Seriousness, Structure and the Dramaturgy of Social Life: The Politics of Dramatic Structure in Contemporary British Playwriting 1997-2011

Sarah Louise Grochala

PhD Thesis

School of English and Drama
Queen Mary University of London

I confirm that the work presented in the thesis is my own and all references are cited accordingly.

22 September 2011

Abstract

Contemporary British plays are commonly thought of as political if they address an issue that is already seen as political (Kritzer, 2008). This thesis explores the idea that the political stance of a play is articulated at the level of its structure, as well as in its content. Contemporary playwriting practices in British theatre are dominated by 'serious drama'. Serious drama yokes together politics, dialectical structure and a realist dramaturgy and the resultant form is held up as an ideal against which the political efficacy of a play can be judged. Through an application of the concept of the ideology of form (Jameson, 1981), this thesis re-reads the structures of serious drama in terms of how they reflect the social and economic structures of post-Fordism in their representation of spatio-temporal structures, causation in the dramatic narrative and their imagining of the social subject. Through this reading, this thesis problematises serious drama's claim to a progressive socialist politics.

In contrast, the experimental dramaturgies of a range of contemporary British plays (1997-2011) are read as mediating, negotiating and critiquing the social and economic structures of post-Fordism through their dramatic structure, and so articulating a potentially radical politics. Caryl Churchill's *Heart's Desire* (1997), David Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* (2005) and David Greig's *San Diego* (2003) are read as negotiating the effects of spatio-temporal compression (Harvey, 1990). Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* (2008), debbie tucker

green's *Generations* (2007) and Rupert Goold and Ben Power's adaptation of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* are analysed in terms of their causal structures (Althusser, 1970). Finally Anthony Neilson's *Realism* (2006), Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (2007) and Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008) are investigated for the ways in which they re-imagine the social subject through subjective, narrative, unassigned and collective modes of characterisation.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

I would to thank my supervisor, Dr. Michael McKinnie, for all his support in helping me complete my thesis.

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to articulate a structural politics within the context of contemporary British playwriting. A play is usually read as political because, as Anne Howe Kritzer states, 'it presents or constructs a political issue or comments on what is already perceived as a political issue'. [1] This thesis argues that a play can also be read as political on the basis of its structure, with or without containing any ostensibly political content. My interest in this issue is born out of my own work as a playwright on two main counts: firstly, a growing consciousness of a gap between the plays that I felt had political efficacy and the idea of a political play as a play about political issues. Secondly, an experience in my own writing of finding the dramaturgy of the political issue play increasingly inadequate as a medium through which to articulate my lived experience of contemporary British society.

Contemporary political playwriting in Britain predominately takes the form of what I will term 'serious drama'. This form has its origins in Diderot's genre sérieux in the second half of the eighteenth century, and is rethought as a dialectical form in the work of George Bernard Shaw at the end of the nineteenth. Serious drama addresses social and political issues through a structure that yokes together dialectical argument with a realist dramaturgy. The narratives of serious drama centre around contemporary social and political issues. These issues are embodied in the characters, through their opinions and their life stories, and symbolically resolved

---

[1] Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain : New Writing : 1995-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 10.

in the conclusion of the narrative. This type of dialectical narrative is positioned as central to serious drama's political efficacy and realist dramaturgy is seen as supporting it through its implication that the political and issues embodied in the narrative relate directly to the real world outside the theatre doors. The realist dramaturgy employed in serious drama consists of the following main features: a linear and progressive sense of time; an understanding of space primarily as a realistic backdrop for the play's action; a linear plot structure in which events are linked by cause and effect; and individualised socio-psychological characters, who are thought of as being like real people. These features are recognisable in Ruby Cohn's description of the main dramaturgical features of a form of realism that she identifies as being particularly English:

> Mimetic at both ends, the realistic play is embedded in the contemporary scene. The heir of the well-made play, it too is well made in linking cause and effect within a plot. The characters behave with sociological and psychological credibility; members of the broadening middle class, they display the effects of its education and conventions [...] the coherence of dialogue parallels that of plot and character [...] people speak grammatically in complete sentences [...] connect one sentence logically to another; they answer pointed questions, and they swear meaningful oaths.[2]

Whilst serious drama has been an influential form on the British stage since its birth in the late nineteenth century, it has not been the only form. Mary Luckhurst argues that '[p]lays written after the fashion of the late-nineteenth century realists such as Ibsen, Shaw and Granville Barker are still critically privileged' and 'a certain kind of social realism has been understood as quintessentially English and promoted as the national drama – a campaign so successful that practically everyone has come to believe it'. Despite this, she notes that the contemporary British stage is home to a

---

[2] Ruby Cohn, *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 3.

wide range of theatrical forms. In 2003, she observes that as well as producing serious drama, British theatres also produced musicals, farces, pantomimes, stand-up comedy, physical theatre, anti-realist performance, and plays by writers such as Pinter, whose forms sit uncomfortably within the definition of serious drama.[3] This thesis will specifically concern itself with the last form that Luckhurst identifies, that of plays whose structures are difficult to fit within the dramaturgy of serious drama.

The single authored play is more closely associated with the idea of serious drama than other forms on the British stage. Forms such as musicals, farces, pantomimes and comedy are generally viewed as non-serious on the grounds of their inclusion of music or their dominance by comic elements. In addition to this, they are often categorised as entertainment rather than serious drama on the basis of their predominantly commercial modes of production and their mass audience appeal. At the same time forms such as physical theatre and anti-realist performance set themselves in direct opposition to the forms of serious drama. They are characterised by processes that attempt to resist the structures and modes of production of serious drama, which they identify with the single authored play. Much of this work is therefore produced through collaborative devising processes and privileges visual over textual dramaturgy. There is a general assumption that the single authored play takes the form of serious drama, despite the existence of many plays whose structures lie outside of this form. The plays of J. B. Priestley, Samuel Beckett, Ann Jellicoe, Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton and Caryl Churchill, to name but a few, obviously sit uncomfortably with the definition of serious drama. Despite this, the structures of serious drama are frequently presented

---

[3] Mary Luckhurst, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 9 (2002), 73–84 (p. 82).

as the universal, transhistorical principles of playwriting, as opposed to the structural features of a specific dramatic form. They are thought of as the structures of a good play, rather than a certain kind of play. When a play is presented that lies outside of the structures of serious drama, it is sometimes judged to be a bad play on the grounds that it does not use the structures of this form. The most famous recent example of this was the reception of the first production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* at the Royal Court in 1995, which was criticised for its seemingly illogical leap between the worlds of 1990s Leeds and war-torn Bosnia.

A consistent realist dramaturgy is thought of as central to the political efficacy of serious drama. If the audience need to understand that the issues addressed by the play are directly relevant to their lives, then it is logical to argue that this link is most apparent when the setting of the play recognisably reflects the social reality in which they live. I will argue, however, that the realist dramaturgy of serious drama is problematic on two counts. Firstly the structures of serious drama, it is often suggested, present us with a dramatic world that accurately reflects social reality beyond the theatre doors. As William B. Worthen notes 'realism not only asserts a reality that is natural or unconstructed, it argues that such a reality can only be shown on the stage by effacing the medium – literary style, acting, mise-en-scene – that discloses it'.[4] Social reality, however, is neither natural nor unconstructed. Social reality is produced through the interaction of economic, cultural, ideological, juridical and political structures: 'a synchronic system of social relations as a whole'.[5] Social life has a dramaturgy of its own, what Stuart Hall terms the 'theatre

---

[4] William B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 14.
[5] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 21.

of the social'.[6] Realist dramaturgies reflect this dramaturgy of social life without interrogating it. They offer representations of social, political and economic structures through their dramatic structure that are in line with the representation of those structures by the prevailing cultural hegemony. Raymond Williams defines cultural hegemony as 'the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but which are organized and lived'. The structures of the prevailing cultural hegemony are presented, not as representations of reality, but as social reality itself as it is lived from day to day: 'the reality of social experience'. The structures of a cultural hegemony are hard to discern as they appear in the form of common sense or established knowledge. They are thought of 'as deeply saturating the consciousness of a society' to the point where they appear to be the natural order of things.[7] When drama reproduces 'reality' through its dramaturgy, dramatic structure mirrors the prevailing cultural hegemony's representations of these structures. Realist dramaturgies show us a representation of social reality as we are told it is, rather than as it actually might be in its lived experience or could be imagined to be in the future. While the content of serious drama may articulate a challenging political position, its structures can be read as conservative. As Jameson observes, its structures may carry 'ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content'.[8]

Secondly, I will argue that there is a gap between the representations of social structures in serious drama and our contemporary lived experience. The structures of serious drama, as re-thought by Shaw, originate in a different social, political and

---

[6] Stuart Hall, 'Brave New World', *Marxism Today*, 1988, pp. 24–29 (p. 27).
[7] Raymond Williams, *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 168.
[8] Jameson, p. 84.

economic context from the one in which they continue to be employed now, that of late nineteenth century Britain. To suggest that the structures of serious drama reflect the structures of contemporary reality is to deny significant shifts in the social, political and economic basis of our lives over the past century. The economic systems of the late nineteenth century Britain and contemporary Britain may both be capitalist systems, however there are significant differences in their economic and social structures. David Harvey notes that a capitalist society is one in which 'production for profit remains the basic organising principle of economic life', however, while all capitalist systems operate on this basis, not all capitalist systems are identical.[9] This can be seen by comparing different forms of capitalism operating within contemporary nation states. While there has been a general movement towards more neo-liberal forms of capitalism since the early 1970s, the Swedish model of managed capitalism with its highly unionised workforce and strong welfare state remains significantly different to America's neo-liberal model of deregulated markets, privatised public services and minimal welfare provision, and both differ significantly from the Chinese system which allows for the operation of a capitalist market within the political structures of a communist state. Just as there are significant differences in national forms of capitalism, so capitalism within a single country alters and develops over time.

My rather sweeping explanation of the development of capitalism in Britain in from the early nineteenth century to the present day will be informed by two major theoretical approaches. Firstly my account will be informed by the theories of the French regulation school, who argue that developments in capitalism are caused by

---

[9] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 121.

shifts in two key areas. The first is the 'regime of accumulation' which refers to the processes that enable the accumulation of capital. Ash Amin identifies these as 'the organization of production and work (the labour process), relationships and forms of exchange between branches of the economy, common rules of industrial and commercial management, principles of income sharing between wages, profits and taxes, norms of consumption and patterns of demand in the marketplace and other aspects of the macroeconomy'. The second key area is the 'mode of regulation', which refers to the formal or informal rules that relate to capitalist production; the 'institutions and conventions which "regulate" and reproduce a given accumulation regime through application across a wide range of areas including law, state policy, political practices, industrial codes, governance philosophies, rules of negotiation and bargaining, cultures of consumption and social expectations'.[10]

Secondly, my account will be informed by Scott Lash and John Urry's concept of 'organized' and 'disorganized' capitalism. Lash and Urry identify three broad phases of capitalist development. The first phase is 'liberal' capitalism, which is characterised by liberal beliefs in the freedom of the individual and in the free operation of the market. The second phase is 'organised' capitalism, which is characterised by a general movement towards greater state regulation of the market and of capitalist production. The final phase, 'disorganised' capitalism, is characterised by a return to beliefs in the freedom of the individual and the market, and the rise of neo-liberal forms of politics. None of these phases are distinct. They overlap with each other and in global terms, these phases can exist alongside each other as capitalism develops at different rates in different nation states. There is an

---

[10] Ash Amin, 'Post-Fordism: Models, Fantasies and Phantoms of Transtition' in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. by Ash Amin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 8.

overall sense, however, as Henri Pirenne notes that capitalism tends move between phases of regulation and de-regulation. He observes 'la *régularité vraiment étonnante* de la *périodicité* des phases de *liberté économique* et des phases de *réglementation*' throughout its history.[11] Serious drama in Britain develops as part of a wider a socialist campaign for a movement away from liberal capitalism towards an increasingly state regulated and organised form. In contrast, the experimental plays discussed in this thesis can be read as critiquing the social effects of Britain's transition from organised capitalism towards an increasingly de-regulated and disorganised form.

Lash and Urry argue that liberal capitalism was the dominant mode of production in Britain during the nineteenth century. Liberal capitalism appears to be unregulated but in fact its development was supported by three major pieces of legislation, in tandem with the development of an increasingly codified system of private law. In 1832, the Reform Act redefined the parliamentary boroughs and extended the franchise to all male holders of property worth above £10. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, reduced tariffs on imports and ushered in an era of freer trade. Finally the 1844 Bank Act, made the Bank of England the only authorised issuer of bank notes and created the Gold standard.[12]

The regime of accumulation was based on growing pockets of industry in fierce competition with each other. The introduction of railways and canals dramatically speeded up the rate of transportation of goods, raw materials and people from one place to another, so speeding up the rate of production. The rate of

---

[11] Henri Pirenne, *Les Périodes De l'Histoire Sociale Du Capitalisme* (Bruxelles: Librairie du Peuple, 1922), p. 24.

[12] Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 96.

production was also increased by the introduction of new manufacturing technologies, such as the invention of the fully automated power loom in 1841. Initially, the working conditions in the factories were unchecked, so factory owners were able to increase their output by squeezing as much labour as they could out of their employees. There was little in the way of labour organisation to resist this. Until the repeal of the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 in 1824, strike action was illegal in Britain. Though there was increasing regulation of working conditions from 1833 Factory Act onwards, the workforce remained vulnerable to exploitation.

There was a mass movement of people from rural areas to the new and rapidly expanding industrial cities, such as Manchester and Sheffield. This rapid urban growth lead to extremely high levels of poverty, ill-health and rising crime rates. As the industrial cities began to expand, older patterns of social control began to fall apart. Calhoun argues that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there is a 'breakdown of the structure of hierarchical incorporation which knit local communities into the society as a whole'.[13] Previously, society had been organised through networks of clients, family and friends and focused around the country estates of the aristocracy. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there is 'a general concern for establishing new forms of order and discipline' rather than a state of complete lawlessness in the cities.[14]

In *Capital*, Marx catalogues the miserable existences of British workers in the mid nineteenth century. He tells of children working in the lace industry in Nottingham being 'dragged from their squalid beds at two, three or four o'clock in the morning and compelled to work for a bare subsistence until ten, eleven, or twelve

---

[13] C. Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p. 174.
[14] Lash and Urry, p. 96.

at night, their limbs wearing away, their frames dwindling, their faces whitening, and their humanity sinking into a stone-like torpor'.[15] He quotes Dr J. T Arledge of North Staffordshire Infirmary, who describes the workers in the potteries as 'stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed in the chest; they become prematurely old, and are certainly short-lived'.[16] He recounts the story of Mary Anne Walkley, a milliner working in a respectable London dressmakers, who died 'after working without intermission for 26½ hours, with 60 other girls, 30 in one room, that only afforded ⅓ of the cubic feet of air required for them'.[17] Her employers reaction, he states, was annoyance that she had died without completing the work at hand. Marx argues that the drive for profit through the production of surplus value means that the exploitation of the working class is an inevitable feature of any capitalist system: 'the first birthright of capital is equal exploitation of labour-power by all capitalists'.[18]

Serious drama in Britain is born out of the rise in socialist politics in the late nineteenth century. In the 1880s and 1890s, three major socialist organisations are established in opposition to the adverse social effects of liberal capitalism: Social Democratic Federation (1882), The Fabian Society (1884) and The Independent Labour Party (1897). George Bernard Shaw is a early member of the Fabian Society. In an 1884 pamphlet, he outlines some of their aims including the nationalisation of land and industry, better rights for children, political equality for women, a liberal education for all and an end to a system that divides society 'into hostile classes with large appetites and no dinners at one extreme and large dinners and no appetites at

---

[15] Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. by David McLellan, Abridged ed (Oxford Paperbacks, 2008), p. 154.
[16] Marx, p. 155.
[17] Marx, p. 158.
[18] Marx, p. 177.

the other'.[19] George Bernard Shaw's manifesto for serious drama, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, originated as part of series of Fabian Society lectures on 'Socialism in Contemporary Literature'. As a Fabian, Shaw advocates social progress rather than revolution: 'a peaceful but expeditious path to Socialism'.[20] His reading of Ibsen's drama identifies dialectical discussion as the vital ingredient that reconfigures theatre as a vehicle for such progressive social reform. Both Shaw's political thinking and this dramatic theory demonstrate 'belief in linear progress' and 'the rational planning of ideal social orders'[21] In 1900, Shaw is involved in the creation of the Labour Party and so helps to set the stage for left-wing versus right-wing battle that characterises British politics in the twentieth century.

