalistic Historiography

On the basic level, therefore, verbatim drama seems to break new theatrical ground. With the intentional diminishment of the role of the subjective, artistic presence, it emerges as an egalitarian, public form of expressing opinions. No matter how strongly influenced by journalistic conventions, theatre thus becomes an independent alternative to all other media of mass communication. Documentary playwrights, theatre producers and some reviewers want to see it as a medium of the people and for the people not only because it wants to present itself as faithful to the original words of spoken testimonies but also because it stands in opposition to artistic experiments of previous decades of British drama. What is generally appreciated is the spontaneity and authenticity of expression without the unnecessary artifice of theatrical convention. In Guantanamo, one of the solicitors remarks that the stories told by the detainees are characterised by “the absolute lack of any artifice, or pretence, or contrivance, so that the words come tumbling out” (Brittain and Slovo 52). I would like to stress that in the kind of medium thus defined, the role of the playwright is that of an agent intercepting other people’s voices instead of an artist creating his or her own vision. The playwright becomes an archaeologist who assembles and collects interesting specimen of human life. Theatre, by implication, appears to be similar to a museum exhibition with loose and dynamically orchestrated
strings of individual narratives based on ready-made objects. One is tempted to ask a pressing question: is verbatim drama one more example of post-dramatic theatre?

Let us suspend this question for a while and concentrate briefly on issues of a more philosophical nature. David Hare’s Stuff Happens opens with a curious statement which seems to add a serious corrective to what has been so clearly categorised and assessed so far. In an “Author’s Note” Hare states that “Stuff Happens is a history play, which happens to centre on very recent history.” This — perhaps the most illuminating statement for the whole discussion on verbatim drama — leads to the complex issue of historiography, which in contemporary criticism is positioned between literature and history and which seems to have a decisive role at least in some of the quoted plays. Hare’s declaration thereby provides a sufficient precedent to redirect the debate away from the binary opposition between literature and journalism into a new set of issues: the present and the past. The truly literary and anti-factual character of verbatim drama, so far almost completely overshadowed by documentary pledges of verbatim playwrights, comes fully to light only when we see these plays as part of the discourse of history. The fact that in the debates about documentary drama it is equally significant to talk about history as it is to discuss literary concepts introduces a number of new perspectives. David Hare’s apparently off-hand remark turns people and issues described in his play into figures and events in the historian’s narrative instead of in a journalistic report. As a result, the war on terror, the invasion on Iraq, the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the Bloody Sunday massacre become what Hayden White calls “historical fields,” that is to say, detailed collections of historical facts and data to be explained and rationalised (Metahistory 26). As such, they require significant cognitive operations which may not be apparently aesthetic or poetic but which bring into the discussion certain rhetorical devices followed by ideological considerations (Metahistory 26–27). All of the great eighteenth and nineteenth-century historians, whose concepts and philosophy White investigates in his groundbreaking Metahistory, developed their own realistic outlook on the past of their civilisation. However, as White stresses “the concept of a realistic approach to reality is equally problematic as the notions of sanity and health” (Metahistory 47). I pro-
pose to dwell on this point for a while and to consider verbatim drama as an instance of historical writing in which an array of devices applied by writers or literary journalists is seen as techniques usually associated with the workshop of professional historians.

In Hayden White’s opinion any historical narrative on its path leading towards the truth is encapsulated in what he calls “archetypal plot structures” or, in other words, “archetypal story forms” among which White numbers comedy, tragedy, romance and satire (Metahistory 6). Furthermore, his theory of tropes, among which he enumerates metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, proposes that they are to “characterise objects in different kinds of indirect, or figurative, discourse” (Metahistory 34). The tropes, so to say, embellish the individual elements that appear in a historical narrative with additional modality in which the element begins to function not only in relation to other elements but also with a new set of more general characteristics. All of these tropes are after all based on the mechanism of transferring the qualities of one thing onto another (for instance, synecdoche as pars pro toto). In consequence, they help grasp the content of experience in a more figurative, and thus, meaningful way (Metahistory 34).

All documentary plays already mentioned here use at least one or more tropes out of Hayden White’s list and thus skilfully transform concrete, factual meanings into more abstract and literary ones. For instance, The Colour of Justice consistently establishes a dominating metaphor of racism among the Metropolitan Police staff. Once a number of witnesses say that the attack on Stephen Lawrence was an act of racial violence, almost every step of the police investigators is metonymically associated with racism even though no explicit mention of the word itself is made in the particular descriptions of their actions. The fact that Stephen’s wound was not examined properly by the police officers, the ineffective search of the area after the crime, the fact that some documents concerning the investigation went missing, or even the truly incriminating collusion of one of the detectives with the suspect criminal — all these instances of negligence and unprofessional conduct are indirectly presented as examples of racism. The mechanism of metonymy transforms these individual issues into serious instances of racist bias. Individual stories of witnesses, then, are vehicles for new implied
meanings. The general rules of metonymy emplot the described events as racist. Consequently, without losing any documentary, factual objectivity the play still manages to universalise particular opinions and facts, attributing them with clearly abstract and figurative characteristics. Similarly, *Bloody Sunday* establishes a ruling metaphor of death which penetrates both the subjective evidence given by the witnesses and the factual details of the fatal day. As a result, all activities of the British Army in Londonderry on Sunday 30 January 1972, such as the lack of any plan to deal with violent rioters, are immediately qualified as murderous and presented as an unwritten concession to use life ammunition. Irony and satire are also used to influence the qualitative value of words and actions. In *Guantanamo*, the ironic effect is produced when two contradictory images of the British secret police are juxtaposed. The professional conduct of highly trained agents is undermined in one of the accounts which presents a police officer unable to take the suspect’s fingerprints because he has to use an old Victorian ink block instead of computerised equipment (Brittain and Slovo 48). Similar methods of ironic treatment of public figures and official statements are common in *Stuff Happens, Bloody Sunday* and *Permanent Way*. Indeed, ‘cognitive operations,’ described by Hayden White, are activated most effectively through such hidden rhetorical tropes.

Shifting the debate from the strictly literary level to a historical discourse reveals the smooth operation of subtler, more aesthetically sophisticated mechanisms of establishing epistemological positions within documentary drama. Outside explicitly literary or journalistic categories of organising material, there are also popular ways of common storytelling which emplot events and facts as parts of tropological narrative, which then may encode ideological positions such as anarchism, conservatism, radicalism or liberalism and which, finally, operate within the patterns of tragedy, comedy, romance or satire. Thus, selling its subjective and opinionated ideology to the audience, verbatim drama can nonetheless be seen as objective and factual — a virtually transparent form of communication. In this instance it seems that verbatim drama aims at an illusion that “it is the world that speaks itself” (White, *Content of the Form* 2) to the reader instead of a more appropriate conclusion that it is an individual writer who speaks about the world.
4. Post-Dramatic Drama after Postmodernism?

Verbatim drama, consistently sustaining the illusion of the neutrality and transparency of its form, gains free access to the popular imagination of mass audiences. By communicating with audiences accustomed to the “totemic somnambulism” of the popular press, verbatim drama itself conforms to, and becomes part of, the culture industry. Its “composition hears for the listener”, was Adorno’s openly paradoxical comment on pop music (qtd. in Howe 497). Documentary drama’s relative popularity and unconfontrational relationship with theatre audiences springs largely from the strategy of an attentive catering to the popular taste. As a quotation of the every-day, documentary drama reflects expectations revealed in general statistics. Consequently, almost by definition, it uncritically boasts at least two characteristic features of typical mass culture phenomena. Firstly, it is unfit for rebellion; verbatim writing effectively triggers an inborn mechanism of conformity to common opinion which excludes any possibility of a publicly subversive criticism — it is obsessively democratic. Putting things plainly, unless you are a top-brass politician in the Bush or Blair administration, you will be persuaded to continue living as you are with your deep political biases ever more confirmed. Secondly, and coming back to the issue of post-dramatic theatre, typically of all forms of popular culture, verbatim drama rejects any generic specificity, it abolishes the high-culture divisions into types of literary and non-literary language or fiction and non-fiction writing. Verbatim drama is post-dramatic as much as it is post-literary, post-fiction and post-journalism. Is it post-postmodern? Well, perhaps yes because it innocently believes that the objective truth of facts can be reconstructed from the chaotic pool of rioting, subjective voices.
Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


Postmodern Drama Post-9/11:
Adriano Shaplin’s *Pugilist Specialist* and
David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*

The idea for this essay first emerged after critical reflection on the ambiguity of the conference motto (and now title of these proceedings), “Drama and/after Postmodernism.” Apart from apparently suggesting two alternative topics for discussion — 1) the relationship of drama to postmodernism, 2) drama in the wake of postmodernism — the slash separating “and” and “after” can also be interpreted to indicate the simultaneous applicability of those rather disparate options, thereby allowing for the following reading: plays (and since these are the proceedings of a conference of a Society for Contemporary Drama in English: contemporary plays) may still draw upon and define themselves in relation to postmodernism, even though that term may no longer adequately describe the current conditions of certain postindustrial societies. But would a drama that still relates to postmodernism — for example, by adopting key features of postmodern aesthetics — not be obsolete under social and cultural conditions that could no longer be characterized as postmodern? And what possible relevance could such postmodern plays still have under those changed circumstances?

From an American perspective, the notion of postmodernism seemed increasingly anachronistic and irrelevant in the wake of the attacks of September 11. The initial cultural response to the carnage of that day, shared by popular opinion at large, was a call for the “end of
irony” by numerous pundits (including Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter and Time contributor Roger Rosenblatt). More damaging and of longer-lasting effect, however, were the consequences of the domestic and foreign policy initiatives of the White House in response to 9/11: the Patriot Act, the War on Terror, the Iraq War, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, etc. The political concepts, decisions, and actions, as well as the manipulative and authoritarian tactics of George W. Bush’s administration — regarding not only the Iraq War but also other issues less relevant to the following discussion, such as global warming, abortion, birth control, the right-to-die, gay marriage, the separation of church and state, etc. — clearly suggest an alarming departure from what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has described and conceptualized as the postmodern condition of technologically advanced knowledge societies. This departure certainly calls for a reconsideration of Lyotard’s sociological-philosophical concept, at least in regard to its continuing relevance within an American context, and it also necessitates a reassessment of postmodern drama in the wake of such a shift (even if the determining factors of postmodern drama as an aesthetic genre may differ from those characterizing the postmodern condition). The following pages will deal with two plays that both combine a postmodern exploration of dramatic form with a critical representation of the Iraq War as the Bush administration’s “displaced” retaliation for the attacks of 9/11: Pugilist Specialist by American playwright Adriano Shaplin and Stuff Happens by British dramatist David Hare. Since this essay responds primarily to predicaments closely associated with the second Bush administration, it may seem arbitrary that the focus here is not exclusively on contemporary American drama. Yet, the place of origin of the dramatic texts under discussion may be of less concern than the question of how Shaplin and Hare analyze, criticize, and/or deconstruct a “theatre of war” largely created by George W. Bush and his advisors — with the strong support of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Besides, both plays have been performed to major acclaim in the United States.¹

¹ Adriano Shaplin’s Riot Group has performed Pugilist Specialist in New York (where it opened at 59E59 Theater in September 2004 before moving to The Culture Project at 45 Bleecker St. the following November), San Francisco (Magic Theater,
Numerous and often polemical articles in the last few years have re-assessed the appropriateness of postmodernism as a concept to describe the situation in the United States. In his landmark study *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* from 1979, Jean-François Lyotard defined postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), by which he meant totalizing stories about the history and goal of humankind that legitimize cultural practices and forms of knowledge. For Lyotard, metanarratives or, as he also calls them in his earlier work, master-discourses provide the basis for judgment in all situations. Lyotard saw the totalitarianism of modern metanarratives such as Hegel’s teleology, Hermeneutics, Marxism, and Capitalism replaced by a postmodern “heterogeneity of language games” (xxv), which no longer aimed at providing systematic theorizations of human society or at prescribing universal remedies, or metaprescriptions, for its ills. Instead, the rules of these language games only applied to a particular context and had to be agreed upon by its present players. The postmodern condition, according to Lyotard, invalidated metanarratives that aimed at regulating “the totality of statements circulating in the social collectivity” (65) and replaced them with a “multiplicity of finite meta-arguments” that were “limited in time and space” (66). While it could be argued that the policies of the Bush administration are neither driven by a postmodern vision nor a high regard for heterogeneity, and many crit-

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2 Ashley Woodward provides the following information on Lyotard’s adoption of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of language games. “The theory of language games means that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put. [...] Lyotard presents a postmodern methodological representation of society as composed of multifarious and fragmented language games, but games which strictly (but not rigidly – the rules of a game can change) control the moves which can be made within them by reference to narratives of legitimation which are deemed appropriate by their respective institutions. Thus one follows orders in the army, prays in church, questions in philosophy, etc., etc.”
ics even attack the administration for returning to modern metanarratives (liberty, democracy, capitalism), if not pre-modern masterdiscourses (manifest destiny, “House on the Hill,” messianism), other voices nevertheless emphasize the postmodern aspects of the Bush presidency. It is particularly the brazen disregard of his administration for politically inconvenient scientific facts that is often associated with Lyotard’s delegitimization of traditional science. The American literary scholar Stanley Fish, in this context, blames the recent inclusion of Intelligent Design in the biology curricula of several American states on liberal academics, who have made multiculturalism and postmodernism the new paradigm in research, replacing the traditional contest of ideas (and their testing by experimental verification) with a pluralistic contest of claims that all have “a right to be heard and taught” (72). In other regards, too, conservatives have been quite successful in appropriating popular(ized) notions of postmodernism and turning them to their advantage — with the result that what originally promised emancipation from the demands of Western metaprescriptions now recurs, in a per-

3 In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard suggests that scientific research in the West, instead of being autonomous and universal, has always depended on political powers and “the legitimation of the legislator since the time of Plato” (8). Consequentially, the delegitimization of traditional political metanarratives also entails the loss of legitimacy for the traditional paradigm of scientific discourse — with its “conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification” (8). It could be argued that the Bush administration accepts one of Lyotard’s key statements at face value — “In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government” (9) — and that it interprets the delegitimization of Western science in their own favor, by granting legitimacy to discourses that had been considered unscientific before and by only acknowledging those findings of scientific research that fit their ideological agenda.

4 Fish also refers to an interview from 1996, in which the Intelligent Design advocate Phillip E. Johnson admitted his misappropriation of postmodernism. “I’m no postmodernist,” he declares […], but ‘I’ve learned a lot’ from reading them. What he’s learned, he reports, is how to talk about ‘hidden assumptions’ and ‘power relationships,’ and how to use those concepts to cast doubt on the authority of ‘science educators’ and other purveyors of the reigning orthodoxy. […] [T]he strategy he borrows from the postmodernists — the strategy of claiming to have been marginalized by the powers that be — is, he boasts, ‘dead-bang mainstream academia these days’” (71).
verse spin, as a self-legitimization of America’s global reach for power. The administration of George W. Bush has effectively appropriated and utilized for its own purposes one of the basic concepts of postmodernism: namely, the idea that history, identity, class, race, gender, the self, etc. are constructs and can therefore be “re-fashioned.” An often-quoted passage from a *New York Times* article by journalist Ron Suskind, in which he describes his encounter with a senior advisor to George W. Bush, makes this very plain.

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors… and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” (Suskind, “Without a Doubt”)

In November 2003, the staff of the Harvard-based online publication *Perspective* published an editorial that clearly differentiated between the Bush administration’s anti-scientific bias (which might be construed as postmodern but is really the result of a totalitarian desire to control all aspects of reality) and their unilateral worldview (which defies the implicit pluralism of postmodernism).