The dialectical structure of the treatment of social issues in Shaw's serious drama expresses an optimistic belief in the creation of a better society through rational positive progress. This optimistic view of future of capitalism is also articulated by other socialist thinkers around the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1892, Friedrich Engels declares that the unacceptable level of labour exploitation that he observed in mid-nineteenth century Britain 'belongs to-day, in many respects, to the past'. He goes on to voice an optimistic view of capitalist development: 'the larger the scale on which capitalistic production is carried on, the less can it support the petty devices of swindling and pilfering that characterize its early stages'.[22] Max Weber articulates an optimistic belief that capitalism will become increasingly rational and this rationalism will resolve the worse aspects of the current system. He

---

[19] George Bernard Shaw, *A Manifesto* (London: Geo. Standring, 1884), p. 1.
[20] George Bernard Shaw, *The True Radical Programme* (London: Geo. Standring, 1887), p. 10.
[21] Harvey, p. 10.
[22] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 37.

argues that the spirit of modern capitalism is rooted in that the Protestant frame of mind that 'strives systematically and rationally *in a calling* for legitimate profit'[23] in accordance with the virtues of '[p]unctuality, industry and frugality' and '[h]onesty'.[24] He sees the worst features of contemporary capitalism are characteristic of earlier backward forms of capitalism. Modern capitalism 'has as little use for *liberum arbitrium* [easygoing] persons as laborers as it has for the businessman fully without scruples in the running of his company'.[25] Werner Sombart predicts that capitalism will move towards a '*planned economy*'[26] in which economic life will be shaped along 'cooperative or publicly owned lines'.[27] This will be a 'regulated'[28] capitalism, where 'demand is stabilized' and 'distribution and production move in familiar paths'.[29] Like Weber, Sombart believes that capitalism is fundamentally driven by rationalisation and so will eventually create a better social order. Future capitalism will be marked by an 'ever more prominent cultivation of rationalism, while at the same time pursuit of profit and individualism, which in concert with rationalism had formed the capitalistic spirit, pass away'.[30]

Shaw and other socialist thinkers in the late nineteenth century stand at the beginning of a move towards a more organised form of capitalism. Lash and Urry argue that 'organized capitalism developed the wrong way round' in Britain. From the 1880s onwards there was a degree of organisation at the bottom amongst workers

---

[23] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 88.
[24] Weber, p. 79.
[25] Weber, p. 83.
[26] Werner Sombart, *Economic Life in the Modern Age*, ed. by Nico Stehr and Reiner Grundmann (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), p. 254.
[27] Sombart, p. 255.
[28] Sombart, p. 256.
[29] Sombart, p. 255.
[30] Sombart, p. 254.

but the system does not become organised at the top until after the Second World War.[31] In organised forms of capitalism, state regulation of the economy together with a welfare system helps to reduce the adverse social effects of capitalism and its crises on people's lives. Marx argues that crises are required to rebalance inherent contradictions within the capitalist system: 'momentary and forcible solutions of the existing contradictions [...] which for a time restore the disturbed equilibrium'.[32] At these points of crisis, the balance of capitalism is restored through the devaluation and destruction of capital. Employers seek to drastically reduce their costs in order to enable their businesses to survive. Wages drop in value and labour is laid off in great numbers. State regulation of the economy brings with it a decrease in frequency and severity of such crises: 'the rhythm of prosperity and depression characteristic of full capitalism, also becomes attenuated'.[33] In such 'managed' forms of capitalism, as Sombart terms them, life for the worker becomes progressively more stable:

> his activity is regulated by norms of a quasi-public character, the manner of his work approaches that of a civil servant (no overtime), his wage is determined by extra-economic, non-commercial factors. The sliding wage scale of earlier times is replaced by its antithesis, the living wage, expressing the same principle as that underlying the salary scale of civil servants; in case of unemployment the worker's pay continues, and in illness or old age he is pensioned like a government employee. [34]

To some degree, Sombart's optimistic prediction that an increasingly organised capitalism would bring a greater stability to economic conditions was realised during the twentieth century in post-war Britain. The depression of the 1930s and the effects of two world wars laid the ground for greater state regulation of the economy and led

---

[31] Lash and Urry, p. 53.
[32] Marx, p. 454.
[33] Sombart, p. 29.
[34] Sombart, p. 28.

to a twenty five year period in which the national economy was relatively stable. Two major developments in the British economy played a role in creating and supporting this stability. Firstly, there was a shift in the regime of accumulation. British manufacturing industries began to employ the systems of Fordism in their plants. Fordism originated in the technological and organisation innovations implemented by the American car manufacturer Henry Ford. Rather than expecting the worker to move to the work to be done, Ford created an assembly line that could move the work to the worker so increasing productivity. He also broke down each labour process into its component motions, so that each worker became responsible for completing one simple task in a continuous process. In order to compensate his workers for having to complete repetitive monotonous tasks, Ford cut the length of the working day to eight hours and raised wages significantly. This had the added bonus of increasing consumer spending as workers had both more disposable income and more leisure time to spend it in. Ford astutely recognised that mass production requires the creation of a mass market to consume its goods.

Secondly, there was a change in the mode of regulation, in terms of the strategies used by the British government to manage moments of economic crisis. Traditionally, the way to manage an economic crisis is to cut expenditure and raise taxes. This, however, has the adverse effect of increasing unemployment and lowering consumer spending which could potentially extend the period during which the economy is in recession. In his 1936 book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, John Maynard Keynes proposes that instead of instigating polices that ultimately lower consumer spending, governments should instigate policies to increase it. For example, the government could invest in infrastructure

projects, such as road building, which would create more jobs and lower unemployment. Increased spending would create an increased demand for commodities so lifting the economy out of recession. Keynesian-Fordism, together with greater state regulation of the economy, the creation of the welfare state and the demands of post-war reconstruction created the conditions for a stable economy, whose stability was not significantly threatened until the beginning of the 1970s.

Ash Amin argues that 'the period since the mid-1970s represents a transition from one distinct phase of capitalist development to a new phase'.[35] In Britain, this transition occurred in response to crises caused by surplus production and falling exchange rates. During the 1960s, international competition between industrialised nations intensified. Japan and Germany re-emerged from post-war reconstruction as modern and highly efficient industrialised nations. At the same time, multinational companies began to globalise production through offshore manufacturing, moving their plants to areas with cheaper labour and costs, such as South East Asia. This resulted in a speeding up of industrialisation in those locations. By the mid-1960s, the internal British markets were saturated and there was need to create larger export markets for surplus production. The intensification of international competition made this difficult to achieve. As companies tried to maintain their profit margins, the rate of unemployment increased and further decreased the internal demand for consumer goods. In an attempt to deal with situation, Britain began to print more money in order to stabilise the economy, which resulted in soaring inflation rates. At the same time, inflation in the United States undermined the value of the dollar. Since 1944, exchange rates had been stabilised through the Bretton Woods agreement, which

---

[35] Amin, pp. 1–40 (p. 1).

fixed currency values in relation to the dollar and in turn fixed the value of the dollar in relation to gold. In the early 1970s, the dollar became tremendously over-valued with respect to gold and the relationship between them was suspended. By the end of 1971, the dollar was formally devalued. In 1973, the Bretton Woods currency markets were closed and replaced with floating and highly volatile exchange rates. The value of the pound fell against the dollar from around $2.50 when it was floated in June 1972 to $1.55 by October 1976. The British government had to request a $4 billion dollar loan from the IMF, which was granted on the condition that the government made heavy cuts in public expenditure. The effects of these crises combined with a steep rise in the price of oil led to a reduction in the real value of wages and an increase in public discontent, which resulted in a wave of public sector strikes in the winter of 1978/1979. After coming to power in 1979, the Thatcher government dealt with the continuing economic crisis by deregulating the financial markets and bringing public services back into the market place through privatisation. This, David Harvey argues, was not, in the first instance, an ideological choice but an inevitable effect of slackened growth: 'heightened international competition under conditions of flagging growth forced all states to become more "entrepreneurial" and concerned to maintain a favourable business climate'.[36]

Since the early 1970s, there has been a radical restructuring of production processes and labour organisation in Britain. The need to cut profit margins, and improvements in transport and communications has led to the increasing globalisation of production. Formerly, factories were located near to sources of raw materials or close to markets. Improvements in transport and communications

---

[36] Harvey, p. 168.

technologies now mean that this is no longer the most cost efficient model. Industrial manufacturing is increasingly relocated to regions of the world where labour is cheap and working conditions are less regulated. Through lowering labour costs in this way, companies are able to protect their profit margins. Despite the rise in employment in the financial and service industries, levels of unemployment have generally been higher in the UK over the last forty years. This surplus of labour means that employers have been able to push for lower wages in real terms, and introduce more flexible models of employment. There has been a reduction in the availability of full-time permanent positions and an increase of part-time, flexible, contracted and sub-contracted labour. This enables a higher turnover of labour, allowing companies to make reductions in their workforces more easily when necessary. At the same time, this enables an erosion of the benefits associated with full-time permanent employment, such as pensions. While flexible working can be to the worker's benefit as well, for example in the case of many women with children, it ultimately leads to greater job insecurity and a reduction in career prospects.

There has been a rise in mergers and acquisitions. Whereas companies have always used this process to concentrate their capital and reduce competition, since the 1970s, it has taken on a different form. Rather merging with or acquiring companies within their own sectors, companies now use these processes to diversify their business. The prime aim of a company becomes the production of money, rather than the production of a particular product. For example, Virgin starts life as a mail order record company in 1970. In 1984, it launches an airline as the first step in an expansion into the transport and tourism industry. The company currently deals in entertainment, transport and tourism, communications and finance. Through

dispersal, both spatially and in terms of their labour force and their business interests, companies actually become more secure. Many companies, like Virgin, have started to diversify into finance as opposed to the production of goods or other services. Harvey states that '[f]rom the 1980s onwards reports have periodically surfaced suggesting that many large non-financial corporations were making more money out of their financial operations than they were out of making things'.[37]

Finally and most importantly, there has been significant growth in the financial sector in Britain. This has been facilitated by technological advances in communication and through the reorganisation and deregulation of the global financial system. Britain has stood at the forefront of this movement. The British markets were deregulated and moved from an open-outcry system of trading to a screen based one on 27 October 1986. On the same day, the London and New York financial markets became interlinked, which sparked the integration of all the world's major financial markets into one trading system. The last twenty five years has seen the rise of global finance companies. Improved communications technologies have enabled the instantaneous movement of funds through the global financial market. The number of different forms of investment within that market have multiplied to bewildering numbers producing 'an avalanche of new financial products in the 1990s' and 'a totally unregulated shadow banking' system dealing in the trading of asset values, futures, interest swaps, currency options and securitised debt. There has been a huge rise in the trading of derivatives. Huge profits have been made through financial activities that no longer bear any relation to traditional goods and services. Global banking and financial companies have become increasingly

---

[37] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Profile Books, 2011), p. 23.

autonomous and in the 1990s Britain's economic system became increasing reliant on a vibrant financial sector. Through the loosening of financial regulations, the British government found that they could attract more lucrative business: '[i]f the regulatory regime in London was less strict than that of the US, then branches of the City of London got the business rather than Wall Street'.[38] The financial sector was embraced by New Labour and there was a sense that all major political parties now agreed that the financial industry was central to the British economy. Even though the financial system was now better able to spread risk through tactics such hedging, levels of debt tend to spiral out of control in such an unregulated market. The increasing autonomy of the financial sector from the state made the economy more vulnerable to crises and contributed significantly to the financial crisis of 2008. Sharp increases in the value of property in the UK created a housing bubble. In 1998, the average house price was around £80,000, but by 2007 it had risen to approximately £220,000.[39] At the same time, Britain shared the lead with New York in 'slicing, dicing and securitising housing mortgages and other forms of debt'.[40] The sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States hit Britain particularly hard because it originated in the both the property and financial markets.

In their totality, these shifts in the social and economic structures, seem to mark a significant shift in the structures of capitalism in Britain since the 1970s. The effect of these changes on the social subject and everyday life is perhaps most clearly expressed in the idea of financialisation. Wage repression in advanced capitalist societies creates a problem because it produces a reduction in the market for

---

[38] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, p. 20.
[39] Graeme Chamberlin, 'Recent Developments in the UK Housing Market', *Economic & Labour Market Review*, 3 (2009), 29–38 (p. 30).
[40] Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, p. 36.

commodities. As Ford recognised, mass production requires mass consumption. The gap between the stagnation of personal earnings for the majority since the 1970s and increased personal spending has been bridged by the expansion of credit. Credit makes it possible to purchase something currently beyond a person's actual means and so dissolves and reassembles 'the possessive relations between persons and things'.[41] Randy Martin argues that as people take on larger levels of debt, they begin to behave more like businesses. For example, home ownership becomes an investment for the future, rather than an end in itself, 'a major factor in mitigating strain from inflation as value would appreciate to preserve levels of equity'.[42] Individuals start to operate using the same structures of opportunity and decision making as companies. They are subject to the same need to react rapidly to profit opportunities and suffer the same uncertainty of rewards. Risk replaces labour as the basis for the generation of personal capital.

Personal improvement becomes intrinsically linked to economic growth and the work/leisure binary is eroded as finance begins to permeate every aspect of our lives. As finance becomes more and more part of our daily lives, 'a new set of signals are introduced as to how life is to be lived and what it is for'.[43] Martin claims that financialisation 'aims to make life like an approach to business, and thereby return the protocols of work to daily life with a vengeance'.[44] We are offered the opportunity to increase personal wealth, but that wealth remains beyond the grasp of the average individual. Instead we become locked into working to pay off our

---

[41] Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 11.
[42] Martin, p. 31.
[43] Martin, p. 17.
[44] Martin, pp. 34–35.

increasing levels of personal debt. Finance has the 'ability to take by giving, to spread growth while denying to those who might partake of it the very wealth it puts in view'.[45] It is the alluring siren that keeps the population fruitfully productive. Although the economy has grown in the last twenty years, Martin claims that that growth has not translated into increased individual happiness for most people. The economic boom of the 1990s did not bring proportionally higher standards of living for the majority of the population. There was an 'inadequately equitable distribution of economic gain' with the richest sectors of society benefiting the most.[46] This created a 'disconnect between measures of the economy's objectivity and the people's subjectivity'.[47] Financialisation offers us a linear narrative of perpetual economic growth and of social progress based on the generation of increasing wealth. The financial markets that generate that wealth supposedly available to us all, however, now operate with a complexity that exceeds general understanding. We are offered a simple narrative of personal and social development through the accumulation of capital but the means by which this can be practically achieved remain beyond most of our abilities to grasp them.

Serious drama reflects a picture of contemporary social reality, which suggests that we continue to live in a world where social change can be achieved through rational argumentation. It presupposes a political dialogue between left-wing and right-wing politics. Its structures are organised around the idea of linear progress. Throughout the twentieth century it remains a form that is utilised for political means. In the late 1950s and the 1960s, it becomes the vehicle for the voice

---

[45] Martin, p. 16.
[46] Martin, p. 14.
[47] Martin, p. 16.

of the rising working class, through the work of playwrights like Arnold Wesker and John Arden. In the 1970s and 1980s, the form is used to argue for the continuance of a primarily socialist form of politics in the face of a shift to more neo-liberal policies by playwrights such as Howard Brenton, David Edgar and David Hare. Ultimately, however, this is a political project that fails. The appearance of a more monologic form of politics in the 1990s with the rise of New Labour blurs the distinctions between the left wing and the right wing, particularly in terms of their economic basis. Serious drama continues to retain some force into the noughties as a vehicle for previously unheard voices in British society, whose experiences stand in opposition to those of white middle classes that usually dominate the British stage.

Though on the surface, social reality appears to still be organised around the same structures of time, space and causation as it was a hundred years ago, shifts in the nature of capitalism in Britain over the last forty years mean that our lived experience of time and space is more compressed, and patterns of causation seem more complex. Our lived experience has become more present tense, dispersed and insecure. Advances in technology and changes in labour organisation mean that we feel both more connected to others around us and more isolated from them. As our lives become increasingly financialised, Fordism's divide between work time and leisure time is eroded away. Collective opposition to these changes feels more difficult. Lash and Urry observe that there has been a decline in the 'class character of political parties' and a shift towards '"catch-all" parties' instead.[48] Our politics has become more monologic in its character. A political theatre based on serious drama that operates through dialectical debate loses its force when the binary political

---

[48] Lash and Urry, p. 6.

divisions out of which it originated become blurred. At the same time, its representation of social reality offers a model of rational linear progress which mirrors financialisation's narrative of perpetual economic growth and bears little resemblance to our lived experience under the pressures of post-Fordism.

Harvey argues that the major shift in social and economic structures since the 1970s has resulted in a movement in cultural forms towards '[f]ragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or "totalizing" discourses', which could be argued to reflect the dispersal, insecurity and increased spatio-temporal compression inherent in increasingly disorganised forms of capitalism.[49] The experimental dramaturgies of the plays discussed in this thesis attempt to mediate, negotiate and critique this shift. As such they have the potential for political efficacy. Raymond Williams argues that cultural hegemonies are not fixed structures. They are 'not singular' and 'their internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended'.[50] Though serious drama may critique post-Fordism through a discussion of the political issues surrounding it in its content, by mirroring post-Fordism's misleading rational representations of social reality through its dramaturgy, serious drama is potentially supporting the renewal of the very system that it seeks to challenge. Forms of drama that attempt to interrogate rational representations of time and space, causation and nature of the social subject are political in that they provoke us consider the current gap between how social reality is represented to us and how we experience it. Williams argues that if a cultural hegemony can be thought of as a complex of interrelated structures that need to be renewed and recreated, then a cultural hegemony can also, through the same thought

---

[49] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 10.
[50] Williams, p. 168.

process, be thought of as something that 'can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified'.[51] If realist dramaturgy produces structures that mirror and so support hegemonic structures, then it follows that other experimental dramaturgies could, in theory, produce structures that challenge it. Jameson argues the possibility of such structural interventions, on the grounds that the mode of production is no longer thought of as ultimately determined by the economic, but rather as produced by the relations between a range of social structures, of which the economic is only one type amongst others. By mediating, negotiating and critiquing the structures of the prevailing cultural hegemony through its dramaturgy, a play can expose a productive gap between representations of social structures and our lived experience of them. Its re-orderings of these social structures can be then been seen as potentially having political agency, through the symbolic production of re-ordered social structures.

Ben Brewster offers, in his definition of Althusser's three levels of causality a theatrical analogy, which can be used to clarify how this structural politics differs in approach from the political stance of serious drama. The political efficacy of serious drama is imagined to work by making the audience 'believe that they are seeing a faithful copy of reality, recognising themselves and their preconceptions in the mirror held up to them by the play'. In contrast, the structural approach taken by the plays explored in this thesis 'reflects neither simple reality or transcendental truth, a theatre without an author; the object of his science is the mechanism which produces the stage effects'.[52] Such dramaturgies can be imagined as opening our eyes to the

---

[51] Williams, p. 168.