With all his rejection of truth and construction of alternative realities, Bush might well be said to be America’s first postmodern president. […] Right? Wrong. […] While the Bush Administration may be ostensibly postmodern in its rejection of science, it certainly is not postmodern in its rejection of every other moral, political, and economic framework other than its own. This worldview, which legitimizes a foreign policy defined by the mantra “with us or against us,” is also the basis for the Bush administration’s unapologetic denial of science. In the end, what is most troublesome is not the possibility that our leaders are abandoning scientific facts in favor of radical relativism. The real danger […] is that American leadership will remain so mired in its own absolutism that it becomes divorced from reality itself. (“George W. Bush”)

If the analysis of the political situation in the United States results in the conclusion that the Bush administration, despite its seemingly postmodern aspects, is really a threat to postmodernism, and if, furthermore, the administration’s strict adherence to self-fabricated metanarratives and its
consistent attempts to superimpose these narratives onto multiple other discourses within American society (media, science, religion, morality, etc.) clearly reveal absolutist tendencies, what sense does it still make to bring up the notion of postmodern drama under these conditions? Would postmodern drama not be anachronistic in this context and, therefore, incapable of reflecting the conditions of its time, either affirmatively or critically? The first answer to this may be that the notion of postmodern drama (like that of other postmodern art forms) cannot be reduced or limited to represent a specific political formation or era. The German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, for example, grants that postmodern theatre reflects the *Zeitgeist* of its time, but by this she refers to changed modes of aesthetic perception and reception since modernism, not larger historical-political constellations (227). Secondly, since postmodernism, in Lyotard’s words, describes a condition of plurality, not a unified metanarrative, postmodern drama, as one particular language game among a heterogeneous multiplicity of such games, cannot possibly come to stand in for the postmodern condition itself. Lyotard even implies that postmodern artistic experimentation may well and justifiably co-exist with authoritarian conditions when he mocks “a talented theatreologist for whom postmodernism, with its games and fantasies, carries very little weight in front of political authority, especially when a worried public opinion encourages authority to a politics of totalitarian surveillance in the face of nuclear warfare threats” (72). Different from traditional forms of political aesthetics, postmodern art resists political authority not by producing “counter-metanarratives,” but by refusing to engage in metanarratives at all. For Lyotard, postmodern aesthetics are defined by artistic experimentation that allows “the unpresentable to become perceptible […] in the signifier. The whole range of available narrative and even stylistic operators is put into play without concern for the unity of the whole, and new operators are tried” (80). However, Lyotard’s focus on rendering the unpresentable perceptible provides only one of many possible strategies for a postmodern aesthetics. With regard to postmodern drama, quite a large number of “new operators” have been tried over the last few decades that have gradually added up to a set of recognizable characteristics. “[F]ragmentation, indeterminacy, reflexivity, intertextuality, montage techniques, temporal
conflation [and] randomness” (Malkin 17) are some of the traits that postmodern drama shares with postmodern literature more generally. And since the discourse on postmodernism itself is marked by a multiplicity of concepts and theories, postmodern drama has not only been influenced by Lyotard’s concern with the unrepresentable but also by Jacques Derrida’s playful decentering of structures and sign systems, Roland Barthes’s “death of the author,” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “rhizomatic” structures and “desiring machines,” Julia Kristeva’s “chora,” Jean Baudrillard’s “simulation” and “hyperreality,” Fredric Jameson’s “pastiche” of artistic forms, Charles Jencks’s semiotically “double-coded” aesthetics, and Craig Owens’s “allegorical impulse” (synthesizing the ideas of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man). One of the most common features of postmodern drama, however, may be the self-reflexivity and metadiscursivity with which it displays and deconstructs the processes of its own signification. According to German theatre scholar Kerstin Schmidt,

[Postmodern drama fulfills a dual function: it deconstructs drama in the very process of producing drama and, as a consequence, [...] generates its own metadiscourse. In postmodern drama, formal features are foregrounded to such an extent that unilateral referentiality is impossible and, in this sense, it becomes a concrete theater in which each (theatrical) sign is purely metatheatrical, only tells itself, and represents itself. (35)

While this definition proves valuable for the debate under discussion, its seemingly easy transition from “postmodern drama” to “concrete theatre” exemplifies a problematic terminological slippage that is still all too common in scholarly writings on drama. The terms “drama” and “theatre” denote very different fields of meaning, not less so under the conditions of postmodernism. While both postmodern drama and postmodern theatre — and, for that matter, postmodern dance, postmodern architecture, etc. — share the characteristics mentioned above (self-reflexivity, metadiscursivity, intertextuality, etc.), these characteristics manifest themselves in differing ways in each form since they apply to a literary genre in the first case and to performance methodologies in the latter. Even though postmodern drama and postmodern theatre may successfully meet in the occasional production (Robert Wilson’s staging of Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmachine*, Richard Foreman
directing his “ontological-hysterical” plays), the more common occurrence is either the comparatively conventional staging of a postmodern text (as in most productions of Tom Stoppard or Sam Shepard’s work) or the postmodern interpretation of a classical or modern play (the Wooster Group production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Wilson’s staging of August Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*). Postmodern plays focusing on the fragmentation and decentering of dramatic sign systems and structures (such as *Hamletmachine*, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play*, and Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life*) often inherently require an equally decentered production style, while those plays primarily exploring temporal conflation, simulation, pastiche, and double-coded aesthetics (such as Stoppard’s *Travesties* and *Arcadia*, Shepard’s *Fool for Love*, and Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*) often do not demand postmodern acting or directing techniques since they cite and recycle realist plot and character conventions. Despite the fact that both postmodern drama and postmodern theatre share the “classical” avant-gardes as a major influence, they also relate to and process rather divergent artistic lineages: while the genealogical precursors of postmodern drama include the Romantic drama of Ludwig Tieck, the theatricalist plays of Luigi Pirandello, and perhaps even the self-reflective narrative strategies of Jorge Luis Borges, postmodern theatre adopts and reworks artistic techniques and strategies from a wide range of performance traditions, media cultures, and art forms.

The formal and stylistic experiments of postmodern drama can certainly be interpreted as acts of resistance not only against the “unilateral referentiality” (Schmidt) of traditional Western drama but also against a hegemonic and imperial cultural and political discourse (for example, in the form of American exceptionalism, a you’re-either-with-us-or-against-us mentality, etc.). However, in times of rising religious fundamentalism and political extremism, the foregrounding of the self-referentiality of the dramatic sign may seem a rather limited and ineffective strategy to postmodern playwrights who also want to respond to the political situation in their work. The major challenge for a postmodern drama intent on tackling the pressing issues of our time is how to combine and integrate a postmodern aesthetic that playfully explores dramatic form with a dramaturgy that critically engages with current
events without falling into the trap of (re-)producing the master-discourses of traditional political theatre. The plays that will be discussed in the following pages answer this challenge in different ways.

Adriano Shaplin’s *Pugilist Specialist* is a play about four marines that are assigned the task of assassinating a Middle-Eastern leader. The 15 scenes of the play cover the first military briefing of the marines, their lunch at a mess hall, their reconnaissance training, their final deployment close to the target, and a last-minute change of plan and immediate execution of this revised plan. The code names of the target are “Big ‘Stach’” (for “Big Moustache”) and “The Bearded Lady,” but several references in the play indicate that the target in question is actually Saddam Hussein: “The Bearded Lady” has doubles, is supposedly delusional and paranoid, has already survived five previous assassination attempts by the United States, is located in “Mesopotamia” — Colonel Johns refers to an “ancient Mesopotamian landscape tapestry” (202) —, and is compared to Hitler in one of the letters that the marines receive from fellow Americans back home. Also, the play provides numerous clues that point to the immediate aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 as the main time-frame: one of the characters talks about a “righteous intervention” (177), and the letters sent to the soldiers include references to “nation building,” the “Christian war machine,” and “charred remains of Iraqi babies” (195). Nonetheless, the major plot element of the play — the attempt of a group of marines to assassinate “Big ‘Stach’” at one of his palaces — does not correspond to any factual event of the early Iraq War: the American “Shock and Awe” campaign actually started with an air attack on Hussein’s Baghdad palace, but the dictator had already gone into hiding and did not resurface at any of his other palatial residences after that. Since *Pugilist Specialist* was already performed in August 2003 at the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, Shaplin must have written the play right at the beginning of the American occupation. (Saddam Hussein himself was captured by American troops only four months after the play’s Edinburgh run.) The major conflict in the play is between Lieutenant Emma Stein and Lieutenant Travis Freud. Stein is a proud, tough and sober-headed explosives expert famous for her carefully organized and executed bombings of enemy sites, whereas Freud is a sniper with a misogynist attitude and a
Markus Wessendorf

deep libidinal attachment to his job. While Stein is an idealist who has joined the military to serve the public good, Freud has chosen his profession because he loves to kill and considers sniping an art. At the end of the play, when Freud and Stein have finally entered the target’s mansion to plant the bomb, Freud suddenly receives instruction via radio to kill Stein instead of the “Big ‘Stach.”’ Colonel Johns, who is in charge of the operation, never expected his team to get so close to the target that they could really kill him. Johns justifies his change of plan to Lieutenant Harpo Studdard: “I can’t let her set that bomb Harpo. […] I can’t let her finish this mission Harpo. We need the target more than we need her. […] No more targets, no more history” (225). After Stein has been shot by Freud, the last scene in Pugilist Specialist just features an audio recording of the radio communication among the remaining team members. In the recorded dialogue, Johns tells Freud to leave the corpse of Stein at the mansion and finally orders Studdard to switch off the tape recorder. The play ends with the abrupt cutting off of the tape.