[52] Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), p. 347.

constructed nature of the seemingly 'natural' social structures that shape our sense of social reality and suggesting other possible forms for these structures. This move has political agency, because as Adorno argues the 'moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be'.[53]

The first chapter of this thesis will examine the structural politics of serious drama in detail. In order to facilitate this investigation, the term 'structure' will be used to describe the component parts of dramatic structure. Where the term 'form' is used, it refers to the overall shape that these structures generate through their interrelations. The term structure has been chosen over the term form, for its utility in relating dramatic structures to the idea of social and economic structures. This chapter will examine the idea that the supposed political efficacy of play is indicated not only by its social and political content, but is also associated with a serious approach to this material that is expressed through a responsible dramaturgy. This responsible dramaturgy yokes together politics, dialectical structure and realist dramaturgy and loads all three with a moral significance that is troubled when a playwright dares to deal with a social or political issue through an alternative dramaturgy. The origins of this structure will be traced to the work of George Bernard Shaw and its contemporary expression revealed through an examination both of how Michael Billington reads the political efficacy of a play and how David Edgar thinks about the process of political playwriting. It will be argued that serious drama continues to act as a influential formation in contemporary British playwriting in three ways. Firstly, it presents its principles as the universal principles of

---

[53] Theodor W. Adorno and others, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 194.

playwriting, rather than as the features of specific genre of playwriting. Secondly British playwriting and its history are imagined to be coextensive with that of serious drama. Thirdly, serious drama dominates the terminology through which the practice of playwriting can be described, so making it difficult to articulate alternative dramaturgies without reference to the structures of serious drama. Finally, the politics of serious drama's structures will be read through Fredric Jameson's three horizons of textual analysis: as the symbolic resolution of a social contradiction; as an utterance that forms part of a confrontation between classes; and in terms of its ideology of form. Through this reading, serious drama's claim to a progressive, subversive and socialist politics will be problematized.

The following three chapters will explore the dramaturgy of serious drama in terms of Jameson's concept of an ideology of form. Serious drama's employment of a realist dramaturgy will be problematised. The dramaturgy of serious drama will be considered as a structure that incorporates earlier dramatic theory and reinvents it in its own image. Serious drama's claims to constitute a transhistorical dramaturgy will be challenged through an examination of pre-Shavian dramatic theory, which relates this earlier theory to the theatre practices and social structures that it originates from. The arguments that lend validity to the structures of serious drama are rooted in the idea that its ordering of time and space, structures of causation and its imagining of the social subject are 'just how it is in life'. [54] By rooting its structures in verisimilitude, serious drama will be argued to mirror the dramaturgy of social life without intervening in it. In this way serious drama will be argued to present a conformist as opposed to a challenging politics, because its dramaturgy mirrors

---

[54] Tim Fountain, *So You Want to Be a Playwright?* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007), p. 56.

rational representations of social structures. In contrast, it will be argued that experimental dramaturgies that mediate, negotiate and critique the spatio-temporal and causal structures of post-Fordism, and seek to expose and re-imagine the lived experience of the social subject produced under its pressures, are politically productive as they can be thought of as structural interventions that challenge the normative representations of the dramaturgy of social life.

The plays, whose experimental dramaturgies will be explored in this thesis have been selected primarily for the nature of the structures that they employ. I have chosen to focus on plays that were produced by institutions lying at the heart of the British new writing industry: the Royal Court Theatre, the National Theatre, the Gate, Paines Plough, Headlong, the Tron, the Traverse and the National Theatre of Scotland. Unsurprisingly this produces a focus on plays produced in London and as part of the Edinburgh Festival. The rationale behind this is to show that these experiments with dramaturgy are taking place in the heart of major institutions in the subsidised sector, which are more commonly associated with the production of serious drama. This use of experimental dramaturgy is a mainstream as much as a fringe movement. As such, these plays with their experimental dramaturgies can be argued to be as representative of the character of contemporary British playwriting, as serious drama purports to be. Indeed, the number of British plays whose use of dramaturgy could be argued to demonstrate a structural politics is so great that it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Plays that were considered for analysis but then could not included within the scope of this thesis include: Alan Ayckbourn's *House/Garden* (Stephen Joseph Theatre, 1999), James Graham's *The Man* (Finborough, 2009), Sam Holcroft's *Edgar and Annabel* (National Theatre, 2011),

Dennis Kelly's *Love and Money* (Young Vic/Royal Exchange, 2006), Fin Kennedy's *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* (Crucible Theatre, 2007), Lucy Kirkwood's *it felt empty at first when the heart went but it is alright now* (Clean Break/Arcola, 2009), Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (Brimingham Rep, 1998) and Alexandra Wood's *Eleventh Capital* (Royal Court, 2007).

The thesis focuses on plays produced in the Britain since 1997. Many plays with similarly experimental dramaturgies were produced in Britain before this date, J.B. Priestley's *Time and the Conways* (Duchess Theatre, 1937) and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (Royal Court, 1982) are two obvious earlier examples that spring to mind. The year 1997 has been chosen because it is the year that New Labour comes to power. New Labour is born from Old Labour with the alteration of clause IV within the labour party constitution, which places the opportunity for the individual to accumulate capital rather than the equitable distribution of capital at the heart of the party's economic thinking. Old Labour strove:

> To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.

In contrast New Labour works for:

> a dynamic economy, serving the public interest, in which the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition are joined with the forces of partnership and co-operation to produce the wealth the nation needs and the opportunity for all to work and prosper[55]

Whereas Old Labour believed in public ownership and state control of private industry, Dan Coffey and Carole Thornley, argue that New Labour 'has been active

---

[55] 'Clause IV', *Labour Counts* <http://www.labourcounts.com/clause4.htm> [accessed 10 October 2012].

in its advocacy of market liberalization, of free capital movements, of weak protection for workers, and of the prerogatives of profit-seeking businesses'[56] and 'continued with policies of financial deregulation begun under previous Conservative governments'.[57] While it is perhaps overstating the case, to argue that New Labour's election to power in 1997 heralds the 'decisive victory of liberal capitalism over socialism', the more monologic politics that it ushers into being requires new strategies for political intervention.[58] In terms of political theatre, it sets playwrights a new challenge. There is a need to re-think the way that a play might function in order to have political efficacy in a political system in which the binary division between left wing and right wing has become blurred and all the major political parties articulate a broad consensus on the basis of economic policy.

The second chapter will deal with the representation of time and space in serious drama. It will investigate the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of serious drama and argue that it is not commensurate with our lived experience of time and space, through an investigation of the nature of dramatic time and space in Tim Crouch's *The Author*. The spatio-temporal structures of realistic dramaturgy, it will be noted, reflect the spatio-temporal rhythms that go hand in hand with the prevailing cultural hegemony through the idea of a moral unity that deems that actions must take place in the proper space at the proper time. Serious drama is primarily structured around the temporal axis of succession. As such its spatio-temporal ordering reflects earlier spatio-temporal structures that go hand in hand with the rise of liberal capitalism,

---

[56] Dan Coffey and Carole Thornley, *Globalization and Varieties of Capitalism: New Labour, Economic Policy and the Abject State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 153.
[57] Coffey and Thornley, p. 136.
[58] Coffey and Thornley, p. 2.

rather than the spatio-temporal structures of post-Fordism. The lived experience of time and space under post-Fordism, it will be argued, is no longer linear but rather compressed and simultaneous. Thus there is a gap, which serious drama ignores, between its representation of time and space and the contemporary lived experience of time and space. The spatio-temporal dramaturgies of Caryl Churchill's *Heart's Desire*, David Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* and David Greig's *San Diego* will be analysed for the ways in which they mediate and negotiate this shift towards simultaneity through an expansion into space.

The third chapter will deal with issues surrounding the structure of the dramatic narrative. It will focus on the politics of causation, and the relationship between different kinds of causation and the complexity or magnitude of a plot. The dramatic narrative will be examined from two different angles using the plot/story relationship as an analytical tool. The dramatic narrative will first be considered in terms of a stable story that can can plotted in variable forms. The plot structures of serious drama will be argued to have a basis in Aristotle's concept of the 'single, unified action', albeit in a form that is re-thought through Stanislavski's system of actions and objectives.[59] These plot structures will be related to Louis Althusser's concept of mechanical causality, which views causation in terms of a chain of cause and effect. Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* will be analysed for the ways in which it exposes the relationship between mechanical causation and economic relations under post-Fordism. debbie tucker green's *Generations* and Rupert Goold and Ben Power's adaptation of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* will be analysed in terms of the alternative forms of causation that are mediated through their structures.

---

[59] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 15.

Secondly, the dramatic narrative will be considered with plot as its stable aspect and story as taking variable forms. Martin Crimp's *The City* will be examined in terms of its absence of story. Drawing on Lyotard's observation that narratives define criteria of competence which legitmate and delegitmate certain actions, Mark Ravenhill's use of disrupted story in *The Experiment* will be read as questioning the ethics of dramatic narratives that are rooted in socio-psychological causation.

The fourth and final chapter will focus on issues surrounding characterisation. It will be argued that characterisation plays a structural role, through an examination of Vladimir Propp, Étienne Souriau and Algirdas Julien Greimas's analyses of the structure of narrative. Historical ideals of characterisation will be examined for the ways in which they imagine the social subject and in terms of the ways in which they are re-read and shift in meaning over time. These will be related to serious drama's ideals of characterisation, which construct characters as empathetic, socio-psychological motivated individuals. Fuchs and Lehman have suggested that socio-psychological character has been superseded in recent years by postmodern or postdramatic character. I will explore this shift in character through an analysis of the modes through which character is presented in the work of recent British playwrights. Anthony Neilson's *Realism* will be examined in terms of its representation of subjective characterisation. Simon Stephens's *Pornography* will be read in terms of its use of narrative and unassigned characterisation. These plays, it will be argued present an image of a passive social subject that imagines itself as both subject and object, as both isolated and driven by a need to connect meaningfully with others. Finally Mark Ravenhill's use of collective character in the choral plays that are part of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* will be examined. It will be

argued that these choral plays stage dramatic consensus as opposed to dramatic conflict and in doing so present the audience with an image of post-Fordism as moving politics towards a monologic position, whilst at the same time impelling each member of the audience to construct a personal political stance in opposition to it. Through its exploration of the different relationships that the structures of serious drama and experimental dramaturgies create with the structures of post-Fordism, this thesis will ultimately seek to define the ways in which the contemporary social subject is re-imagined both inside and outside the space of theatre. The re-imagining of the social subject through dramatic structure has a strong political dimension as it re-imagines the social subject's potential for agency within the social and economic structures of post-Fordism.

1 – Serious Drama

In June 2008, *The Guardian's* longstanding theatre critic, Michael Billington, reviewed two new plays on successive nights. The first was Anthony Weigh's *2000 Feet Away* (Bush, 2008) and the second Anthony Neilson's *Relocated* (Royal Court, 2008). The narratives of both plays touch on the serious issue of child abuse. In *Relocated*, a classroom assistant, whose partner murdered two of her pupils, tries to escape her past. In *2000 Feet Away*, a deputy sheriff is charged with enforcing a state law that bans sex offenders from being within 2000 feet of any child. Though the two plays can be read as sharing similar and serious concerns, Billington delivered opposing verdicts. Weigh's play is a 'serious play', whereas Neilson's is not.[1]

This chapter will ask how we define what is and what is not a 'serious play' in contemporary British theatre. I will argue that a serious play is not simply a matter of serious content. Rather, there are a set of structures that underlie what is commonly defined as serious drama and which frame its serious content in a responsible way. These structures mediate the content in a way that is thought of as having political efficacy. Serious drama is thought of as political drama. This yoking together of politics and dramaturgy loads both with a moral significance that is troubled when a playwright, like Neilson, violates the calculus of propriety that links them. This chapter will examine both the origins of this relationship between politics

---

[1] Michael Billington, '2000 Feet Away', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jun/17/theatre.reviews2> [accessed 6 October 2008].

and dramaturgy and its current character. It will trace our modern usage of the term 'serious drama' to Diderot's arguments for a '*genre sérieux*' in the mid-eighteenth century, which would deal with the everyday problems of everyday men through a realistic dramaturgy.[2] I will argue that in British theatre, our understanding of what is and what is not serious drama is heavily informed by George Bernard Shaw's reading of Ibsen in the late nineteenth century and his conclusion that dialectical debate is the mark of a 'serious playwright'[3] of 'serious drama'.[4] I will investigate the persistence of Shaw's model of serious drama through an analysis of Michael Billington's use of the term 'serious play' in his reviews and his linking of this form with political efficacy. I explore the ways in which dialectical debate informs David Edgar's understanding of how the contemporary political play should be constructed. I will argue that this understanding of a serious play as a play that integrates the dialectical debate of a social or political issue into a realistic dramaturgy persists as an influential model in contemporary British theatre in several ways. It continues to influence the ways in which the process of playwriting is theorised and taught. It influences the ways in which we define the value of a particular play. Finally, despite the many alternative models of a political theatre put forward by both practitioners and theorists over the last century, it remains an influential way of thinking about the way in which a play needs to function in order to have political efficacy.

The second half of the chapter will investigate and challenge the political character of serious drama. Serious plays, by definition, engage with social and political issues. On this level alone, they are frequently classed as political plays. The

---

[2] Denis Diderot, *Œuvres Completes* (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre, 1970), p. 174.
[3] George Bernard Shaw, *Major Critical Essays* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 160.
[4] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 164.

model of serious drama suggests, however, that political content alone is not enough. The political content must be framed within a particular dramaturgy. Plays which frame political content within an experimental dramaturgy, like Neilson's *Relocated*, are defined as not serious and therefore are seen as lacking political efficacy. The serious play's claims to political efficacy, however, I will suggest are problematised when its politics are read at the level of the very structures that are positioned as vital to its political efficacy. This will be demonstrated by a application of Fredric Jameson's three horizons of textual analysis, where the text is read simultaneously as offering a symbolic resolution to a real social contradiction, as part of antagonistic discourse between social classes, and in terms of its 'ideology of form'. The use of Jameson's analytic framework will introduce the idea that when the dramaturgical structures of serious drama are read for the ideology of their form, they reveal a relationship to the structures of post-Fordism, which problematizes serious drama's claims to political efficacy in terms of a progressive left-wing politics.

It must be noted, before I proceed any further, that the terms 'serious drama' and 'serious play' are notably loose ones, even though they are recognisable ones. Neither term is thought of as holding critical weight. John Caughie states of the term 'serious drama' that 'it is not a term which anyone would own up to or defend seriously' but despite this it has 'a long history in formal and informal criticism and in everyday conversation, referring to forms of drama which are approved by 'serious' critics or 'serious' people'.[5] Applying the term 'serious drama' to any form of drama implies that it is the form of drama that is approved of by serious people. The adjective 'serious' yokes together the concepts of responsibility, utility and

---

[5] John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

value. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the adjective serious can describe something 'thoughtful, earnest, sober, sedate, responsible, not reckless or given to trifling', something 'not merely for amusement' or something 'concerned with religion or ethics'. The word serious is intrinsically linked to the idea of something of high value, something 'important, demanding consideration' and something 'not slight or negligible'.[6] The term 'serious drama' links any form of drama it is applied to to ideas of responsibility, usefulness and higher worth.

The terms 'serious drama' and 'serious play' are floating terms. They are not specific terms for a specific type of drama. They have been used over the years to describe a range of different dramatic forms. F. L. Lucas conflates ancient tragedy with serious drama. He claims that in the *Poetics*, Aristotle 'is really discussing, not what we call "tragedy", but what we call "serious drama"'.[7] Lucas reworks Aristotle's definition of tragedy in terms of serious drama: 'To-day if we tried to remould the definition of Aristotle it might run, perhaps, simply thus: "Serious drama is a serious representation by speech and action of some phase of human life."'[8] Robert D. Hume states that in the Restoration theatre, the term 'serious play' could arguably be applied to a wide range of theatrical forms, from 'the straight heroic and villain tragedy, to the high tragedy, the pathetic, the various sorts of 'tragicomedy', the operatic spectacular, and the plays which turn on history and politics'.[9] The reason he puts forward for the application of the term to such a wide variety of

---

[6] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. by R. E. Allen, 8th edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 1106.

[7] F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 26.

[8] Lucas, p. 33.

[9] Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 186.

forms, is the basis on which a play's seriousness was judged at the time. The idea of serious drama continued to be linked to tragedy by late seventeenth century critics, but the definition of tragedy itself had become very loose. The genre was 'conceived in affective terms', so a tragedy was defined as a play that aroused emotion. The range of emotions that tragedy could legitimately arouse, however, was wide: '[a]dmiration, love, pity, joy and indignation were all possibilities'. As Hume notes, '[d]eployed singly or together they offer an almost infinite variety of emphases and combinations which add up in practice to several very disparate sorts of serious drama'.[10]

It is, however, in its loose definition that the actual function of the term is revealed. The terms 'serious play' or 'serious drama' apply to different forms of theatre in different social and cultural contexts, but the term is usually ascribed to either the most legitimate form of drama at the time or to a form that wishes to challenge another form's legitimacy. Thus high tragedy is referred to by Hume as the serious drama of the later seventeenth century, but Diderot argues in the eighteenth century that it is domestic tragedy not heroic tragedy that should be considered the serious drama of his day. To support his argument, Diderot names domestic tragedy, the *genre sérieux*. Rather than defining a certain form of drama, the term 'serious drama' is used to argue for and legitimate a particular form of drama and so to raise its cultural capital. The exact nature of 'serious drama' shifts over time and from place to place but the legitimising function of the term remains consistent. As Caughie argues, the term is 'a code understood by like-minded people, signalling a sense of worth which is assumed to be shared but there never seems to be enough

---

[10] Hume, p. 185.

time or need to elaborate'.[11] It is a term that excludes other form's claims to legitimacy without clearly defining its own, as everything that is not serious drama must be non-serious drama and therefore of lesser worth.