In an essay published in two installments in the early 1980s, American art critic Craig Owens identified the “allegorical impulse” as one of the key characteristics of postmodernism. Quoting Paul de Man’s statement that “[a]llegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read” (Owens 73, quoting de Man 205), Owens established a close link between the postmodern aesthetic of Laurie Anderson’s performance pieces and the problems of illegibility (72), unreadability (72), and the impossibility of reading (73) associated with the allegorical mode. Pugilist Specialist relates postmodernism’s “preoccupation with reading” (74) and its concern with the “failure to ‘read the signs’” (70) to a military operation of American Special Forces at the beginning of the Iraq War. These themes not only dominate the actions and interactions that occur in the plot but also shape the dramaturgy of the play with regard to a potential audience reception.

Within the context of the play, none of the marines ever seems to be fully informed about his or her mission: information is consistently withheld (or fragmentary), while the marines themselves are under constant surveillance (a microphone records all of their conversations). Since their operation is only a small component of a larger theater of war, the characters lack a broader frame of reference that would allow
them to decode the signs. Their process of reading remains open-ended, since any possible perspective allowing for a conclusive interpretation of information would by far transcend the immediate reality and perception of the characters. At the beginning of the play, for example, Lieutenant Stein believes that she is the first person to arrive at the military briefing room, only to find out later that a clandestine pre-briefing between Lieutenant Studdard and Colonel Johns — the contents of which are not revealed — had already occurred in that same space. After Stein’s assassination it remains unclear if the change of plan was really Colonel Johns’ spontaneous decision, or if Stein hadn’t been the primary target of the mission all along — in retaliation for her leaking sensitive information to the New York Times after a previous operation. The problem of illegibility also recurs in other scenes of the play. During their reconnaissance training, the marines are asked to identify “The Bearded Lady” on photographs. However, they have a hard time distinguishing between “Big ‘Stach’” and his doubles — and it becomes apparent that all proposed methods of identification are inexact since they rely on intuition (Colonel Johns suggests that the target can be identified by the seductive quality of his “bedroom eyes” [193], while Lieutenant Stein claims that the “frown lines” are the distinctive mark [194]). In another scene the marines discuss the semiotics of the standard-issue care packages that are designed for the Iraqi population. Again, the message conveyed by the content of those packages — “One protein bar. […] One miniature white flag. A calculator. […] Three condoms” (199), and a cartoon representing “Big ‘Stach’” next to a pile of money — is far from simple and can be interpreted in contradictory ways.

LT. STUDDARD: What do they need condoms for?
LT. STEIN: Ooo, let me see the cartoons.
LT. FREUD: It’s like: “Immigrate to the U.S., and you might need these.”
[…]
LT. STEIN: Okay, what is “The Bearded Lady” doing in this picture?
LT. STUDDARD: I think that picture speaks for itself.
LT. FREUD: It’s a harmless allegory.
[…]
LT. STEIN: Do you think because you drew an arrow from “The Bearded Lady” to a pile of money that his people will rise against him?
LT. FREUD: Most importantly, will they know that’s a stack of ones?
COL. JOHNS: A strong narrative arch is essential to any military victory. You
should know that.

LT. STEIN: This narrative arch has poor character development. (199f)

Apart from the theme of unreadability, this dialogue also exemplifies another key aspect of postmodern drama: self-reflexivity. Johns’ insistence on the unambiguous readability of the cartoon and his claim that military victory depends on narratives such as that suggested by the cartoon provides an ironical contrast to the situation in *Pugilist Specialist* itself: the cartoon, designed by Americans for Iraqis, fails to convey an unanimous message even to Johns’ own subordinates, while the marines themselves are unaware of any univocal narrative that would justify their mission. As a result, their operation ends not with a military victory, i.e., the assassination of “The Bearded Lady,” but with the killing of Lieutenant Stein by “friendly fire.” Lieutenant Freud’s claim, on the other hand, that the cartoon represents “a harmless allegory” (200) also folds back metadiscursively and ironically onto the play itself since allegories are not only far from harmless within the universe of *Pugilist Specialist*, they are also the major reason why the marines do not succeed in their various reconnaissance missions. Lieutenant Stein’s final statement, in addition, self-referentially relates to the dramaturgical structure of the play (which could, indeed, be interpreted as a strong narrative arch with poor character development).

The theme of “character development” (or lack thereof) also extends to the problem of “readability of character.” The characters try to guess at each other’s motives and emotional lives behind their rigid military postures. Lieutenant Stein, in the opening monologue of the play, indicates that women in the military can only maintain their dignity by not revealing any private information about themselves: “Secret is my armor. Silence is my camouflage” (160). At the same time, she herself provokes Lieutenant Freud by telling him that she knows very well how to read his macho behavior: “You don’t fool me Freud. [...] I know you just want to hold hands” (185).

The stage directions in *Pugilist Specialist* are very minimal, and locations are exclusively suggested by the dialog, not indicated by particular objects on stage. Similar to the characters within the play, the audience of the play is often under-informed. With each new scene it has to be established all over again where, and how much later than earlier events,
the action is happening. The dialog is often elliptical and allusive; it becomes only gradually clear, though never explicit, that the mission of the marines is to assassinate Saddam Hussein. Since the characters are soldiers, a lot of their dialog is delivered in clipped military jargon, which also impedes our perception of their individual traits. Lieutenant Stein invites the audience, right at the end of the first scene, to approach not only herself but also the entire play as an allegory or riddle that needs to be deciphered: “Loneliness, grief, discipline. Spectacles, testicles, wallet, watch. Decode that” (160).

There is also an intertextual dimension to Pugilist Specialist that suggests possible directions of interpretation. The name of Emma Stein, who claims that “[p]unctuality is my feminism” (159), points both to Jane Austen’s novel Emma, as well as to Gertrude Stein (Lieutenant Stein may be a lesbian), while the name Travis Freud refers both to Travis Bickle, the psychotic protagonist in Martin Scorsese’s film Taxi Driver, and the pioneer of psychoanalysis. Studdard’s first name Harpo, on the other hand, points to the Marx Brothers. The association between Lieutenant Stein and the playwright of the same last name is clearly evoked when Lieutenant Freud asks Lieutenant Stein to define “empathy” for him, since he is “a sniper, not a playwright” (196), and the female lieutenant obliges him by offering a definition of the term. Lieutenant Freud’s link to Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, is emphasized when he claims to “eat unconscious desires for breakfast” (179). Similar to the protagonist of Taxi Driver, Lieutenant Freud also plots but then fails to assassinate a political leader (in Scorsese’s film, the politician is a mayoral candidate for New York City). Regarding the larger context of the play, though, the connotations of the names fail to provide meaningful clues for interpreting the characters. Lieutenant Stein exhibits none of the major traits associated with Austen’s heroine or with the famous American writer, nor does Lieutenant Freud demonstrate any behavior that clearly aligns him with the analytical Viennese doctor or the short-fused protagonist of Scorsese’s film. In addition, Harpo Studdard is not funny — the reference to the Marx Brothers serves less to suggest an analogous relationship between the four characters of Pugilist Specialist and the four famous comedians; rather, it emphasizes the striking gap that separates the regimented life of the mar-
ines in Shaplin’s play from the anarchistic humor and grotesque universe of such films as *Animal Crackers* or *Duck Soup*. The character names in *Pugilist Specialist* only provide limited readability and function more like arbitrary codes of designation rather than as revelatory clues to a person’s identity.

Shaplin’s play not only features a fictitious plot that alludes to the early stages of the Iraq War, but also reflects on the way this war has been conducted in reality. Similar to the Bush administration’s habit of offering up a new justification for war once the previous one is discredited (Weapons of Mass Destruction, regime change, spreading democracy in the Middle East, etc.), the official mission of the marines, namely, to assassinate “The Bearded Lady,” is completely redefined by the end of the play to reveal a different metaprescription altogether: to keep the primary enemy alive under all circumstances so that a continuation of war will be justified. (Even though Saddam Hussein has been captured and put on trial, this still seems to be the major strategy of the Bush administration with regard to Osama bin Laden five years after the attacks of 9/11.)

David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* also deals with the Iraq War, but from a different angle. The play focuses not on operations in Iraq itself, but on the backroom deals and political maneuvers of the Bush administration that made the war possible. Different from Shaplin’s elliptical dramaturgy, Hare’s play represents the political plot that led to the march on Baghdad by America’s “coalition of the willing” in a more direct fashion. *Stuff Happens* consists of two acts with twelve scenes each. The play starts with short glimpses into the formative experiences of the major characters in the 1970s, then zooms in on the time period between January 2001 and August 2004. The key events of that period covered in

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5 On September 22, 2006 Op-Ed contributor Lawrence Wright wrote in *The New York Times*: “The fifth anniversary of 9/11 has come and gone, but there was a conspicuous figure missing from the retrospectives and commentaries: Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda’s founder has clearly been marginalized even in his own movement […]. Meanwhile, Pakistan has negotiated a truce with tribal chiefs promising to keep troops out of the Waziristan districts, where the leadership of Al Qaeda may be hiding, and the C.I.A. has closed Alec Station, the unit devoted to finding Mr. bin Laden. He is the forgotten man.”
Hare’s drama include: the first mention of Iraq as a potential target at a National Security Council meeting ten days into Bush’s first term, Bush’s use of 9/11 as an excuse to bring up Iraq again only four days after the attacks, the war in Afghanistan in late fall 2001, Bush’s January 2002 speech about the “axis of evil,” Tony Blair’s initiation into Bush’s Iraq plans by the summer of 2002, Bush’s speech at the U.N. in November 2002, Colin Powell’s presentation of dubious evidence of Iraq’s WMD at the U.N. in February 2003, the launch of the war in March 2003, and — in a short final scene — the first one-and-a-half years of the American occupation of Iraq. Even though the play has 49 characters, the main plot only involves nine protagonists: George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Paul Wolfowitz, Kofi Annan, and Hans Blix. All public utterances of the protagonists are quoted verbatim, while their confidential conversations are dramatizations based on a combination of extensive research and conjecture. (Hare states in the “Author’s Note” to the first publication of Stuff Happens: “The events within it have been authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public. What happened happened. Nothing in the narrative is unknowingly untrue. Scenes of direct address quote people verbatim. When the doors close on the world’s leaders and on their entourages, then I have used my imagination.”) Stuff Happens constantly moves back and forth between different settings and features the role of a narrator-actor that is played by alternating members of the company, easing transitions between scenes by providing background information and often introducing as well as commenting on a character’s lines or actions. The chronological sequence of events is occasionally interrupted by monologues that stand apart from the main thrust of the play and represent a range of different opinions on the American push for war. These monologues represent the views of a conservative British journalist, a New Labour politician, a Palestinian academic, a British citizen in New York, and an Iraqi exile. Hare’s own dramatization of the conflict, however, is far from unbiased. The central (but flawed) hero of Stuff Happens is the “multilateral internationalist” Colin Powell, who first puts his world reputation on the line to gain international legitimacy for what he considers Bush’s peaceful intentions in putting political pressure on Saddam Hussein, only to
find himself excluded from the major decisions of Bush’s inner circle that lead to the war. Tony Blair opportunistically jumps on Bush’s bandwagon early on to have some impact on the shaping of American foreign policy in the wake of 9/11, but is soon outmaneuvered by Cheney and Rumsfeld, who care neither for his New Labour credentials nor his political survival. Bush himself is represented as an intellectually narrow man of simple but strong convictions, whose major strength is his unwavering pursuit and use of power. The most sympathetic of the nine protagonists is clearly U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix, who displays a strong sense of humor and appears unintimidated by power.

Stuff Happens presents a postmodern version of documentary drama. Even though Hare himself claims in the “Author’s Note” that his play is not “a documentary” but “a history play,” he uses a similar approach as Rolf Hochhuth (The Deputy), Heinar Kipphardt (In the Case of J. Robert Oppenheimer), and Peter Weiss (Vietnam Discourse) in their plays from the 1960s by exploring actual political and/or historical events and by incorporating factual material into the dramatic text. Different from 1960s docudrama, however, Stuff Happens is “post-ideological.” While the earlier generation of dramatists considered themselves partisan and often (particularly in Weiss’s case) attacked fascism, capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism from an openly Marxist point of view, the target of Hare’s play is not a general system of political thought or government but a specific group of politicians and their actions. (Bush, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz are certainly depicted as right-wing ideologues, but the political system represented by them is not identified with their ideology since it also allows for the contrary positions of Colin Powell.) The questions that drive Stuff Happens are exactly those attacked by the “angry British journalist” in the play, when he complains of the “relentless archaic discussion of the manner of the liberation. Was it lawful? Was it not? How was it done? What were the details of its doing? Whose views were overridden? Whose views condoned?” (15) Stuff Happens takes issue with why and how the Bush administration went to war in Iraq, but shies away from larger political generalizations (such as claiming that the Iraq War is an example of American imperialism).
Also different from many of the earlier docudramas, Hare is rather minimalist in his use of stylization (there are no verses, songs, or choruses in Stuff Happens) and only combines a few elements of Epic Theater (actor-narrator, Gestus, an episodic sequence of events occasionally interrupted by individual commentaries on the build-up to war) with realistic dialog and factual speech. The characters in Stuff Happens are instantly recognizable by key bits of information that are communicated through different dramatic devices. To take the first scene with Condoleezza Rice as an example, these details are provided through stage directions — “Condoleezza Rice, splendid, always alone, steps forward” (6) —, the background information provided by the actor-narrator — “a minister’s daughter from Birmingham, Alabama” (6) —, statements by the character herself — Brahms is her favorite composer because “He’s passionate without being sentimental” (6) —, and statements by other people reflecting back on her character: “Yo-Yo Ma: Do you think it’s also this irresolution in Brahms, the tension that is never resolved?” (6). The sense of immediate familiarity that this Brechtian indication of Gestus evokes is further heightened by the realistic dialog employed by Hare. Verbatim quotes from historical figures and conjectured dialogs between them blend so well that they almost make for a certain unease: the diegetic narration, as well as the recognizable factual speeches, suggest a high level of documentary veracity and objectivity that even affects the reader’s response to the invented scenes. Reality and fabrication seem inseparable and suggest a perfectly believable simulacrum of the “stuff” that really “happened.” This effect, however, is again offset by the metadiscursive elements of the play that serve as constant reminders of the constructedness of its dramatic representation. This aspect is even more foregrounded by the material reality of any theatrical production of Stuff Happens: The narrator-actors, the frequent and rapid scene changes that only allow for a limited realization of each locale, and the fact that the actors are never complete look-alikes of the historical characters they represent ensure that the illusion of a documentary “slice of life” is rarely sustained for long. The permanent oscillation between a simulacrum of historical reality and the metadiscursivity of the play itself (or, in production, its metatheatricality), however, not only points to the dramatic (or theatrical) constructedness
of such a simulation, it also suggests that the simulated political reality may already be a dramatic (or theatrical) construct itself. The invitation to relate the situation in the play to theatrical production and to compare the group of politicians in the play to a company of actors is implied by a verbatim line of Hans Blix at the beginning of the play: “I was an amateur actor when I was a student. Theatre teaches you the value of collaboration, of getting on with other people” (9). Similar to actors performing Stuff Happens, whose efforts at sustaining the simulation of the represented politicians are undermined by the material signifiers of theatrical production itself, the politician-characters within the play also create a simulacrum, namely a semblance of evidence of Hussein’s imminent threat, that is finally undone by the post-invasion reality in Iraq.