In this chapter I will apply the term 'serious drama' specifically to plays that address social and political issues through that a structure that frames dialectical debate within a realistic dramaturgy. The term 'serious drama' is used because it links us both to the origins of the form in Diderot's *genre sérieux* the mid eighteenth century and to Shaw's identification of the importance of dialectical debate to the functioning of the serious play. Shaw too uses the word 'serious' to define his new drama in comparison to the non-serious melodramatic drama which dominated the stages of his time. The word 'serious' continues to be used to refer to this form in both the reviews of critics, such as Billington, and in the discussions of everyday theatre goers. The term is useful not only because it is a recognisable way of describing this form, but also because it encompasses this form's claims to higher worth and greater utility.

Serious Drama

In 1757, Diderot makes the case for a new form of drama in his *Entretiens*. In his argument for his new domestic drama's superiority to high tragedy, Diderot terms this form of drama the *genre sérieux*, the serious genre. In contrast to tragedy, the *genre sérieux* focuses on the domestic life of the middle classes, rather than the lives of kings and queens. It is, he claims, of direct relevance to its middle class audience,

---

[11] Caughie, p. 3.

because it takes their day to day concerns as its subject. Its primary aim is a utilitarian one. It is a drama that places moral instruction above pleasure. In order to achieve this purpose, its dramaturgy aims to reflect reality of lived experience and its dialogue takes the everyday speech patterns as its model. Diderot sees this combination of contemporary social issues and a realistic dramaturgy as highly useful device for providing moral instruction:

> Quoi! Vous ne concevez pas l'effet que produiraient sur vous une scène réelle, des habits vrais, des discours proportionnés aux actions, des actions simples, des dangers don't il est impossible que vous n'ayez tremble pour vos parents, vos amis, pour vous-même? Un renversement de fortune; la crainte de l'ignominie; les suites de la misère; une passion qui conduit l'homme à sa ruine, de sa ruine au désespoir, du désespoir à une mort violente, ne sont pas des événements rares; et vous croyez qu'ils ne vous affecteraient pas autant que la mort fabuleuse d'un tyran, ou le sacrifice d'un enfant aux autels des dieux d'Athènes ou de Rome …**[12]**

Diderot thinks of the *genre serieux* as having political efficacy. This form of theatre will enable its audience to make better judgements about their actions and their possible consequences, through an empathetic response to the familiar situations they see represented on stage. The influence of Diderot's *genre sérieux* spreads quickly and widely. In 1767, Beaumarchais prefaces his play *Eugénie* with an *Essai sur le Dramatique Sérieux*. He references Diderot many times, calling him '[é]crivan du feu' and a 'génie' and credits him with being 'la base de tout l'interet de mon drame'.**[13]** Beaumarchais agrees with Diderot that drama should be realistic and concerned with the everyday, representing men and their actions as they are in contemporary life. It should present the audience with a 'tableau fidèle des actions

---

[12] Diderot, p. 186.

[13] Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Chez Étienne Ledoux, 1821), p. 35.

des hommes'[14] and 'montrer les homes absolument tels qu'ils sont'.[15] Serious

drama's realistic representation of the world will affect us much more greatly,

Beaumarchais argues, because it is closer to our experience: 'la peinture touchante

d'un malheur domestique, d'autant plus puissante sur nos coeurs, qu'il semble nous

menacer de plus pres'.[16] As a result this form has a greater utility than high tragedy

whose actions are distant from our own experience.

Diderot's *genre sérieux* is an influential precursor to the naturalist plays of

the nineteenth century. Zola openly acknowledges the influence of Diderot on his

work. Zola recounts how he found himself in a disagreeable situation during a

conference on naturalism run by M. Henri de Lapommeraye. Lapommeraye used the

occasion to publically accuse Zola of stealing the idea of naturalism from Diderot,

rather than inventing it himself: 'Je vais vous prouver, en vous lisant des passages de

Diderot, de Mercier, d'autres critiques encore, que le naturalisme n'est pas né d'hier

et que, de tout temps, on a réclamé ce que M. Zola réclame aujourdhui'. Zola's

response to this is one of irritation and of surprise. He states that he has always

acknowledged the important influence of Diderot on his work and never claimed to

have invented the idea of naturalism himself from scratch:

> il est bien entendu que Diderot a soutenu les mêmes idées que moi, qu'il croyait lui aussi à la nécessité de porter la vérité au theatre; il est bien entendu que la naturalisme n'est pas une invention de ma cervelle, un argument de circonstance que j'emploie pour defender mes propres oeuvres. Le naturalisme nous a été légué par le dix-huitième siècle; je crois même que, si l'on cherchait bien, on le retrouverait, plus ou moins confus, à toutes les périodes de notre histoire littéraire.[17]

---

[14] Beaumarchais, p. 9.
[15] Beaumarchais, p. 26.
[16] Beaumarchais, p. 9.
[17] Émile Zola, *Œuvres Completes* (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968), XI, p. 389.

While some modern critics, such as Brian Johnston[18] and Toril Moi[19] have argued for Diderot's influence on Ibsen's work, Ibsen himself has nothing to say about Diderot or his *genre sérieux*. Ibsen rarely acknowledged outside influences on his work. His few comments about Zola tend most frequently towards contempt: 'Zola descends into the sewer to bathe in it; I, to cleanse it'.[20] Ibsen may deny the influence of Zola on his work, but Zola sees the situation differently. Zola accuses Ibsen of stealing from the French naturalistic tradition without acknowledging it. When asked about Ibsen's influence on naturalism, Zola is rumoured to have stated that 'he did not attach much importance to it, for he held that the ideas which were supposed to rain on Paris from the North were in reality French ones which had been disseminated by French writers and had come back to their place of origin'.[21]

Diderot argued for a drama that, unlike high tragedy, engaged with the everyday concerns of its audience through the frame of a realistic dramaturgy. While Diderot's *genre sérieux* can be seen as the providing the foundation of our modern understanding of serious drama, it does not, however, fully describe the form that we would now recognise as the serious play. This is because Diderot's *genre sérieux* is missing one vital ingredient: the insertion of a dialectical debate into the heart of the play's structure. To properly understand the form of the modern serious play in British theatre, it is necessary to look to the work of George Bernard Shaw at the end

---

[18] Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 269–271.

[19] Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 113–116.

[20] Quoted in Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry 1864-1882* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), p. 299.

[21] Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, *Émile Zola: Novelist and Reformer* (London and New York: John Lane, 1904), p. 389.

of the nineteenth century and his insertion of dialectical debate into the form of serious drama. The contemporary serious play is not just a matter of social content and realistic dramaturgy, it is a matter of dialectical debate as well.

In 1880s, the theatre reformer William Archer declared British theatre to be in a terrible state. British theatre's weakness, he states, lies in having 'no contemporary drama of our own'.[22] Though British drama, he admits, 'exists and flourishes'[23] on the melodramatic stage, he dismisses it because it is 'a non-literary product' and hence 'it falls short of any literary merit'.[24] He lays the blame for this deficiency with the theatre audience: '[i]t is with the public, I believe, that the fault lies'.[25] The theatre, he argues, 'is supported mainly by people who have no taste or thought whatever'[26]. They regard the stage as 'a vehicle for mere amusement'[27] and will 'laugh always, cry sometimes, shudder now and then, but think – never'.[28] As a result of this, British theatre is stuck in a vicious circle from which it cannot escape: 'A frivolous public calls for frivolous plays, and frivolous plays breed a frivolous public'.[29] The audience refuses to take the drama 'seriously'[30] and, as a consequence, any 'drama which opens the slightest intellectual, moral or political question is certain to fail'.[31] Instead of the frivolous non-literary drama that he sees as dominating the contemporary stage, Archer calls for creation of a 'literary drama'

---

[22] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today* (London: Low, Marston, Serle and Revington, 1882), p. 3.
[23] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, pp. 3–4.
[24] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 4.
[25] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 8.
[26] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 9.
[27] William Archer, *About the Theatre* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1886), p. 266.
[28] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 9.
[29] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 17.
[30] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 8.
[31] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 9.

which would be characterised by an element of 'seriousness'. Such 'serious plays'[32] would be 'not only acted, but printed and *read*'. Though Archer states that these serious plays could belong to any form of dramatic composition, he suggests that most of them would deal with contemporary subjects, the 'phases of modern life', and their seriousness would be rooted in their engagement with a contemporary or universal issue, 'relation of the work to some moral, social, political – may I add religious? – topic of the day, or better still of all time'.[33]

In his quest to bring seriousness to British theatre, Archer takes the writing of suitable plays into his own hands. He discovers, however, that his talent for playwriting is limited; though he is a 'born constructor', he found 'could not write dialogue a bit'.[34] The solution to this problem comes in the form of George Bernard Shaw, who Archer first encounters in 1884, sitting in the British Library 'day after day, poring over Karl Marx's *Das Kapital'*.[35] Shaw admits to Archer, that though he is a failure as a novelist, his dialogue is 'incomparable'.[36] The men embark on the writing of a serious play entitled *Rhinegold*. Archer provides Shaw with a plot and Shaw goes away to write the dialogue. Shaw and Archer fall out, however, when Shaw asks Archer to provide him with more plot as he has used it all up and is only halfway through the play. Archer refuses Shaw's request. Archer feels that his plot is 'a rounded and perfect organic whole'.[37] The collaboration between the men breaks down, as they discover that they have different priorities and different visions of

---

[32] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 5.
[33] William Archer, *English Dramatists of Today*, p. 4.
[34] George Bernard Shaw, *The Complete Prefaces: Volume 1 1889-1913*, ed. by Dan H. Lawrence and Daniel J. Leary, 3 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1993), I, p. 8.
[35] Charles Archer, *William Archer: Life, Work, and Friendships* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), p. 119.
[36] Shaw, I, p. 7.
[37] Shaw, I, p. 8.

what a serious play is. Archer, though he feels that serious plays should deal with serious matters, is primarily interested in reforming the theatre, so his focus is on the construction of plays that would have a claim to the title of literature. Shaw, on the other hand is primarily a social reformer, interested in using the theatre as a vehicle through which to lobby for better social conditions. Shaw, taking his lead from Ibsen, has become convinced that theatre can break with the melodrama which dominated its stages and be reconfigured as a vehicle for radical social change, a 'social organ' on a level with other great social institutions such as 'the Church, the law and the schools'. [38] Shaw rewrites the *Rhinegold* as *Widowers' Houses*, which he unashamedly declares to be a 'propagandist play – a didactic play – a play with a purpose'.[39]

Shaw sees theatre's efficacy as an agent of social and political change as rooted in the employment of a dialectical structure. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw identifies the new innovation that Ibsen has introduced into dramatic structure as being 'discussion'. When defining the nature of discussion, Shaw refers to 'a conflict of unsettled ideals'.[40] Shaw attributes a very specific meaning to the term 'ideal'. Central to Shaw's thought is a distinction between an idealist and a realist approach to the world. Shaw divides human beings into philistines, idealists and realists. If one takes a community of a thousand people and analyses their attitudes to a social institution such as marriage, Shaw postulates that 700 of them will find marriage to be a good enough arrangement for them and will not question it. These people Shaw designates as being philistines. Another 299 will experience marriage to

---

[38] Shaw, I, p. 45.
[39] Shaw, I, p. 12.
[40] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 165.

be a failure. Looking around them, however, these 299 will see the contented 700 and as they lack the courage to face the idea that they are failures, they will try to persuade themselves that marriage is an ideal institution no matter what the actual reality of their own marriage might be. These people are what Shaw classifies as idealists. For Shaw, idealists are far more dangerous than philistines because they take an unsatisfactory social institution and reposition it as an ideal. They create 'a fancy picture', in order to protect themselves, 'a mask for reality, which in its nakedness is intolerable to them'. In order to strengthen this mask they require others to confirm it. They instigate 'the policy of forcing individuals to act on the assumption that all ideals are real, and to recognize and accept such action as standard moral conduct, absolutely valid under all circumstances, contrary conduct or any advocacy of it being discountenanced and punished as immoral'.[41] The ideal becomes a moral absolute and those who challenge its validity face fierce attack. Thus it is vital to make the distinction that the term 'ideal' in Shaw's thought refers not the truth behind the mask, but to the mask instead. The single individual left over from Shaw's community of a thousand is the realist and it is the realist's function to tear down the beautiful mask that the idealists have created and reveal what lies behind it. Shaw sees theatre as a vehicle for this process and identifies 'discussion' as an important technique. Discussion, in this case, is not the presentation of the right and the wrong of a situation, rather two differing but equally strong ideals.

We can see this idea of opposing ideals exemplified in Shaw's play *Mrs Warren's Profession*, whose main characters embody different idealist perspectives on women's roles. Vivie idealises the revolutionary notion of the overturning of

---

[41] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 49.

conventional roles to the point where, when the nature of her mother's profession, running high class brothels is revealed to her, she can declare her mother to be 'a wonderful woman ... stronger than all England'.[42] Mrs Warren, however, for all her apparent unconventionality, espouses conventional Victorian ideals. Using the language of business, she advocates the capitalist system which has allowed her and her sister Lizzie to rise out of the gutter through exploiting the only commodity she owned, her body: 'Do you think we were such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shopgirls, or barmaids, or waitresses, when we could trade in them ourselves and get all the profits instead of starvation wages?'[43] Shaw pits these two ideals against each other, forming a dialectic, which aims to bring his audience 'through contradictory error to relatively greater truth'.[44]

Shaw's dialectic is an open one. Robert F. Whitman points out that Shaw understands the 'essence of the dialectical process as described by Hegel is that its movement is from the less real, because less complete and less self-conscious, to the more real - in other words, from the particular and physical and limited to the more universal and complete'.[45] He avoids the temptation to articulate definite answers and instead aims through the synthesis to approach closer to the truth rather than to grasp it. His drama is not a drama of answers but 'a drama of questioning'.[46] This can be seen in the open nature of the conclusion Shaw draws from the lesson of Ibsen's plays in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* that 'conduct must justify itself by its

---

[42] George Bernard Shaw, *Plays Unpleasant* (London: Penguin, 1946), p. 251.
[43] Shaw, *Plays Unpleasant*, p. 249.
[44] Robert F. Whitman, *Shaw and the Play of Ideas* (London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 195.
[45] Whitman, p. 193.
[46] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 72.

effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal'.[47] This conclusion provides the reader with no simple answer but instead challenges them to engage in an active and continual questioning of the validity of any moral system.

For Shaw, social progress can only take place 'through the replacement of old institutions by new ones; and since every institution involves the recognition of the duty of conforming to it, progress must involve the repudiation of an established duty at every step', in other words through the destruction of ideals.[48] Society, however, cannot cope with the vacuum left by the demolition of an ideal and will immediately form a new ideal to replace it, 'the replacement of the broken goods will be prompt and certain'. This is still positive progress as each new ideal as less of a delusion than the one preceding it: 'the advantage of the work of destruction is that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies'.[49] The progressive nature of Shaw's dialectic can be seen in his reading of Ibsen's plays not as single entities in themselves but rather as a dialectical progression. He aims to show how 'the plays, as they succeed one another, are parts of a continuous discussion; how Mrs Alving is a reply to your hasty remark that Nora Helmer ought to be ashamed of herself for leaving her husband; how Gregers Werle warns you not to be as great a fool in your admiration of Lona Hessel as of Patient Grisel'.[50] Major questions raised by the synthesis of the argument in one play form a vital part of the dialectic of the next. The quality of a play's dialectic becomes a benchmark against which the seriousness of a playwright's work is judged, and

---

[47] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 149.
[48] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 40.
[49] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 62.
[50] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 173.

therefore also its value: 'If the case is uninteresting or stale or badly conducted or obviously trumped up, the play is a bad one. If it is important and novel and convincing, or at least disturbing, the play is a good one. But anyhow the play in which there is no argument and no case no longer counts as serious drama'.[51]

Shaw sees the dramatic form into which the discussion is translated as of vital importance to the theatre's functioning as a vehicle of social change. Jonas Barish proposes that Shaw and his contemporaries attempted to turn theatre against itself in order to redeem it. They took up the old argument that theatre corrupts its audience as the audience transfer the codes of behaviour that they see validated on stage into society. In Shaw's eyes, the heroes and heroines of melodrama live by idealist codes which would be foolish for anyone to replicate in real life: 'It has fostered a false and unnatural view of the world prompting men to behave falsely and unnaturally themselves'.[52] His theatre is 'a persistent testing of those codes by the canons of common sense, and the exposure of them as gaseous folly'.[53] For example in *Arms and the Man*, Sergius Saranoff is the idealistic soldier who foolishly leads his men on a cavalry charge in the name of heroism. Shaw exposes Saranoff's heroism as false and melodramatic by pitting the character against Captain Bluntschli, the realistic soldier, who shuns heroism in favour of the dictates of common sense. While earlier figures, such as Plato and Rousseau, argued that theatre should be banished in order to save the audience from its corrupting influence, Shaw and his contemporaries sought not to destroy theatre but instead to save it from itself:

The remedy is not to suppress the theater but for men of good will to

---

[51] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 164.
[52] Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 451.
[53] Barish, p. 452.

seize it and make it serve morality and truth. All art in Shaw's view should be used so, but the theater, because of its exceptional potency, constitutes a uniquely powerful pedagogical instrument, an agent of moral reform.[54]

Like Diderot, Shaw sees theatre as having a primarily utilitarian function. He repositions theatre as a school of instruction rather than a place of pleasure, with the dramatist 'teaching and saving' the audience through his use of discussion.[55] Shaw articulates this educational process through the use of religious language. The audience experiences a 'conversion from the ordinary acceptance of current ideals as safe standards of conduct, to the vigilant openmindedness of Ibsen'.[56]

In order to employ this dialectical structure and reposition theatre as a school of instruction, it is necessary to rethink the dramaturgical construction of a play. Discussion must permeate the structure of the play as a whole, 'until it so overspreads and interpenetrates the action that it finally assimilates it, making play and discussion practically identical'.[57] For Shaw, there is an organic relation between the content of a play and its structure: 'Changes in technique follow inevitably from these changes in the subject matter of the play'.[58] A shift in the content of plays to prioritise social issues will automatically cause a shift in the dramatic structure to reflect this change. Shaw defined this shift as being away from the excessive theatricality and outmoded structures of melodrama towards a more realistic dramaturgy. In order for a play to engage an audience, its discussion must relate to the everyday problems that they experience: 'a play in which problems of conduct and character of personal importance to the audience are raised and suggestively

---

[54] Barish, p. 251.
[55] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 171.
[56] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 147.
[57] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 172.
[58] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 170.

discussed'.[59] As the content deals with the everyday so must the dramaturgy. The representation of a social issue on stage requires verisimilitude. In other words, as the content relates to the current social and political reality outside the theatre, so the form must work to create a recognisable version of that reality on stage. This is because Shaw seeks an intellectual engagement between the audience and the characters, which is achieved through empathy. This requires the audience to recognise the onstage world and the problems its characters face as similar to their own, 'making the spectators themselves the persons of the drama, and the incidents of their own lives its incidents'.[60] Through the audience's identification with the characters and their situation, the playwright can mislead the audience into drawing false conclusions and then work to overturn them, 'trick the spectator into forming a meanly false judgement, and then convict him of it in the next act'.[61] This induces a dialectical thought process in the audience's mind, 'a forensic technique of recrimination, disillusion and penetration through ideals to the truth'.[62] The audience is forced to question their own assumptions. The dialectical structure at the heart of the play's dramaturgy is seen as encouraging a similar structure of thought in the audience's mind, helping them to reconsider the ideals that society has constructed for them. It is important to note that Shaw's reforms entailed not just a change in theatre's content, but the establishment of the relationship between politics, dialectic structures and realist dramaturgy that defines the structure of the serious play.

---

[59] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 162.
[60] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 172.
[61] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 171.
[62] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 172.

Reading serious plays

The idea that serious drama yokes together politics, dialectical structure and a realist dramaturgy has its origins in the work of Shaw at the end of the nineteenth century. Shaw's conception of serious drama persists as an influential model in contemporary British theatre. This persistence is evident in the way that some theatre critics judge the political efficacy of contemporary plays. This section will argue that Michael Billington assesses the political efficacy of a play on Shavian terms through an analysis of his reviews and his writing on theatre. Billington is a highly respected voice within British theatre criticism. Since 1971, he has been the drama critic of *The Guardian* newspaper. As one of Britain's most longstanding and widely read theatre critics both within and outside the industry, the way that Billington reads and judges the political worth of theatre is highly influential. Billington is a great admirer of Shaw. He sees him as 'a pioneering figure'[63] and once even 'rashly suggested that Shaw was the best dramatist after Shakespeare'.[64] He identifies Shaw's work as the model against which the quality of other plays can be judged. For example, Billington assesses Joanna Murray-Smith's *The Female of the Species* as a 'would-be Shavian-comedy' and finds it ultimately disappointing because it fails to meet

---

[63] Michael Billington, 'Let the Battle for Shakespeare's Crown Commence', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/jul/02/thebattleforshakespearescr> [accessed 12 October 2008].
[64] Michael Billington, 'Who Needs Reviews?', *www.guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/sep/17/whoneedsreviews> [accessed 12 October 2008].

Shaw's standards, 'if Shaw is the model, I passionately wish Murray-Smith had followed his methods more closely'.[65]

For Billington, criticism 'is not the last word: simply part of a permanent debate about the nature of the ideal theatre'.[66] Billington's ideal theatre is a theatre of political efficacy, a place of 'self-recognition and spiritual transformation',[67] where the audience experiences, as Dan Rebellato terms it, a 'kind of revolution in consciousness'.[68] Billington tellingly describes scanning the faces of the audience leaving the Royal Court after seeing a 1957 revival of *Look Back in Anger* for signs of a transformative experience: 'I remember standing on the steps of the Royal Court and watching people coming out of the first-house Saturday performance to see if they had been visibly changed by the experience'.[69] The kind of theatre that Billington argues produces such political efficacy is a 'drama that addresses living issues'[70] through 'testimony, satire, informed argument and articulate dissent'.[71] Plays that have political efficacy address social and political issues in their content. The National Theatre of Scotland's *Be Near Me*:

[65] Michael Billington, 'The Female of the Species', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jul/17/theatre.reviews2> [accessed 12 October 2008].

[66] Michael Billington, *One Night Stands: A Critic's View of Modern British Theatre* (London: Nick Hern, 2002), p. xi.

[67] Michael Billington, 'God in Ruins', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/dec/06/theatre.pantoseason2> [accessed 6 October 2008].

[68] Dan Rebellato, 'State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945 by Michael Billington', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18 (2008), 528–530 (p. 528).

[69] Michael Billington, *State of the Nation : British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber, 2007), p. 98.

[70] Michael Billington, 'Look Back in Anger', *guardian.co.uk*, 2004 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/dec/04/theatre1> [accessed 12 October 2008].

[71] Michael Billington, 'Drama Out of a Crisis', *guardian.co.uk*, 2003 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2003/apr/10/theatre.artsfeatures> [accessed 24 April 2009].

is a serious play for serious people. It raises any number of issues, from the violent prejudices of small communities to the sexual provocation offered by modern teenagers. It even, in a noisy dinner-party scene, explores the dangers of applying religious concepts of good and evil to foreign policy.[72]

Plays that deal with social and political issues have a seriousness, which other theatre lacks.

The serious nature of a play is signalled by its political content. Billington appears to privilege content over form. He states in his review of the Royal Court's original production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, 'although the aesthetics are important, they matter less than the show's content'.[73] He describes theatre as functioning as 'a vehicle of truth'.[74] It communicates the 'truth' about a particular social and political issue to its audience. They then leave the theatre 'better informed'.[75] Political efficacy is framed in terms of education. Billington praises Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* for making 'a series of pungently instructional points'.[76] A rehearsed reading of six short plays by young Muslim writers at the Royal Court fulfils a public need 'to learn about the multicultural

---

[72] Michael Billington, 'Be Near Me', *guardian.co.uk*, 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jan/20/theatre> [accessed 21 January 2009].
[73] Michael Billington, 'My Name Is Rachel Corrie', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/apr/14/theatre.politicaltheatre> [accessed 21 September 2009].
[74] Michael Billington, 'Bloody Sunday', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/apr/12/theatre> [accessed 11 October 2008].
[75] Michael Billington, 'Mark Thomas', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/jun/16/theatre2> [accessed 11 October 2008]; Michael Billington, 'Stuff Happens', *guardian.co.uk*, 2004 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/sep/11/theatre.politicaltheatre> [accessed 6 October 2006]; Michael Billington, 'Top Marx: Why It's Time to Stage Non-Fiction', *guardian.co.uk*, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2006/nov/10/topmarxwhyitstimetostage> [accessed 6 October 2008].
[76] Michael Billington, 'The Mother/Birth of a Nation', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/apr/15/theatre2> [accessed 6 October 2008].

society in which we live'.[77] Billington gives us an image of a theatre that produces a 'greater understanding'[78] in its audience of the society in which they live and the people that they share it with by satisfying a public 'hunger for information' through education.[79] Structure itself is not explicitly thought of as political. In Billington's writing, as Dan Rebellato argues, 'plays' formal and metaphorical aspects [are] bracketed and their content tidied up as propositional statements, they are then either celebrated or condemned according to the extent to which they are deemed to have successfully provided uplifting political messages'.[80]

If content is the sole basis on which Billington judges the political efficacy of a play, then any play that addresses a social or political issue should be classed as a serious play. Despite his apparent bracketing of structure, Billington's assessment of the seriousness of a play, reveals that he associates political efficacy with a particular dramaturgy. This is evident from Billington's reviews of Weigh's *2000 Feet Away* and Neilson's *Relocated*. While the plays ostentatiously share similar subject matter, that of child abuse, they employ very different dramaturgies. *2000 Feet Away* is a naturalistic portrayal of a deputy sheriff charged with enforcing a state law that bans sex offenders from being within 2000 feet of children. The play employs a social realist dramaturgy, following a single protagonist along a linear narrative, presenting characters with psychological coherence, using time chronologically and space with

---

[77] Michael Billington, 'Acts of Faith', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/may/06/theatre.religion> [accessed 6 October 2008].

[78] Michael Billington, 'Lorilei', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/feb/22/theatre> [accessed 11 October 2008].

[79] Michael Billington, 'Why Drama Is Now Driven by Public Events', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/aug/13/theatresmovefromthepriv ate> [accessed 6 October 2008].

[80] Rebellato, 528–530 (p. 529).

a coherent geography. *Relocated* also appears to be concerned with the abuse of children, as it tells the story of a classroom assistant who is unwittingly involved in a child killing and/or the kidnapping of a child. Stylistically Neilson's play is very different from Weigh's. It uses a 'Gothic thriller format' and employs a dramaturgy of dislocation.[81] The play's sense of time and space is disrupted, the narrative fragmented and the characters fractured. In comparing the two plays, Billington finds Weigh's far superior because he 'confronts a real issue with honourable integrity' and so it can be called a 'serious play'.[82] Weigh treats the issue in a responsible way. In contrast, Billington implies that Neilson treats the issue irresponsibly. The 'format' through which Neilson has explored the issue is 'hideously inappropriate' and so this 'repellent' play offers 'titillation without illumination' and 'a morbidly indecent thrill'. Billington's language indicates some moral anxiety around the relationship between the political content of Neilson's play and its dramaturgy. There is a 'disjunction between its content and style'.[83] Despite its serious content, *Relocated* is not a serious play, because it does not employ a serious dramaturgy.

Billington identifies a fundamental structural difference between the two plays' treatment of their subject matter. Weigh's play posits a general thesis about the issue of child abuse, while Neilson's does not. *2000 Feet Away* 'asks whether America has the right answers in demonising adult-child relationships',[84] thus it is a

---

[81] Michael Billington, 'Relocated', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jun/18/theatre.reviews> [accessed 6 October 2008].
[82] Billington, '2000 Feet Away'.
[83] Billington, 'Relocated'.
[84] Billington, '2000 Feet Away'.

serious play from which Billington felt that he had 'genuinely learned something'.[85]

Billington states that his main objection to *Relocated* is the play's lack of a 'general thesis' on child abuse.[86] Neilson objects to this assessment of his play on the grounds that it was being judged against an inappropriate set of criteria. Billington and Neilson, as the latter observes, 'disagree utterly on what it is a play should do'.[87] Neilson identifies the idea of a thesis as reflecting a need to posit permanent truths about the world and argues that, as he does not believe in a world where there are permanent truths, it would be dishonest of him to put forward a coherent thesis, even if the presentation of a coherent thesis is the criterion on which his work is judged. For Neilson, the idea of a 'play-as-thesis is by nature reductive, an attempt to bring order to the unruliness of existence'.[88] Instead of putting forward a thesis about child abuse, Neilson states that *Relocated* is 'an entirely subjective piece, taking place in the mind of the central character'. It expresses 'a state of mind, not the "state of things."'[89] For Billington, a play's thesis is the benchmark of its quality. For Neilson, a thesis is not an integral element of a good play.

Billington sees the presence of a strong thesis as the indicator of a play's seriousness, and therefore its quality. Rebellato states that 'Billington seems to have very little sense of a play as a play. He prefers to think of it as a thesis or

---

[85] Michael Billington, 'Follow the Banned', *whatsonstage.com*, 2008 <http://blogs.whatsonstage.com/2008/07/04/follow-the-banned/#more-370> [accessed 6 October 2008].

[86] Billington, 'Relocated'.

[87] Anthony Neilson, 'Last Word: Anthony Neilson on Relocated', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/theatre/drama/story/0,,2287274,00.html> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[88] Neilson, 'Last Word: Anthony Neilson on Relocated'.

[89] Billington, 'Follow the Banned'.

argument'.[90] While other critics found the original Broadway production of David Hare's *The Vertical Hour* 'clunking',[91] 'unfocused ... messy and unresolved',[92] and 'soggy ... a musty throwback to the psychological puzzle plays of the 1950s', Billington concentrates his judgement of the play's worth on the value of its central debate.[93] He states that: 'a play is infinitely more than an aesthetic experience. Although there are aspects of *The Vertical Hour* I find unpersuasive, what finally matters is the play's total gesture. I can forgive Hare's flaws for the force of his central argument'.[94] Billington imagines the central argument of a play to be structured dialectically. The play's thesis must be presented and confronted with an antithesis: 'a clash of opposed principles'.[95] He criticises plays that fail to follow this structure. He laments the failure of Joanna Murray Smith to structure the different sides of the argument in her play *The Female of the Species* into this dialectical form: 'what the play offers, however, is a sequential succession of viewpoints rather than the thrill of dialectical argument'.[96] He praises the 'anti-authoritarian stance' of Steppenwolf's production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* but emphasises their

---

[90] Rebellato, 528–530 (p. 528).

[91] Paul Taylor, 'First Night: The Vertical Hour, Music Box Theatre, New York', *The Independent*, 2006 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/first-night-the-vertical-hour-music-box-theatre-new-york-426563.html> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[92] David Rooney, 'The Vertical Hour', *Variety*, 2006 <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117932227.html?categoryid=33&cs=1> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[93] Ben Brantley, 'Battle Zones in Hare Country', *NY Times*, 2006 <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/12/01/theater/reviews/01hour.html> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[94] Michael Billington, '"A Five-course Meal After a Diet of Candyfloss" - Hare Hits Manhattan', *guardian.co.uk*, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/dec/01/theatre.art> [accessed 6 October 2008].

[95] Michael Billington, 'The Burial at Thebes', *guardian.co.uk*, 2004 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/apr/07/theatre> [accessed 10 October 2008].

[96] Billington, 'The Female of the Species'.

failure to present a convincing antithesis: 'real drama ... only occurs when you give weight to the party you like least'.[97] This suggests that Billington imagines a fair contest between both sides of the argument at the level of dramatic structure. Often, however, in his description of these opposing sides, the play's thesis is presented as intrinsically more valid than its antithesis. This can be seen in his assessment of David Hare's *Stuff Happens*: 'Hare, in fact, constantly creates a form of internal dialectic. The play ruthlessly exposes the dubious premises on which the war was fought. At the same time, it questions our complacency by reminding us of the pro-war arguments'. The greater validity of the anti-war thesis is suggested by Billington's choice of verbs. The play 'ruthlessly exposes' the 'dubious premises' for the second Iraq war, while it is only 'reminding' us of any of the arguments for it.[98] This dialectical structure underlies the way that Billington sees theatre functioning politically.

Billington frames this dialectical structure as functioning most effectively when it is integrated into a realist dramaturgy. *2000 Feet Away* is praised not only for positing a strong thesis but for framing that thesis within a realistic situation. The play's 'rigorous portrait' of '[s]mall town America' places the subject of child abuse in a 'cultural context and, in so doing, poses more searching questions'.[99] Billington's original response to Sarah Kane's *Blasted* heavily stresses the importance of a social realist dramaturgy to the political efficacy of a play. He states that '[t]he reason the play falls apart is that there is no sense of external reality'. His

---

[97] Michael Billington, 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', *guardian.co.uk*, 2000 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2000/jul/31/theatre.artsfeatures> [accessed 12 October 2008].

[98] Billington, 'Stuff Happens'.

[99] Billington, '2000 Feet Away'.

criticisms of the play are focussed on the way that the play defies realistic logic: 'who exactly is meant to be fighting whom out on the streets?'; 'I was intrigued to notice, however, that public disorder had not interfered either with room service or with soccer matches at Elland Road'; 'absurdity sets in with the revelation that the gun-toting hack is some kind of secret agent'. Even after Billington has promoted the play in his opinion from 'naive tosh'[100] to the status of a 'serious play'[101] with a strong thesis which 'warn[s] us that we enjoy no special historic immunity from violence and that there is a direct link between private and public fascism', he remains critical of the play's anti-realist blurring of mundane space of a hotel in Leeds with a war-torn space of resembling the Bosnian conflict. He states '[t]he difficulty with the play was always structural - that it yoked together two apparently irreconcilable worlds' and in this respect it remains 'flawed'.[102]

Billington's reading of contemporary plays demonstrates how serious drama yokes together politics with a structure that is organised around a dialectical argument, which is ideally framed within a realist context without distorting the logic of a realist dramaturgy. Plays, like *Relocated* and *Blasted*, which attempt to produce political interventions through an experimental dramaturgy are read within the context of serious drama as treating their subject matter inappropriately. Billington and other proponents of serious drama respond to these dramaturgical transgressions in a way that indicates a level of moral anxiety about their effects.

---

[100] Michael Billington, 'The Good Fairies Desert the Court's Theatre of the Absurd', *The Guardian*, 20 January 1995.
[101] 'Nightwaves' (BBC Radio Three, 2000).
[102] Michael Billington, 'Blasted', *guardian.co.uk*, 2001 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2001/apr/05/theatre.artsfeatures?INTCMP=SRCH > [accessed 10 September 2011].

How serious plays work

Shaw's notion of the serious play lives on, not only in the way that plays are read by theatre critics like Billington, but also in the way that they are constructed by contemporary playwrights. Edgar thinks about the construction of contemporary political plays in way that continues to connect political, dialectical structure and realist dramaturgy with political efficacy. Edgar is not only one of Britain's foremost political playwrights, but also holds an influential pedagogical role as the founder of the Masters in Playwriting Studies at Birmingham University. As the head of the Writers Guild, his views on theatre are often presented as representative of the views of British playwrights in general.