One of the most striking aspects of Stuff Happens, particularly regarding both Hare’s treatment of Bush’s plotting as a “historical play” and, inversely, the self-understanding of the Bush administration as “history’s actors” (Suskind, “Without a Doubt”), is the mismatch of George W. Bush as a “leading man,” considering the theatrical as well as political arenas of the genre that he purportedly represents. “History’s players” (be they protagonists in Shakespeare’s histories or actual political leaders in difficult times) are usually expected to match the complexity of the historic moment intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically. Bush as dramatis persona, in this regard, fails to meet this expectation throughout the play. The fact that none of the characters in Hare’s play are intended as parodies makes it even more remarkable that the Gestus of Bush is primarily indicated by one recurring stage direction that renders him almost robotic in his lack of intellectual agility. The stage direction “There is a silence” (or variations thereof) either indicates the stunned reaction to a disarmingly unsubtle proposition by Bush (see pages 11, 12, 20, 25), emphasizes his inability to respond spontaneously to someone else’s argument (29, 38, 39, 40, 42, 53), or precedes his own wooden reply to a question (30). This Gestus sums up key aspects of Bush’s private behavior that have been well documented in several books on his presidency. Referring to (former Secretary of the Treasury) Paul O’Neill’s descriptions of his encounters with the president in Ron Suskind’s The Price of Loyalty, the critic Carol V. Hamilton argues that George W. Bush represents a postmodern substitute for the
Postmodern Drama Post-9/11: Shaplin’s Pugilist Specialist and Hare’s Stuff Happens

traditional notion of character. She writes in “Being Nothing: George W. Bush as Presidential Simulacrum.”

Under the sign of postmodernism, the hermeneutics of depth have been replaced by the play of surfaces, and the flat celebrity has superseded the complicated historical figure. […] American media commentators […] overlook, understate, or make excuses for [Bush’s] slipshod syntax, reliance on clichés, and inability to answer either theoretical or factual questions. They inevitably refer to him as if he were a “real” person with a complex sensibility, rather than a simulacrum entirely composed of sound bites and photo opportunities. […] While in public, Bush appears to interact amiably with the media, in the center of government — away from public observation — he is disconnected, like an unplugged machine. […] If Bush “plays at privacy” in public, he cannot act “for real” in private, because he is now in a realm where substance and depth, rather than sheer surface, are called upon. […] I will speculate that in a post-literate, hyperreal world, those accretions of historical time and psychological reflection that produce subjectivity tend to disperse before they constitute a deep, coherent self. The result can be a personality like that of Bush — intellectually narrow, emotionally shallow, working with an abridged vocabulary, like a novice in a foreign language class.

Notwithstanding Hamilton’s anti-postmodern bias and her mourning for traditional character structure, it could be argued that it is less the flat, post-literate personality of Bush that is scandalous here than a political system and media culture that still invest him with the attributes of depth, substance, and heroic leadership.

As postmodern plays that were both written post-9/11, Pugilist Specialist and Stuff Happens succeed quite well in combining a playful exploration of dramatic form with the tackling of political themes. Instead of judging the depicted events from a clearly defined political vantage point, both plays ‘unravel’ the portrayed campaigns — the special operation to assassinate “The Bearded Lady,” alias Saddam Hussein, and the fabrication of a master-discourse by the Bush administration to make the American occupation of Iraq seem legitimate — from within. This, however, is facilitated by the fact that the worlds depicted in both plays and the means by which they are depicted have certain postmodern features in common. The unreadability of signs and the end of metanarratives as key themes of postmodernism are reflected both in the plot of Pugilist Specialist, where they figure as obstacles to the marines’ pursuit of their mission, and in the play’s formal composition and dramatic
structure. *Stuff Happens*, on the other hand, self-reflectively interrelates the notion of a Bush administration determined to ‘re-fashion’ the Middle East in its own image with the play’s attempt to model those events into coherent epic drama: the selective focus on only a few key protagonists and the obvious melodramatization of the more nuanced historical conflict between Colin Powell and the other members of Bush’s inner circle clearly reveal Hare’s play to be a fabrication itself. Overall, though, the postmodern aspects of the realities that both plays describe have a rather different significance from those elements that allow the plays themselves to be characterized as examples of a postmodern aesthetic. While the unreadability of characters, motives, and overall mission in *Pugilist Specialist*, as an artistic strategy, confronts the audience not only with their own desire for closure but also, more generally, with a key aspect of the postmodern experience; within the military context of Shaplin’s plot itself those themes connote surveillance, secretiveness, hierarchical power, betrayal, and, finally, death. While *Stuff Happens* implies that Bush’s plot to invade Iraq and his ever-changing justifications for war constitute a *simulacrum* that is mirrored in the dramaturgy of Hare’s plot itself, it is only Bush’s *simulacrum* that has led to disastrous consequences in political actuality. The discrepancy between the benign function of postmodernism on an aesthetic level and its negative implications for the realities referred to in both plays results from a major denial that haunts the military world of *Pugilist Specialist* as well as the self-enclosed universe of the Bush administration in *Stuff Happens* — namely, the incapability to accept decenteredness, heterogeneity, and multiplicity as facts of 21st-century existence. The disintegration of meaning, identity, purpose, etc. leads to the cynical outcome in *Pugilist Specialist* because the characters inhabit a world that is unable to confront the fact that, despite Colonel Johns’ claim to the contrary, no “strong narrative arch” (200) justifies the marines’ individual actions, their group mission, or the general operation of American troops in Iraq. The protagonists of *Stuff Happens* completely disregard the language games of political discourse (informed decision-making, the honoring of contracts and laws, the rules of diplomacy, etc.) in their creation of a new reality, while insisting that they are merely serving the most traditional justification of American politics: “RUMSFELD: I’ll tell
you what’s legitimate. [...] The authority to act comes from the people. [...] Power in this country doesn’t come from its institutions [...]” (101). Pugilist Specialist and Stuff Happens are successful and relevant examples of postmodern drama in the post-9/11 period because they convincingly employ postmodernist devices to demonstrate that the actual ‘situation on the ground’ depicted in both plays (the planning of the Iraq War by the Bush administration and the execution of a clandestine mission by American special forces in Iraq) is still inherently marked by postmodern ambiguity, fragmentation, and unreadability. The plays also imply that their grim endings result from the denial of those postmodern conditions, as well as from the ideological adherence to self-generated metanarratives that are completely out of tune with the fragile realities that they supposedly serve to legitimize and explain.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


IV. APPENDIX
Richard Bean
in Conversation with Aleks Sierz

Richard Bean is one of the most prolific and talented playwrights to emerge on the British new writing scene since the start of the new millennium. Born in 1956, he had a career as an occupational psychologist before becoming a stand-up comic, and then finally a playwright. He first came to attention with his play *Toast* at the Royal Court in 1999, the first of his gritty work plays, which he once called “plays about hairy men in work situations,” a phrase which also covers *Under the Whaleback* (Royal Court, 2003, joint winner of the George Devine Award). In 2001, Bean was Writer in Residence at the National Theatre. His plays include *The Mentalists* (National, 2002), *Mr England* (Crucible, Sheffield, 2003), *Smack Family Robinson* (Live Theatre, Newcastle, 2003), *The God Botherers* (Bush, 2003), *Honeymoon Suite* (Royal Court, 2004) and *Harvest* (Royal Court, 2005), which won the Critics’ Circle Award for Best New Play. His productivity is evidenced by the fact that at one point in 2004 he managed to cram the openings of five plays into eighteen months. Bean has become so valued by the Royal Court that when they came to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Look Back in Anger* in 2006, ‘Toast’ was included as one of the mugs with theatre titles that they issued. He has also written radio plays, an opera libretto for Stephen McNeff’s *Paradise of Fools*, and adapted Serge Valletti’s *Le Pub* for the National and Molière’s *The Hypochondriac* for the Almeida. His latest play is *Up on Roof* (Hull Truck, 2006). Bean is also a founder-member of, and vocal spokesman for, the Monsterists, a group of playwrights who have campaigned to persuade theatres to stage more new writing on main stages instead of just in small studio spaces. In the context of the British New Writing scene, he is a post-in-yer-face-theatre...
Richard Bean

playwright, who emphasises storytelling, comedy and is versatile about form. The following interview took place during the “Drama and/after Postmodernism” conference in May 2006.

ALEKS SIERZ: Welcome to Augsburg, Richard, could you tell me how you started out as a playwright?

RICHARD BEAN: I had no connection at all with the arts until I was thirty or so. Theatre wasn’t part of my life. I’m the same age as Johnny Rotten, and I was a punk. But I was a nice punk — I helped old ladies across the road. Then, in the mid-1980s, I started going to comedy gigs. I really enjoyed them and, at the back of my mind, I thought: “I can do that.” Stand-up comedy was easy to get into, but much harder to keep going. I did stand-up for six or so years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but I was comedy B Team; I wasn’t A Team. My material was always better than my performance.

AS: You became a playwright after winning a competition at a night class in drama at Middlesex University. Then your play Of Rats and Men went to Edinburgh in 1992.

RB: Yes, that’s right. I definitely started late. When my play Under the Whaleback was joint winner of the George Devine award, [director] John Tydeman, who was presenting the awards, let slip at the ceremony that they were set up to encourage young playwrights. I was forty-six years old at the time, so my acceptance speech began with the ironic words: “As a young playwright…” But I have no regrets about starting late. I was horribly arrogant in my twenties. And I remember being absolutely fucking clear about everything. I’m now ashamed about how cocksure I was.

AS: You’re a son of Hull, aren’t you?

RB: Yes. Born in Hull. My dad was a policeman and my mum a hairdresser. The police thing is very strong, and it gives the family more status than being working class. Lower middle-class with aspirations: work hard and save money were the values. I owe my parents a great deal — in terms of life skills. But it’s hell having a policeman for a dad — underage drinking, and normal transgressions like that, become a big issue. Eventually, their aspirational drive paid off: they went from Crap
in Conversation with Aleks Sierz

Street to Nice Neighbourhood. And I finally lost my Yorkshire accent when I was doing training work and standing up in rooms talking — you don’t get much respect when you talk like this (a Hull accent is ridiculous).

I still have that work ethic. I’m very workmanlike about writing. For a while, I had an office in Chancery Lane [central London]. Rented it for £50 a week. Most appalling dump you’ve ever seen, but good because you couldn’t do anything else there apart from write plays. I just got on the tube, went to the office and did an eight-hour shift and then went home in the rush hour. It was like a job. So I can’t get away from the work ethic. It’s a fault, but also a strength. I do work bloody hard, I really do. There’s a romantic thing about writing all night, high on inspiration, but that’s all shit. The best time to write is 10.30 in the morning. When your head’s clear.

AS: So what other jobs did you do?

RB: I left school at eighteen, did my gap year in a bakery, working twelve-hour shifts baking the bread. Nowadays I suppose I would have gone to Thailand. Then I did a degree in psychology at Loughborough University, followed by a postgrad diploma in industrial relations and personnel management [1975–79]. I was then an occupational psychologist for STC [Standard Telephones and Cables, which built telephone exchanges] in the 1980s. But that was mad: they had Rorschach tests with multiple choice answers. It was crazy: Does this ink blot remind you of: a) a lovely flower, or b) a car crash. If you answered a) you got the job; if you answered b) it meant you were a psycho, and they threw you out. Then I was self-employed as occupational psychologist and worked for organisations such as Amnesty International.

AS: When did your writing career really take off?

RB: I sent Toast, as an unsolicited play, to several theatres, and they all rejected it. But Jack Bradley, who was the literary manager of the National Theatre, liked it and he suggested that I work at the National Studio [where writers have facilities to develop their work]. While I was there, Toast was taken up by the Royal Court.
Richard Bean

AS: It’s a work play about a night shift in a bakery in the 1970s, and it’s set in Hull. You explored a crisis at the bakery through the eyes of its workers and the trick here was that a 1970s work play was presented with a 1990s sensibility.

RB: Maybe. I’d just seen the Royal Court revival of David Storey’s *The Changing Room*, and yes, I didn’t want to give people neat answers. I wanted audiences to have a big argument about the play. Originally the title was *Wonderloaf*, but it had to be retitled when the owners of the Wonderloaf brand name (now defunct) objected because two men in their workforce had died doing exactly what happens in the play. So they threatened the Royal Court with litigation if it didn’t change the title. But as well as being a work play, it’s also a play about Hull.

I write about working men because, when I’m walking around, I can still hear the voices of the people I worked with in that bakery, as well as those of my uncles, so they are the voices that are in my head. If you live in Hull, the only language you hear is that. At that time, I don’t think I could have written a middle-class metropolitan play because those were not the voices in my head, even though I’d already lived in London for twenty-odd years. The easiest thing for me is to write a fifty-five-year-old working class Hull bloke, usually played by [actor] Sam Kelly. So *Toast* was an obvious play to write.

AS: It’s an all-male play.

RB: Yes. My life has been a blokey life. I went to a boys school, I played a lot of sports, all very blokey. Then I went to university, and became a born-again feminist.

AS: But while *Toast* is a straight work play, *Under the Whaleback* is much more ambitious, especially in terms of its time lapses between its three acts. The life of Darrel, a Hull trawlerman, is shown first when he’s sixteen and a deckie learner on fishing boat, then when he is the only survivor after the trawler capsizes. In the final act, the boat has become a heritage museum ship and Darrel is attacked by the confused and rootless youth Pat.

RB: Yes, it’s all about how one character copes with the changing nature of a traditional industry.
AS: Hull’s trawler fleets also feature in your radio play, *Unsinkable*, which described the tragedy of three local ships sinking off Iceland in one week.

RB: That was an old-fashioned drama, and when I took the script in, the BBC told me they liked it a lot but there wasn’t enough swearing in it. But then when I put realistic trawler swearing in, it was unbroadcastable.

With *Under the Whaleback*, I was inspired by the one-act plays of Eugene O’Neill. It was later revived by Hull Truck in my hometown, and that was a bit scary because Hull people know these stories better than the ladies of Sloane Square. I expected a lot of grumpy fifty-year-olds in the audience, some of who might object to my version of events. But, in fact, they were very enthusiastic.

AS: Talking of fifty-year-olds, *The Mentalists* is about two men in a room, fiftysomethings Ted and Morrie. Ted decides to record a video which explains his plan for saving the world, and both men wrestle with big ideas about utopian aspirations.

RB: The title comes from the behaviourist B. F. Skinner — Ted calls him “Fred” — who in his research decided to ignore the workings of the mind and concentrate on behaviour. According to him, the mentalists are all the people who look at the mind rather than behaviour, in other words Freud and Jung. Psychology is like many other academic disciplines — it’s full of conflict between different gangs, a bit like episcopalian versus congregationalists. Having done psychology, I know a bit about the ins and outs of these rivalries, although my characters are not academics but a barber and company fleet manager. Based on people I’ve met. Ted decides that the answer to the world’s ills is to reprogramme people in a behaviouristic way. The play is also a deliberate homage to Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* [1957], which is the archetypal two-hander.

AS: The play is full of ideas.

RB: I saw the play as an argument between permissive and authoritarian values so, in a sense, Morrie represents community values and Ted authoritarian values. But he also comes from my feelings of dismay about the breakdown of some social values. If you sit in traffic and the guy in front of you winds down his window and throws an empty cigar-
ette packet on the ground, you feel like smacking his face. You think: how can anybody do that? Or: how can people pick flowers from the park? So society’s dead. But it would have been too easy to present Ted as a rightwing nutter. He’s tried alternative foods and he really does want society to be free of pathologies, but he also has gone dangerously astray.

AS: And the play also has that gross bit about a man putting his knob in a bottle.

RB: The knob in the bottle comes from when I was at university and someone we knew stuck his knob into a bottle, photographed it and sent it in to this porn mag to earn ten quid. They published it and we stuck the picture on the kitchen door. So we went through university with this greeting us every morning as we came down to breakfast. You don’t need to see *King Lear* to understand the human condition — you just need to see that picture.

AS: What about *The God Botherers*, one of your most controversial plays, which is a comedy about foreign aid workers and is set in Tambia, an invented African country. Your characters criticise all religions, the idea of aid for Africa and other sacred cows of contemporary liberal life.