Like Billington and Shaw, Edgar believes that discussion is central to theatre: 'theatre is a site where important things are being discussed'.[103] He also believes that this discussion is dialectical in its structure, describing his play *Destiny* as having 'a dialectical structure based on a political dialectic of a thesis and an antithesis'.[104] The important things that Edgar sees as being discussed are current social and political issues, which are either of public concern or should be of public concern. Like Billington, Edgar also has a tendency to define plays solely by the issue they examine. This can be seen in his description of Birmingham Rep's programming for the beginning of 2005, 'a programme of black and Asian plays on issues such as Afro-Caribbean gun crime, Muslim brothels, terrorism, communalism and teenage sex'.[105] In terms of his own work, his plays are often accompanied by in-depth

---

[103] Peter Billingham, *At the Sharp End : Uncovering the Work of Five Contemporary Dramatists* (London: Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 40.
[104] Billingham, p. 31.
[105] David Edgar, 'Attack', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/may/18/theatre1> [accessed 24 April 2009].

articles in *The Guardian* examining the issues that they address. In September 2005, the National's production of *Playing with Fire* was accompanied by an article in *The Guardian* on multiculturalism by Edgar,[106] and for Out of Joint's 2008 production of *Testing the Echo*, he wrote an article for *The Guardian* on the problematic relationship between the progressive liberal left and political Islamism.[107] Both articles contextualise the plays they are related to as contributing to current political debates.

Like Billington and Shaw, Edgar advocates verisimilitude when dealing with issues: 'The big subjects of this decade appear to lend themselves to traditional mimetic representation'.[108] For him, art is about replicating things that exist in reality: 'Most expression involves reference to something real in the world'.[109] In dramaturgical terms, Edgar employs the use of a 'representative fictionalised narrative' within a situation that is a 'generic fictionalised example'. For example in his play *The Shape of Table*, Edgar draws on the events which he sees as common to uprisings in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria to create a narrative which he sees as describing a common process. For the situation in *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, he draws on the common features of a number of conflicts in order to create the details of the setting. He feels that through the employment of a

---

[106] David Edgar, 'My Fight with the Front', *www.guardian.co.uk*, 2005 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/sep/14/theatre.politicsandthearts> [accessed 4 November 2008].

[107] David Edgar, 'With Friends Like These ...', *www.guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/19/theatre.davidmamet> [accessed 4 November 2009].

[108] David Edgar, 'Doc and Dram', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/sep/27/theatre.davidedgar> [accessed 28 September 2008].

[109] David Edgar, 'You Can't Use the O-Word', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007 <ttp://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/oct/08/comment.olympics2012> [accessed 24 April 2009].

fictional as opposed to a journalistic approach to real world issues, theatre can 'show the underlying processes that shape the world ... This dramaturgical strategy - setting a play not entirely within but adjacent to observed reality - allows the playwright to explore human processes, freed from the constraints of particular circumstances and personalities'.[110] For Edgar mimetic representation is not a case of creating mirrors of reality. He sees this as an ineffective way of examining the world as what the world hides from view may also be hidden in the mirror's reflection. For Edgar, the writer paints a picture of reality. Within the scope of the picture there is a chance of being able to perceive the elements that would otherwise be hidden from view:

> Since the late nineteenth century, the assumption has been that the closer drama is to the lives of its audience, the more powerful and painful it will be. But the problem with looking in a mirror is that you see what the world sees. Look into a picture, and you may see what you have disguised.[111]

It is questionable whether the distinction that Edgar makes between the mirror of nineteenth century naturalism and his own pictorial fictionalised narrative has any real material effect, as while the specifics of Edgar's content may be imaginative, the structures within the fictionalised worlds which Edgar constructs are built on real world blueprints.

By presenting a fictional world that reproduces the social structures of the real world, Edgar argues that theatre functions as a social laboratory where 'we can test and confront our darkest impulses under laboratory conditions'. Theatre is educative as it enables us to 'understand why'. Theatre becomes a place where

---

[110] David Edgar, 'Secret Lives', *guardian.co.uk*, 2003 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2003/apr/19/theatre.artsfeatures> [accessed 24 April 2009].
[111] David Edgar, 'In Defence of Evil', *The Observer*, 2000 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2000/apr/30/featuresreview.review2> [accessed 21 September 2009].

society can be dissected and examined. In terms of social and political problems, the opposing pieces in the puzzle can be taken apart and scrutinised in order to find a possible resolution. Edgar justifies his sympathetic presentation of fascists in *Destiny* in terms of how it enables us to examine the way that the movement functions: 'The reason for making the fascists recognisable, and treating them seriously as human beings, was precisely in order to say to the anti-fascist movement, "You've got to understand these people. You've got to understand how it works - and *this* is how it works."'[112] The creation of a sympathetic, psychologically coherent character becomes a dramaturgical tool which enables the audience to come to a deeper understanding of seemingly alien points of view as they are guided to see the world through the eyes of the Other. In an article on the relationship between theatre and conflict resolution, Edgar proposes that seeing the world through the eyes of your political opponent is the key to resolving conflict. 'Drama trains human beings in the unique skill of looking at themselves as if through other eyes. No surprise, then, that it is such a vital tool in working out how we can live together'. The dramatist is thus able 'to invite the audience to see the world he creates from competing perspectives'.[113] The thesis and anti-thesis of the dialectic is embodied in the play's characters. Edgar defines the dialectic of his play *Maydays* in these terms:

> the argument of the play is that James Grain's kind of politics either turns
> you into a zealot, or drives you out. And if you leave you may become a
> zealot in the other direction. That is what happens to Martin Glass.[114]

It is evident from the last quote that Edgar's theatre laboratory has a further

---

[112] Duncan Wu, *Making Plays: Interviews with Contemporary British Dramatists and Their Directors* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 123.

[113] David Edgar, 'Making Drama Out of Crisis', *guardian.co.uk*, 2001 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/jul/07/socialsciences.highereducation> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[114] Wu, p. 118.

function as a place where we can think through the consequences of our actions without having to face those consequences in real life. Theatre allows us 'to imagine a series of actions and their consequences and, on the basis of that speculation, to choose between them'.[115] This function of the serious play is predicated on the utilisation of a plot structure in which the events are linked through a logical sequence of cause and effect or action and consequence. By following a single character through a series of actions whose consequences lead them to commit 'evil' acts, we can see how under a similar set of circumstances we too might choose the same path and commit the same acts: a sense of 'there but for the grace of God go I'.[116] Thus, while Edgar acknowledges that current literary and philosophical theory should encourage theatre makers to 'challenge the linear narrative which is at every genre's core',[117] he is a firm believer in it and notes that 'while the academy has been proclaiming the death of linear narrative, the real world has seen a rush towards it'.[118]

Thus Edgar positions theatre as having social utility as it can teach the audience empathy and guide them into making informed choices about their actions. Edgar's notion of the dramaturgy of this social utility clarifies the ways in which politics, dialectical structure and a realist dramaturgy are yoked together in the serious play. Serious plays: are set in a representative world, which may not be based on a specific place in a specific time, but which is built upon real world blueprints;

---

[115] David Edgar, 'Rules of Engagement', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/oct/22/theatre.fiction> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[116] Edgar, 'In Defence of Evil'.

[117] David Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 29.

[118] Edgar, 'Doc and Dram'.

contain sympathetic and psychologically coherent characters who embody differing perspectives on the social or political issue at the heart of the play, who enact a dialectic through their interactions; have a linear narrative based on mechanical causation through which we can see the consequences of certain choices and actions.

Serious drama as British drama

Mary Luckhurst argues that British theatre is dominated by a particular form of realism that is thought of as quintessentially British. Luckhurst notes '[a] certain type of realism is promoted and endorsed by the Royal Court, then, has been naturalised as "British" and the history of "British theatre"'.[119] I would argue that the type of realism she is referring to is serious drama. While it is arguable whether serious drama dominates British theatre, it certainly offers a highly influential model of what British political theatre is. I would argue that serious drama maintains its influential position within British theatre in three ways. Firstly, it presents its dramaturgy as the ingredients of a good play, as opposed to the dramaturgy of a particular form of political playwriting. Secondly, it presents its history as the canonical history of British theatre, rather than than the history of a single theatrical form. Thirdly, serious drama dominates the terms through which the nature of a play's structure can be described.

Serious drama is strongly associated with the single authored British play. Its dramaturgy is presented, not as the dramaturgy of a particular type of political play, but rather as the transhistorical, universal dramaturgy that underlies all good plays. In this way serious drama could be argued to maintain its dominance through acting

---

[119] Luckhurst, Mary, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 9 (2002), 73-84 (p.76).

like a cultural hegemony, framing its particular dramaturgy as what Gramsci would call 'common sense'[120] or in Lefebvre's terms 'established knowledge'.[121] Its features are portrayed as the 'obvious rule[s]' of playwriting, rather than the structures of a specific dramatic form.[122] The features of serious drama are recognisable in Noel Greig's 'rules' of playwriting.[123] At the centre of every play there must be 'some major question or proposition about human life and activity'.[124] Plot is defined as the journey of a single character moving chronologically through time towards a goal: 'a story is about planned, forward moving activity that (a) is led by someone, (b) has a purpose'.[125] The basic structure of play is identified as linear. This linear journey progresses through a sequence of struggles linked by logical cause and effect, 'a progression of conflicts'.[126] Characters have psychological and sociological integrity, and inhabit a specific and believable world which provides circumstances that drive their behaviour: 'human beings in recognisable social environments, struggling with their situation and their emotions'.[127] The characters are thought of as real people. They are 'alive' and have 'their own individuality'.[128]

The history of serious drama is frequently presented as the canonical history of British theatre. Despite the fact that British theatre, and playwriting as a sub-genre of British theatre, have encompassed and continue to encompass a wide range of

---

[120] Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 334.

[121] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 90.

[122] Alan Ayckbourn, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 4.

[123] Noel Greig, *Playwriting: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 84.

[124] Greig, p. 171.

[125] Greig, p. 86.

[126] Greig, p. 110.

[127] Greig, p. 63.

[128] Greig, p. 77.

variant theatrical practices, the canonical version of modern British theatre history is frequently told as the history of serious plays from Shaw onwards. This is a narrative dominated by the idea of periodic revolutions in practice or 'new waves', which disguise a fundamental continuity in terms of structure from Shaw to the present day.[129] British theatre history traditionally marks a radical break between the playwriting practices of the Edwardians and contemporary practice in 1956 with the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. John Russell Taylor acknowledges, however, that in terms of form *Look Back in Anger* represents a continuation with the theatre that preceded it, 'what distinguished it as a decisive break with Rattigan and the older drama was not so much its form as its content: the characters who took part in the drama and the language in which they expressed themselves'.[130] Kitchen sink dramas, such as Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* or Wesker's *Roots*, maintain the same serious dramaturgy that Shaw advocates, while laying claim to a greater realism and a stronger engagement with social and political issues as their content encompasses characters from a wider range of social backgrounds than the plays that preceded them. Instead of being a break with Shaw's serious drama, these plays are a reinvigoration of it at a time when even George Devine at the Royal Court was predicting that the much needed revolution in British theatre would come in the form of a move away from realism and issue driven plays; the work of a Beckett as opposed to an Osborne. As Shepherd and Womack note, *Look Back in Anger* can be seen as a renewal of naturalism in the face of the threat of modernism: '*Look Back in Anger* is the point at which English drama of the modern period starts to become

---

[129] Billingham, p. 40.

[130] John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 40.

both serious and accessible, the moment at which drama starts to say something real again. Osborne returns us to Ibsen'.[131]

After 1956, revolutions in British theatre practice are imagined to occur on a relatively regular basis. Edgar sees British theatre post 1956 as, 'a kind of three-act drama, reflecting the political debates that surrounded it'.[132] The three acts are marked by the dates 1956, 1968 and 1979; each one delineating a shift in the way that theatre engaged politically with the changing world around it. 1956 signals the beginning of theatre's examination of 'the consequences of working class empowerment'. 1968 is the end of censorship and heralds the birth of work that was more topical and overtly political, questioning 'the limits of social democracy and the welfare state'. The third act begins with the Thatcher era in 1979, out of which emerges a more focussed politics articulating the concerns of a particular group within society, 'as women, black and gay playwrights confronted the questions of difference and identity which had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s'.[133] Edgar argues that these dates indicate radical changes in the practice of British theatre, but it is clear from his description that these are not changes in structure but rather of content.

The concept of new wave permeates the narrative of recent British theatre history. Edgar's writing on this subject is dominated by the notion that ''new waves' keep on coming'[134] and that 'each new wave sought to overthrow what had gone before'.[135] Melissa Dana Gibson challenges the validity of the new wave narrative, in which 1956, 1968 (the birth of alternative theatre) and 1979 (the crushing of the arts

---

[131] Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, *English Drama: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 278.

[132] Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, p. 9.

[133] Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, p. 5.

[134] Billingham, p. 40.

[135] Edgar, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, p. 5.

as Thatcher comes to power) act as period markers. She argues that these dates are used to construct differing narratives of decline, in which British theatre is imagined as 'a phoenix awaiting a rebirth'.[136] Although British theatre is presented as falling into decline between these dates, the new wave narrative offers us the promise that history will repeat itself and from the seeds of stagnation theatre will be born anew. To Gibson's three iconic dates we could now add 1995 (the year Sarah Kane's *Blasted* premiered at the Royal Court) and 2003 (the year Billington claims that there is a revitalisation of political theatre in the face of the Iraq war).[137] Gibson identifies this new wave narrative as a modernist construct: 'modernist in its dependence on the order of 'the new' and the ideology of progress through succession'.[138] Serious drama maintains its influential position through this narrative of the new wave by dazzling us with the idea of the new. The content of each new wave of drama may be radically new, however, the form remains grounded in the combination of politics, dialectical structure and realist dramaturgy outlined by Shaw.

Where genuine challenges have arisen over the past century, serious drama subsumes them within its own parameters. Christopher Innes acknowledges that Shaw's polemic may have distorted the narrative of British theatre history and notes the continuing dominance of Shaw's discourse: 'In claiming a direct social function for this discourse, Shaw not only gave a strong political cast to the mainstream of English drama, but set its stylistic terms'.[139] The ultimate irony of this is that many of Shaw's own plays, such as *Back to Methuselah*, lie beyond the strict bounds of

---

[136] Melissa Dana Gibson, '1979 and All That: Periodization in Postwar British Theatre History', *Theatre Survey*, 47 (2006), 33–50 (p. 42).
[137] Billington, 'Drama Out of a Crisis'.
[138] Gibson, 33–50 (p. 44).
[139] Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 56.

serious drama. This is true not only of Shaw but also the work of other playwrights who form part of the canonical version of British theatre history. J. B. Priestley, for instance, is frequently positioned as a 'state of the nation' playwright despite his formal experiments with the notion of time in plays such as *Time and the Conways*. Innes shows how this discourse subsumes challenging practices, even to the point of including Brecht's epic theatre, within the scope of the serious play: 'These continuities have been disguised by the almost complete triumph of the modernist critique formulated by Shaw, which has come to be generally accepted as an unquestionable premise, however dated Shaw's own works may now seem'.[140] Through the new wave narrative and its subsumption of other forms, it becomes evident that, as Shepard and Womack argue, 'despite other appearances, "naturalism" has not yet relinquished the hegemonic position it established a century ago'.[141]

   The third way that serious drama maintains its influential position is through its dominance of the terms in which dramatic structure can be articulated. Hegemonic formations, according to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, envelope opposing formations through a complete dominance of terminology:

> A hegemonic formation also embraces what opposes it, insofar as the opposing force accepts the system of basic articulations of that formation as something it negates, but the *place of the negation* is defined by the internal parameters of the formation itself.[142]

As serious drama presents its structures as the underlying principles of playwriting it is difficult to articulate alternative approaches to playwriting as anything other than

---

[140] Innes, p. 58.
[141] Shepherd and Womack, p. ix.
[142] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 139.

negations of the dramaturgy of a serious play. When Neilson states his position in response to Billington's criticisms of *Relocated*, he does so using negative terminology. Neilson doesn't posit permanent truths; his play is not a thesis nor is it centred round an issue. The only positive definition of his play that Neilson offers is that it presents an exploration of a state of mind. Neilson's position is almost exclusively defined as being what Billington's is not. Hans-Thies Lehmann points out the way that practitioners like Neilson who attempt to make experimental work 'often lack the conceptual tools to articulate their perception'. Within experimental discourses he identifies a 'predominance of purely negative criteria'. Thus, as in Neilson's defence of *Relocated*, the 'new theatre, one hears and reads, is not this and not that and not the other'.[143] It is difficult, as Turner and Behrndt point out, to articulate alternatives to serious drama as the discourse 'does not acknowledge the possibility of a different set of starting principles'.[144] Arguing a position outside of serious drama is hard to do without invoking the dramaturgy of serious drama itself. Playwrights like Neilson, who attempt to write outside of its structural principles, consequently find themselves fighting a challenging fight, 'groping in the dark for new forms, better forms, getting knocked down, getting up again'.[145] Through its dominance of the principles of playwriting, the narrative of British theatre history and dramaturgical terminology, serious drama presents itself not as a form of British political playwriting as British playwriting itself.

---

[143] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 19.
[144] Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 135.
[145] Anthony Neilson, 'Forward', in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism* (London: Methuen, 2007).

The politics of serious drama

Serious drama presents itself as an effective vehicle of social and political change. Born out of Shaw's interest in the Marxist dialectic and his desire for 'social progress'[146] in opposition to 'organised robbery and oppression (politely called Capitalism)', it continues to be associated with a left-wing politics.[147] As Graham Holderness observes 'political theatre can be progressive, but not regressive; socialist, but not conservative; subversive but not conformist or radically reactionary'.[148] If, however, serious drama is read through Jameson's three levels of textual interpretation, its claim to a progressive and left wing politics can be problematized.

On Jameson's first 'narrowly political horizon', a text is read for its dialectic. The text is grasped as 'a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm'.[149] This dialectic is already inscribed in the dramatic structure of serious drama, whatever the specifics of the social or political issue that constitutes its content. Embodied in realistic characters, the thesis and anti-thesis fight it out in the play's dramatic narrative, whose resolution offers a point of synthesis. Thus serious drama is clearly structured around the resolution of a social contradiction represented by the characters.

This act of resolution can be seen as problematic because it appears to close the dialectic rather than maintain a politically productive open one. Jameson argues,

---

[146] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 40.
[147] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, p. 129.
[148] Graham Holderness, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of theatre and drama*, Insights (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 1–17 (p. 3).
[149] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 62.

however, that there is a contradiction formed in the very act of resolution:

> a symbolic act is on the one hand affirmed as a genuine *act*, albeit on the symbolic level, while on the other it is registered as an act which is 'merely' symbolic, its resolutions imaginary ones that leave the real untouched[150]

On one hand this purely imaginary resolution could be seen as lacking political efficacy because it has no effect in the world outside the theatre. On the other hand, however, it is this very lack of efficacy which is productive in political terms. The contradiction between the unresolved social situation in the world outside the theatre and the imaginary resolution of the social situation inside the theatre produces a productive dialectic. This gap in itself could be seen as providing an impetus to action in the world outside the theatre doors. Thus reading on Jameson's first level serious drama meets its own claim to embody a progressive politics.

On the second level of Jameson's system of analysis, that of 'social class', the politics of serious drama become more problematic.[151] On this level 'the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between classes'.[152] This class confrontation boils down, in Marxist terms, to a confrontation between 'a dominant and a labouring class'[153]. At this level, a text is read as an individual utterance within the wider context of a particular class's discourse. It is part of an antagonistic dialogue between the classes, in which their 'two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code'.[154] In the case of serious drama, this is a class struggle taking place within the shared code of theatre, in which serious drama is a utterance from

---

[150] Jameson, p. 66.
[151] Jameson, p. 69.
[152] Jameson, pp. 70–71.
[153] Jameson, p. 69.
[154] Jameson, p. 70.

the dominant discourse of the intellectual classes.

Serious drama came into being at the end of the nineteenth century in direct opposition to the melodrama that then dominated theatre stages. Serious drama's project consists of the promotion of its own value, combined with an aggressive devaluation of the dominant melodramatic form. William Archer presents serious drama or the 'new drama' as theatre's apex, a 'pure and logical art-form'.[155] In contrast, he presents melodrama, the 'old drama', as drama's apogee, 'the gradual decline of English drama into something very like inanition and imbecility'.[156] Innes argues that the current low view of melodrama is shaped by the 'Bernard Shaw's polemics, which successfully created a climate of appreciation for his own work by denigrating his immediate predecessors'.[157] The success of this project can be deduced from the extent to which the word 'melodramatic' has gathered negative connotations in its everyday usage, implying something 'sensational' and 'crude'.[158] Melodrama, however, is a theatrical form whose audiences were predominantly drawn from the working classes of industrial British cities. Shepherd and Womack position melodrama as the 'people's drama'.[159] They suggest the genre's political potential by observing that melodramatic plays such as *The Factory Lad* can be seen as a drama of protest. They quote Montagu Slater's argument that the illegitimate theatres of the nineteenth century were democratic and focused on the immediate social concerns of their local community. As such, melodrama represents not 'a hiatus in the dominant culture of letters but a high point in the decentralized culture

---

[155] William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1929), p. 5.
[156] William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, p. 252.
[157] Innes, p. 9.
[158] Allen, p. 739.
[159] Shepherd and Womack, p. 236.

of working communities'.[160] Serious drama, despite its left wing politics, is set up in antagonistic opposition to a drama that can be thought of as more genuinely reflecting the concerns and values of working class.

Serious drama is predominantly a theatre of the intellectual classes. Shaw and contemporaries reconfigure the theatre as form of literature and of moral improvement. They argue that plays should be published, as well as performed. They distance theatre from the idea of entertainment. Theatre is not pleasurable, but like church or school it becomes something you attend because it is good for you. Pleasing the audience is no longer the theatre's role. In fact the audience must now be made fit for the theatre and the serious drama aimed 'to create a new class of serious playgoers'[161] who would form a suitable audience for its plays. Serious drama reclaims the theatre for the intellectual classes. This process is mirrored, Shepherd and Womack argue, in the narrative of Arthur Pinero's play *Trelawny of the Wells* . In the play, a working class actress, Rose Trelawny, is raised in class through her marriage to an aristocrat. When she eventually returns to the stage after her marriage, she finds it impossible to act in the way she used to. She has lost her vulgarity. Her acting, however, is now suitable for a new serious kind of drama, which is better and more truthful. Rose acquires a new respectability, just as the theatre has through serious drama.

On Jameson's second level of social class, the politics of serious drama are connected with the *embourgeoisement* of the theatre, as opposed to social concerns of the working class. The success of this project is evident from the fact that serious drama, for all the left-wing concerns inscribed in its content, plays to a predominantly

---

[160] Shepherd and Womack, p. 231.
[161] William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New*, p. 339.

affluent middle class audience. As Holderness states there is an interesting irony in the reality that contemporary political plays are 'performed in the Royal National Theatre, before an audience composed entirely of middle-class Londoners'.[162] If the audience for serious drama is middle class, then this raises the questions as what the function of serious drama is? Serious drama positions its spectator as a liberal, compassionate and social concerned individual. The act of seeing a political play reassures its middle class audience that they are, as the chorus in Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* declare themselves to be, 'the good people'[163]. In a world where the affluence of the middle classes is predicated on the suffering of a lowly-waged working class that is increasingly relocated to the developing world and on wars that open up new markets, the idea that we are still good people is a very attractive thought.

Jameson's third level of analysis is that of the '*ideology of form*'. At this level of analysis, '"form" is apprehended as content' and the analysis seeks 'to reveal the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes'. These formal processes are read as 'carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works'.[164] On this level, form is read in terms of contradictions between the social structures that are mediated through its form. Serious drama employs a realist dramaturgy, which claims to mirror reality. It presents the dramatic world as an unconstructed replication of the world outside the theatre door. It is evident, however from the analysis of serious drama in the first half of this chapter, that the dramaturgy of serious drama is highly

---

[162] Holderness, pp. 1–17 (p. 7).
[163] Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (London: Methuen, 2008), p. 7.
[164] Jameson, p. 84.

constructed. In writing a serious play, a playwright must organise a social or political issue into a dialectical structure and then integrate this structure into the frame of realist dramaturgy. I would argue that the realist frame into which the dialectic is integrated is highly problematic in political terms. The realist dramaturgy of serious drama reproduces normative representations of social structures without interrogating their politics or their relationship to contemporary lived experience under post-Fordism. As Holderness argues 'A drama which addresses what is conventionally accepted as the political "reality" of a society may in fact be collusive with that society's ideology. […] Thus a politics of content cannot guarantee political efficacy, if both form and function are simultaneously collaborating with a dominant ideology'.[165] The following chapters will explore the ways in which the dramaturgy of serious drama reproduces normative representations of time and space, of causal structures and of the social subject. At the same time, I will explore experiments in the work of recent British playwrights that negotiate, mediate, critique and at times radically challenge normative representations of social structures through the use of experimental dramaturgies which question the validity of these structures under the lived experience of post-Fordism.

---

[165] Holderness, pp. 1–17 (p. 9).

2 –Time and Space

The next three chapters will explore the dramaturgy of serious drama in terms of Fredric Jameson's concept of an '*ideology of form*'.[1] They will interrogate the ways in which the serious drama's structuring of time and space, plot and story and its imagining of the social subject mirror the normative representations of these structures under post-Fordism. At the same time, the use of experimental dramaturgies in recent British plays will be investigated for the different ways in which they negotiate, mediate and critique the same social structures and reveal a gap between normative representations of these structures and our lived experience of them under post-Fordism

The structures that will be investigated have been drawn from recent playwriting manuals, in which they are presented as the universal principles of playwriting. Many of these manuals do outline dramaturgies that lie outside these universal principles of playwriting in subsections entitled '[b]reaking the rules'[2] or '[n]on-linear structures', but at the same time they fundamentally guide the reader to produce a play that employs the dramaturgy of serious drama, a play that resembles the plays of David Hare more than the plays of Martin Crimp.[3] The universal principles of playwriting that these manuals invoke are not transhistorical structures but, as argued in the previous chapter, are rooted in George Bernard Shaw's notion

---

[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 84.
[2] Noel Greig, *Playwriting: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 82.
[3] David Edgar, *How Plays Work: A Practical Guide to Playwriting* (Nick Hern Books, 2009), p. 107.

of the serious play, which yokes together politics, dialectical structure and a realist dramaturgy in a theatrical form which is seen as having social utility. These playwriting manuals invoke dramatic theory that pre-dates Shaw, particularly Aristotle's *Poetics*, as the dramaturgy of serious drama inherits structures from earlier dramatic forms and so contains 'a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once'[4]. Much of this pre-Shavian theory, however, is reread through the lens of serious drama and remade in its image, in order to support its claims to constitute a transhistorical dramaturgy; the 'vestiges and survivals of older modes of production, [are] now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new'.[5] Pre-Shavian dramatic theories are rarely considered in terms of their specific historical contexts, as accounts of theatre practices with fundamental differences from our own, originating in societies different from contemporary Britain in terms of their modes of production and their social organisation.

Serious drama's arguments for its dramaturgy are grounded in the idea of verisimilitude. The arguments that it puts forward to support the validity of its structures are rooted in the idea that these structures replicate corresponding structures in the world outside the theatre doors. For Steve Waters, the ordering of the dramatic narrative into scenes reflects 'the rhythm of lived experience. For life, like drama, is experienced as a sequence of time-limited, place-specific, purposeful scenes'.[6] Tim Fountain advocates the use of mechanical causality on the same life-like grounds: 'moving forwards you are always dealing with cause and effect; every

---

[4] Jameson, p. 81.
[5] Jameson, p. 80.
[6] Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), p. 13.

action leads to a reaction and, in turn, further action: action … reaction … action. It's just how it is in life'. [7] Grounding arguments about dramatic structure in verisimilitude is problematic because it reveals that these structures mirror of the social structures of the prevailing hegemony in their supposed 'naturalness'. As Raymond Williams explains, the social structures of a hegemony present themselves not as ideology but as the natural order of things:

> hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives.[8]

To say that dramatic structure is like it is in life is to suggest that the dramaturgy of a play mirrors some corresponding dramaturgy of social life. It imagines that there is a common sense understanding of this dramaturgy of social life, that needs no explanation or discussion because we all know social life to be structured in such a way. It invokes the structures of the dominant social order, post-Fordism in the case of contemporary Britain, and positions them as the natural order of things.

The idea that the dramaturgy of a play mirrors the dramaturgy of social life can be thought of as expressing both a conformist politics and a potentially challenging one. The mirroring of social structures in dramaturgy without critique, as in serious drama, is a conformist political stance. It reflects social structures in line with the prevailing hegemony and through reflecting them as the natural order of

---

[7] Tim Fountain, *So You Want to Be a Playwright?* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007), p. 56.
[8] Raymond Williams, *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 168–169.

things it supports their claim to this status. The politically progressive stance of serious drama is problematized when its structural politics are considered as its politically challenging content is mediated through a politically conformist realist dramaturgy. On the other hand, the dramatic structure of a play can be considered as acting politically when it produces dramaturgies that re-imagine social structures rather than simply reflecting them. By re-imaging social structures in their dramaturgies, such plays challenge the prevailing hegemony's representations of these structures. Therefore plays employing dramaturgies that lie beyond the frame of realism can be thought of as having a radical political agency that the structures of realist drama lack.

The following chapters will investigate this relationship between dramatic, social and economic structures. This chapter will start by exploring this relationship in terms of the dramaturgy of time and space. Plays, as Elinor Fuchs notes, are structured in time and space: '[a] play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space'.[9] At the same time, they structure time and space through their dramaturgy. Time and space, however, are the structures that are given the least consideration in contemporary playwriting manuals. They tend to be considered only briefly if they are considered at all. As Waters notes '[t]hat theatrical events take place in time is so self-evident it can often be forgotten',[10] while space is commonly reduced to position of the 'location(s) that the story takes place in',[11] without considering the ways in which space forms a 'micro-geography' of the world of the

---

[9] Elinor Fuchs, 'EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play', *Theater*, 34:2 (2004), 4-9 (p. 6).
[10] Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays*, p. 71.
[11] Noel Greig, p. 119.

play.[12] Dramatic time and space tend to be presented as commensurate with lived time and space. They are arguably the most common sense aspect of the dramaturgy of serious drama.

The first section of this chapter will examine the qualities of dramatic time in order to consider the ways in which dramatic time both differs from and reflects our experience of lived time. The temporal axis of succession that constitutes the structural backbone of serious drama will be examined. I will argue that Caryl Churchill's play *Heart's Desire* enacts a crisis of such successive temporality and in doing so Churchill's play draws attention to a second temporal axis, that of simultaneity. Gertrude Stein's proposition that drama could be organised on the temporal axis of simultaneity through a predominantly spatial as opposed to temporal ordering will be explored and related to the structures of dramatic space. The second section of the chapter will investigate the ways in which dramatic time and space are imagined to be physically commensurate with lived time and space, through an examination of the use of the unities of time and place in Tim's Crouch's *The Author*. The dramaturgy of dramatic time and space will be related to the dramaturgy of social life, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of spatio-temporal rhythms, through the idea of moral unity. The final section will draw on David Harvey's argument that the forces of post-Fordism produce time-space compression, which has resulted in a shift in our lived experience of time and space. This will be related to the shifts in the representation of time and space through dramatic structure. David Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* will be examined for the way it mediates and negotiates the experience of time-space compression. David Greig's

---

[12] Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays*, p. 54.

play *San Diego* will be investigated for the ways in which its spatial structure negotiates the questions around the nature of space produced through post-Fordism

I will argue when the dramaturgy of dramatic time and space is read in the context of the dramaturgy of social life, a structural politics emerges that suggests both a correspondence and a disjuncture between the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of serious drama and the social and economic structures of post-Fordism.

The dramaturgy of time

This section will concentrate on serious drama's representation of dramatic time and the ways in which it relates to the experience of lived time and clock time, that is time as it is thought of as an objective measurable quantity. Dramatic theory imagines time to be present tense, abbreviated, subjective and organised on two distinct axis of succession and simultaneity. The first and most common observation made about dramatic time is that is present tense. As Thornton Wilder states: 'On the stage it is always *now*'. The difference between the narrative mode of a novel and the dramatic mode of a play is often defined in terms of tense. In a play:

> the personages are standing on that razor-edge, between the past and the future, which is the essential character of conscious being; the words are rising to their lips in immediate spontaneity. A novel is what *took place*; no self-effacement on the part of the narrator can hide the fact that we hear his voice recounting, recalling events that are past and over, and which he has selected - from uncountable others - to lay before us from his presiding intelligence.[13]

The dramatic mode is a showing of seemingly spontaneous events as they happen in the present moment, while the narrative is a selective recounting of events by a narrator that happened in some past moment. The present moment in performance is

---

[13] Thornton Wilder, *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*, ed. by Jackson R. Bryer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 71.

not a single fixed point in time, but rather a succession of presents. As Szondi notes, although 'its internal time is always the present. That in no way means that the Drama is static [...] As the present passes away, it produces change, a new present springs from its antithesis'.[14] As a spectator I am situated permanently in the present moment. From this position, I witness a sequence of present events become past events, while future events become present events. As the events move into the past, I move forward into the future, whilst at the same time remaining stationary in the present moment. It is as if I am walking up the down escalator. Future events come towards me, they pass briefly beneath my feet, and then they move away behind me and into the past. I am moving forwards towards the future events, at the same pace at which the future events move backwards into the present and then into the past. My position in the present moment, is a dynamic equilibrium as opposed to a static one.

The text of a play often contains the narrative as well as the dramatic mode. In this respect it is past tense as well as present tense. Characters recount events that happened before the play began and tell each other about events that happened beyond the reaches of the stage, during the action of the play. In performance, the narrative mode takes on a dramatic quality. The audience become aware of the process of narration. They hear the events recounted in the past tense, but at the same time they witness the narrator compose their account in the present moment. Thus narrative in performance is dramatic. The audience's focus is as much on the way the narrator tells their story, as on the story itself. The past events that are recounted and the present act of telling co-exist in the same moment. In this respects drama does

---

[14] Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, trans. by Michael Hays (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 9.

not exclude the past tense.

The second feature of dramatic time is that it passes at a different rate to lived or clock time. As Gertrude Stein notes 'at the theatre there is a curtain and the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain'.[15] The amount of continuous time represented onstage in a scene is almost always greater than the amount of actual continuous time it takes to perform the scene. Dramatic time moves at a faster rate than actual time from the perspective of the audience. The audience experience this discrepancy between the rate at which time passes onstage and actual time itself as normal, accepting the accelerated rate at which dramatic time passes as representative of lived time. Pfister points out that in film too, dramatic time is represented as passing at a faster rate than lived time. This can be achieved by actually speeding up the film itself – fast motion as opposed to slow motion – so that '*all* events and movements occur more quickly than they do in reality'.[16] This technique is not used to speed up the rate at which time passes in a play. Manfred Pfister argues that dramatic time moves at a faster rate because it is abbreviated time. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that the plot of a play represents a 'single, unified action'.[17] A play, therefore, only includes the events that are essential to this single line of action. All extraneous events are removed. Mundane everyday actions, such as going to the toilet, are not usually necessary to the progression of the plot, therefore they are excluded from the action. Thus dramatic time moves at a faster rate than lived time because it 'excludes or

---

[15] Gertrude Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writing and Lectures, 1909-45*, New edition (Peter Owen Ltd, 2004), p. 59.

[16] Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. by John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 285.