RB: Just talking personally, I would say *The God Botherers* was my 9/11 play and I’m not going to write another one like that. We can certainly expect 9/11 to change the way that people relate to each other, and that’s going to infuse all of new writing. Since 11 September, we have stopped writing plays about people’s little personal problems. If I see a play about someone’s private experience, I shrug my shoulders and say so what? I could blow you away with my problems. What I want to see in the theatre is something bigger.

I think it’s difficult to be noisy at the moment; in the 1990s it was easy to be a brat. Now it’s much harder to be provocative. In *The God Botherers*, there’s a criticism of Islam; there’s a severe deconstruction of Christianity in Africa. I use clitoridectomy as a plot device. I was expecting to be killed; I was expecting protests. But all the play got was nice reviews and a full house, which only proves that you can’t excite anybody really.
AS: I remember you telling me that your dad was very anxious about your safety.

RB: Yes, my dad was very worried. He said, “Don’t give anybody your home address.”

AS: Now, *Honeymoon Suite* is set in a Bridlington hotel, and the play looks at three couples: at eighteen-year-olds on their wedding night, forty-three-year-olds on their silver anniversary, and sixty-seven-year-olds married for almost fifty years. But the trick is that they are the same couple, Eddie and Irene, and their lives at different times are shown simultaneously rather than sequentially.

RB: It’s basically about the deep, awful tragedies of love and relationships. It’s a play about unconditional love, and whether it is possible or not. People expect a work play from me, but this is a play about love. And aspiration. Eddie is a docker, and Irene worked in a chocolate factory. There’s a bit of industry politics in the background — her dad has paid for this expensive honeymoon. They don’t know how to open champagne. He goes out to buy chips because they are afraid of going to the restaurant. Their voices are Hull voices.

I liked the idea of three couples being on stage at the same time because it was a way of condensing three ninety-minute plays into one play. While the eighteen-year-olds are on the bed, the sixty-seven-year-olds are discussing something else downstage. I hope the audience see that when these two are kissing on one side of the stage then you can also see those two refusing to talk to each other on the other side of the stage, and think about our own lives. But the play is not about the trick with time, it’s about the characters’ story. And it’s a bit of a weepie.

Unlike some writers, I don’t want to denigrate the well-made play. In the past few years, I’ve discovered the three-act play. *Under the Whaleback* was my first and I saw that you could get closer to the epic by using the three-act structure. *Honeymoon Suite* satisfies the three-act structure, and has a good climax, but there’s something new about it too.

AS: *Harvest* is a comic epic. It has lots of scenes, and tells the story of a farming family and their pig farm over the whole of the twentieth cen-
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tury, with scenes about the First World War and the Second World War, evoking a panorama of social change.

RB: It is a long play, but all of the elements are important. Some people told me that I should have cut the last scene, which is set in today. In it, there’s a brutal robbery carried out by a couple of young urban thugs. But it’s not just gratuitous — I really wanted to show how all the social values of the countryside, which had been put under such strain during the play, had finally collapsed and that the image of rural England as a place of bliss was false. In theatre, we tend to show the city as a place of horror, but the countryside is actually just as bad. That myth that rural England is a green and pleasant land — it’s not.

The other thing to say is that I use comedy instead of sensationalism. In Harvest, my character Titch is more dangerous than someone getting his cock out. Because Titch is an honesty bomb. Also, the play explores that need to populate the stage and to get away from this idea that all plays now have to be cheap two-handers and that even if you have eight characters, only two are on stage at the same time. What a bore that is. No, I wanted to explore the interplay between several people in a family situation.

AS: Talking of big plays, can you tell me about the Monsterists?

RB: The name comes from the similarity between the words “monster” (as in large) and “montrer” (as in to show), and we formed in about 2002. We issued a manifesto in which we stated that the Monsterists not only want to put on big plays (though not necessarily with large casts) on main stages, but that we also have definite aesthetic designs. The manifesto advocates “large concept” work, which shows rather than tells, implies meaning by action and not by lecture, and which is inspirational but not sensationalist.

I’m certainly glad to get out of the ghetto of the studio black box to the main stage, but I don’t think any of us Monsterists have written really big plays. It’s a chicken and egg thing. Theatres want us to write big plays but don’t want to risk commissioning them; writers want to write big plays but they can’t afford to do this unless they are commissioned. If I don’t write two plays a year, I’m skint. I’d have to get a job. So I have to write two plays a year. And even that only brings in £10,000
a year — try living in London on that. If you’re writing for the theatre, I would say the first job is to pay the rent. Don’t rely on theatre to pay the rent. Pay the rent first, remain sane, and remember that writing is not a romantic activity. It might be within your own soul, but if you start getting solipsistic about it you’re finished.

AS: I understand that there was some pressure to change your latest play, *Up on Roof*, after the controversy about the Muslim cartoons in Denmark.

RB: Yes. There’s a lot of pressure now about anything to do with faith and belief. So my play, *Up on Roof*, which is about a prison riot and is set in 1976, has suddenly become controversial. In it, a guy pretends to be a Muslim because it means he doesn’t have to cut his hair. Then he makes a rooftop protest. In the original text, this character says the word Mohammed occasionally; it seemed like the kind of thing he would do. But the Hull Truck theatre management got a bit nervous about that so I had to cut any mention of Mohammed. Ever since *Bezhti* [a play which included sex abuse set in a Sikh temple] was closed by a mob in Birmingham, theatres are frightened of antagonising any religious grouping. The cuts in *Up on Roof* were very minor, but they do illustrate the climate of fear and self-censorship that is beginning to pervade the arts in Britain.

AS: Yes, that’s right. On another point: we don’t really have dramaturgs in Britain, we have literary managers instead. Do you think their opinion is of any use to writers?

RB: As writers, we mainly have relationships with our directors, and sometimes we may have a relationship with the literary manager, and some are more interventionist than others. For example, Graham Whybrow [literary manager of the Royal Court] has never ever said anything to me about changing anything in any of my plays. He just says, “Oh, nice rewrite, Richard.” He hasn’t told me what to rewrite; he’s just said, “Well we can’t stage it at the moment,” so that’s a broad hint. But he hasn’t told me what to do. Jack Bradley at The National, because he works with lots of young writers, not just for The National but for other theatres in London, he’s a little bit more interventionist, but he never really tells anybody what to do either. He kind of says, “Well I
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don't think you need scene one, but that's just my opinion," nobody's actually saying, “Get rid of scene one.” And I think the balance in Britain is really very healthy actually, because as writers we need to be told which babies to slaughter. But it’s left up to us whether we do it or not.

AS: Have your plays been successful in Europe?

RB: Not really. Not yet. Well, I tend to generally write in a naturalistic genre, with a very local voice, which the French hate and most Europeans kind of despise. I’ve had a play translated into French. It's funny, I was at the Motley Design College, which is a theatre design school, recently, and I just went in as a writer to talk about design. And the biggest conflict I had was with a German designer there. He did designs for one of my plays, which is basically a naturalistic play, and of course he'd just said, “Let’s throw all this stupid naturalism out of the window and let’s have a wonderful free, free design.” So my work’s not so well received in Europe. But America seems to quite like it.

AS: How important has the influence of comedy been?

RB: I get criticised for having too many jokes in my plays. It’s something I've had to look at. I don't want to give people an excuse not to take me seriously. I always want to say the unpalatable thing — that's what fascinates me. For example, I want to know whether women wearing full burkhas are allowed to drive big lorries. The thrill for me is writing a line that does two things: makes the audience laugh and helps tell the story. If I can do that once a day, I could take the rest of the week off. My door is comedy, but I’m not happy just doing comedy. My way in is comedy. As I have written more, I’m no longer always running for the punchline now.

AS: Do you still take your daughter to the theatre?

RB: When my daughter Tilly was four and a half years old she loved the theatre, but she talked all the way through every show. One of the most thrilling things I've ever seen in the theatre was when I saw a show at the Unicorn Theatre yonks ago. There was an archetypal baddy in the cast and this four-year-old kid in the audience just threw himself at him and was punching him — it’s the bravest thing I’ve ever seen a human
being do. He must have believed he was a real baddy. Talk about suspension of disbelief.

AS: Finally, the most important question of all: who is going to win the World Cup?

RB: Germany, of course.
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