[17] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 15.

abbreviates certain sequences'.[18]

Sometimes the audience experience dramatic time as passing at a slower rate than actual time; for instance, while watching a production of Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. Dramatic time in a play like *Waiting for Godot* appears to be passing at a slower rate than actual time, but it is not. The amount of dramatic time represented in the scene is still longer than the time it takes to perform the scene. Each act of *Waiting for Godot* represents the time period from morning to night, but the performance time of each act is about an hour. When dramatic time feels slow or even suspended as it does in *Waiting for Godot*, it is because of the presence of long pauses in the dialogue and because the events of the play are not as tightly focused on driving the action of the plot forward as they normally are:

> Long pauses in a dialogue, or scenes in which the action is reduced to a series of insignificant or irrelevant activities, may create the impression that time is being drawn out but this does not spring either from a comparison between the fictional time and the actual performance time, or between the fictional time and the time a particular action would take in real life. Instead, this impression is derived from the comparison with the conventionalised compression techniques in plays which tend to abbreviate the action on stage in relation to empirical reality by concentrating on the logically most important causal elements.[19]

Dramatic time is passing slowly in *Waiting for Godot* only in comparison to the rate at which we expect dramatic time to be passing. The onstage action is not as abbreviated as the audience expect it to be.

The rate at which dramatic time passes is measured against the rate at which dramatic time usually passes, rather than against the rate at which actual time passes. This is illustrated by the effect of staging the action of a play at a rate which does correspond to the rate of actual time. Director Clare Lizzimore used the rate at which

---

[18] Pfister, p. 285.
[19] Pfister, p. 286.

actual time passes as the metronome for the rate at which dramatic time passes in each of the scenes of her production of Franz Xaver Kroetz's *Tom Fool* (Bush, 2007). The critic Kieron Quirke noticed that the performance felt '[s]low as hell'.[20] During *Tom Fool*, Quirke experiences dramatic time as moving unbearably slowly because he measures the rate that dramatic time is passing, not against the rate at which actual time passes, but rather against the average rate at which dramatic time passes. The comparison is between dramatic time and the average rate at which dramatic time passes on stage, rather than between dramatic time and actual time.

Thirdly dramatic time is subjective like lived time, rather than an objective measurable quantity like clock time. Clock time passes at a constant rate, whereas the rate at which dramatic time passes varies from moment to moment. A clear example of this, can be seen in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. In act V scene ii, Faustus waits for the arrival of Lucifer to claim his soul. After line 142, we hear the clock strike eleven. After line 173, it strikes half past eleven. After line 192, it strikes midnight. The first half hour of dramatic time lasts 31 lines, while the second half hour of dramatic time lasts only 19 lines. As Faustus approaches his fate, the rate at which dramatic time passes accelerates. This is because the audience experiences time passing at the rate at which the characters onstage perceive it to be passing. Time accelerates in *Dr Faustus* to convey to the audience Faustus's sense that time is slipping through his fingers.[21] As Pfister points out:

> the introduction of a discrepancy between fictional and actual performance
> time is not designed simply as a way of economising in dramatic terms,

---

[20] Kieron Quirke, 'Tempest in a Tiny Flat', *Www.thisislondon.co.uk*, 2007 <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/theatre/review-23391323-tempest-in-a-tiny-flat.do> [accessed 5 January 2011].
[21] Christopher Marlowe, 'Dr Faustus', in *The Complete Plays* (London: Penguin, 1986), V, ii, 143–194.

but actually reflects discrepancy within the fiction itself between the empirical chronometry (the chiming of the bells) and Faustus's subjective perception of time.[22]

In this sense, dramatic time is more like lived time, which is also perceived subjectively.

Finally dramatic time is organised on two axes: an axis of succession and an axis of simultaneity. The axis of succession is thought of as the major axis of dramatic time and as the main organisational structure underlying the construction of a play. This notion dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle makes little reference to time in the *Poetics*, but plot, which he positions as 'the source and (as it were) the soul of tragedy', is primarily ordered on the temporal axis of succession.[23] Plot, as already noted, is defined as a 'single, unified action' and Aristotle's description of this structure bears a strong resemblance to his understanding of the nature of time, as outlined in the *Physics*.[24] Aristotle defines time as '*the number of precessions and successions in process*'. Time, Aristotle argues, is dependent on events. An event is a change from one state to another. We do not notice the passage of time unless something changes. This is the means by which we distinguish this present moment or "now" from another previous or subsequent "now". The difference between these states of "now" is what enables us to recognise change. Change helps us to distinguish what came before and what comes after. The "now" before and the "now" after are both extremes and distinct from each other, whilst also being connected. The process which connects them is time: 'When we, accordingly, apprehend the extremes as distinct from what intervenes between them and when we

---

[22] Pfister, p. 285.
[23] Aristotle, p. 12.
[24] Aristotle, p. 15.

mentally mark them as two "nows" (one coming earlier and the other coming later), it is then that we acknowledge and identify time'.[25] Time is defined through the apprehension of change from an earlier state to a later one, in other words a succession of events. Aristotle's conception of a single-unified action is also described as a succession of events: 'a series of events occurring sequentially'[26] or a 'sequence of episodes'.[27] Thus, the movement of the action of a play and the movement of time are based on the same principle, so it can be argued that plots are fundamentally organised on the temporal axis of succession, and therefore this axis forms the main organisational structure of a play.

Keir Elam argues that it is drama's organisation on a temporal axis of succession that distinguishes it from other visual arts. Elam focuses his thinking on the way that a play communicates its dramatic world to the audience, rather than on the nature of plot structure. Elam argues that the visual image of a dramatic world, presented to the audience through the set, cannot convey that world's full nature. The way a dramatic world works can only be fully understood through the sequence of events that occur within it. For example, the nature of the social bonds that form the society depicted in the dramatic world onstage can only be understood through witnessing the rules by which people engage with each other in a number of different situations. In order to describe this, the playwright will show 'a series of connected events involving these individuals within a changing context'. Thus, Elam argues, '[o]ne has to include in any account of the dramatic world, therefore, a temporal structure which indicates this passage from an initial state (W_D at t_1) to a final state

---

[25] Aristotle, *Aristotle's Physics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 80.
[26] Aristotle, *Aristotle's Physics*, p. 14.
[27] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 17.

(W_D at t_x) through a series of intermediary states (W_D at t_n)'. Thus, the dramatic world is defined through a 'complex *successions* of states'.[28]

The shape of the axis of succession is linear, with time driving forwards from the past, through the present, to the future. David Edgar argues that some plays are not organised on this temporal axis of succession but exhibit instead 'disrupted time'[29]. In this category, he includes plays which go backwards (Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*), plays with flashbacks or flash-forwards (Hare's *Plenty* or Churchill's *Top Girls*), plays that tell parallel stories happening at different historical moments in time (Charlotte Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should*) and plays with circular plot structures. The plays that he cites all offer a different sequential organisation of events in their plot structure, but these events, I would argue, are still located firmly on the temporal axis of succession as the spectator can easily piece the jumbled events together to form a linear chronological story. Rather than representing a movement forwards, the plot structure of these plays trace different moves along the axis. Some move backwards, while others jump backwards and forwards from point to point. Circular plays move from one point in time on the axis to another point that resembles it. All four plot structures, however, produce plays whose plots imply linear stories and whose events can easily be told in chronological order moving along a linear axis of succession.

Laura Wade's *Breathing Corpses* (Royal Court, 2005) traces all three of these 'disrupted' movements in time. This play tells the story of a murder, a suicide and suggests a subsequent murder. The events of the story are set in action when Ben

---

[28] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 105.
[29] Edgar, p. 107.

murders his partner Kate, puts her body in a box and hides it in a storage unit. Jim, the owner of the storage units, discovers Kate's body, he consequently has a breakdown and eventually commits suicide in a hotel room. Jim's body is discovered by Amy, the chambermaid. He's the second dead body she's found. A few months later, Amy finds what she thinks is a third corpse but luckily, or perhaps unluckily for her, this time the body turns out to be alive. Initially these events are plotted backwards. In the first scene Amy discovers Jim's body, in the second Jim discovers Kate's body and in the third we see the argument between Kate and Ben that leads to Kate's murder. Then the fourth scene flashes forward to a point in time between Jim's discovery of Kate's body and his suicide. This scene reveals how the discovery of Kate's body leads to Jim's suicide. The final scene flashes forward to a year after Kate's murder. Amy finds what she thinks is a third body in the same hotel room, but this time it is a living breathing man called Charlie who invites her out on a date. It is hinted, however, that the next corpse to be discovered will be Amy's own. In addition to the backwards movement of the first part of the play and the flash forwards of the second part, the first and the last scenes begin with identical dialogue so suggesting a circularity to the plot structure. The circularity of *Breathing Corpses* relates to the idea that Amy is in some way the cause of the appearance of these corpses, an 'angel of death' who would be better suited to working at a hotel on Beachy Head.[30] While the order of the scenes in *Breathing Corpses* might not be strictly chronological, when arranged in chronological order the scenes describe a story that moves forward in progressive linear time. The axis of succession remains the major structure on which the play is organised.

---

[30] Laura Wade, *Breathing Corpses* (London: Oberon, 2005), p. 74.

The second temporal axis is the axis of simultaneity. This axis is thought of as the minor axis. Pfister states that on the axis of simultaneity 'a number of different situations, actions or events coincide'.[31] The axis of simultaneity is most frequently invoked in plays, when the characters onstage become aware of actions happening offstage at the same time. The axis of simultaneity's role in the temporal organisation of a play is considered so minor, that most dramatic theorists fail to examine it in any depth. Szondi, for example, excludes it completely from his description of the temporal organisation of drama. He states that 'the temporal structure of the Drama is one of absolute linear sequentiality'. He does, however, recognise that organising the temporal structure of the action of a play purely on the axis of succession restricts what a playwright is capable of representing: 'Dramatists have regularly found themselves faced with material whose temporal dimension made it appear unsuitable for the Drama'. In his discussion of Ibsen, he argues that Ibsen tends to dramatise the final chapter of his protagonist's lives because he reaching for 'the possibility of expressing the essence of time, its duration, its passing and the changes it produces' through the 'simultaneous epic representation of different points in time' By starting towards the end of his protagonists' stories, Ibsen can narrate these other moments of time in his characters' conversations, so that we are presented with both past and present events simultaneously. The problem Szondi notes with this technique is that in these moments the action of the play is 'no longer "dramatic"'.[32] The only way to present two or more events simultaneously onstage, Szondi argues, is to employ a narrative mode of representation.

---

[31] Pfister, p. 276.
[32] Szondi, p. 87.

Playwrights themselves have experimented with ways of invoking the axis of simultaneity more predominantly in the organisation of their plays. J.B Priestley attempts to order the plot of his play *Time and the Conways* in a way that invokes the axis of simultaneity, and so suggest that time is simultaneous rather than successive in its nature. In his 1927 book *An Experiment with Time*, J.W. Dunne argues that all moments past, present and future actually co-exist and that it is only the human mind that organises time into a successive linear form. Thus actual time in Dunne's view is not successive but simultaneous: 'The present moment of this absolute Time must contain all the moments, "past," "present," and "future," of all the subordinate dimensions of Time'.[33] Priestley attempts to express this notion of simultaneous time in *Time and the Conways*. The play traces the downfall of the wealthy Conway family. In Acts One and Three, the family is shown at the height of their prosperity in 1919. In Act two, set in 1937, Priestley shows how the family have fallen into poverty and misery, despite all their hopes and ambitions. Though the play might appear to simply be a play with a flash forward, it is not. Instead the character of Kay is suddenly able to experience time as simultaneous rather than linear and so gains access to a moment in time in 1937, alongside the moment of time in 1919 that she is most conscious of existing in. Priestley clearly indicates that both those moments in time co-exist simultaneously:

> KAY: But the happy young Conways, who used to play charades here, they've gone, and gone forever.
> ALAN: No, they're real and existing, just as we two, here now, are real and existing. We're seeing another bit of the view – a bad bit, if you like – but the whole landscape's still there.[34]

---

[33] J. W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (London: A & C Black, 1927), p. 151.
[34] J. B. Priestley, *An Inspector Calls and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 60.

While such suggestions of simultaneous time may exist within the world of drama, this conception of simultaneous time is largely dismissed in contemporary philosophy and science. Dunne's experiments with time are based a rather unscientific investigation of his dreams. Modern physicists would dismiss Dunne's ideas, arguing instead that actual time can only move forwards in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics.

Heart's Desire

Caryl Churchill presents a failure of the temporal axis of succession in *Heart's Desire* (Out of Joint/Royal Court, 1997) and through this opens up the idea that it might be possible in practice to order dramatic time more predominantly on the axis of simultaneity. *Heart's Desire* is about a family awaiting the imminent return of their daughter, Susy, from Australia and consists of one single scene, which repeatedly fails to complete itself. The scene initially proceeds as if it was the first scene of a normal play. The audience are presented with Susy's mother Alice, her father Brian and her aunt Maisie, who are all in the kitchen awaiting her arrival. The action of the scene, however, soon comes to a grinding halt, stops, is rewound and then starts again. This happens twenty-six times. Each scene initially repeats the action of the previous version of the scene, before offering what is hopefully a more successful variation on the previous version of the scene. If the variation is successful, it is added to the existing text of the scene and repeated the next time the scene is rewound. If the variation of the action is unsuccessful, it is discarded and replaced with yet another variation. Once an addition to the scene has been repeated it is permanently incorporated into the cumulative action of the scene.

The first version of the scene opens with Alice laying the table for lunch, while her sister-in-law Maisie fidgets. Alice's husband Brian enters in a red sweater. The scene stops and resets to the beginning. It starts again with Alice laying the table, while Maisie fidgets. This is now a permanent part of the action. Brian re-enters in a tweed jacket. The action stops and resets to the beginning. Alice lays the table, Maisie fidgets and then Brian enters in an old cardigan and the dialogue commences with:

> BRIAN   She's taking her time.
>
> ALICE   Not really.
>
> BRIAN   We should have met the plane.
>
> ALICE   We should not.[35]

Then Maisie interjects with a long digression about Australian animals. This takes the action of the scene into a cul-de-sac. Eventually Maisie peters out and the action resets to the top of the scene. Brian's entrance in the old cardigan and the first four lines of the dialogue are repeated. These are now a permanent part of the scene. Maisie's digression about Australian animals is not repeated. It is rejected. Instead Brian and Alice continue their conversion about whether they should have gone to the airport to meet Susy. This conversation develops into an argument, that results in the complete breakdown of Alice and Brian's relationship. The scene has reached another dead end. It resets again and repeats. Seven lines of dialogue are now added to the repeated material from the previous version. The scenes continue to repeat in this pattern. Altogether we see twenty-six different versions of the scene before Susy

---

[35] Caryl Churchill, *Plays: Four* (London: Nick Hern, 2008), p. 65.

arrives and Brian successfully delivers the last line 'You are my heart's desire'[36] The final version of the scene is gradually built up in front of the audience's eyes by the addition of extra material from each previous version to the finished scene.

The scene doesn't always reset to the beginning, after it comes to a halt. The distance that the scene is rewound varies depending upon how far the unsuccessful elements added to the scene take the characters away from their goal of getting to the scene's end. If the disruption is small then the scene resets back a short distance. For example, when Alice garbles her words, we are only taken as far back as her cue line.

ALICE	Are you pleased she's coming back?
BRIAN	What's the matter with you now?
ALICE	You don't sleem peased – you pleem seased –

Reset to after 'coming back'.

BRIAN	What's the matter with you now?
ALICE	You don't seem pleased, you seem cross.[37]

When the disruption is large, the scene resets right back to the beginning; for example when gunmen appear and shoot the family or when Susy's drunken brother Lewis succeeds in making himself the focus of action.

On one level, this structure suggests the process of theatre making itself. Each scene represents an attempt to construct the scene. The successful elements from each attempt are retained, while the less successful elements are discarded. The repetition is reminiscent of the rehearsal process; the actors, stopping when a mistake

---

[36] Churchill, p. 92.
[37] Churchill, p. 74.

is made and finding a point further back in the scene to restart from. On a temporal level, this structure manages compress twenty-six versions of one single event into one moment of time. The door bell rings not once but seven times. Susy appears at the door three times, but other possible callers include an unknown Australian woman, a ten foot tall bird, and a uniformed officer. Suzy is simultaneously alive and at the door, killed in a tube accident and still in Australia.

In Maisie's digression on Australian animals, Churchill articulates the idea that similar events happen simultaneously all over the world in many different variations. Maisie muses on how the experience of feeding ducks in Australia would differ from feeding the ducks in Britain:

> Imagine going to feed the ducks and there is something that is not a duck and nor is it a waterrat or a mole, it's the paws make me think of a mole, but imagine this furry creature with its ducky face, it makes you think what else could have existed, tigers with trunks, anyway the platypus has always been my favourite animal.

In Britain, the creature that emerges out of the water would be a waterrat or a mole, but in Australia the creature would be neither of those two creatures, but it could be a platypus. Therefore feeding the ducks in Britain and feeding the ducks in Australia are both the same action and different actions. The platypus, an animal that appears to be a random amalgamation of the features of several different animals becomes symbolic of this idea of variation. Maisie muses on the thought that the existence of the platypus suggests that events of evolution are random. Had evolution taken a different but equally likely path, then the creatures that exist in the world would exist in significantly different forms from the forms they exist in now: 'tigers with trunks'.[38] In this sense, Maisie is reflecting the structure of the repeating scene,

---

[38] Churchill, p. 65.

which offers us a picture of what else could have happened, if the scene had played out differently from the way it finally does.

The discarded fragments of action, though rejected, inform our understanding of the final version of the scene, particularly in terms of the way in which they enlarge our understanding of the characters and their relationships. Through Maisie's digressions, we learn not only of her fascination with Australian animals, but also of her fear of death, her expertise on the Hay diet and her physical fragility. The discarded fragments indicate that Maisie has some skeletons in her closet. Lewis hints that she may have a drinking problem. We learn that she not only knows about her brother's affair but has kept his secret for fifteen years. Her fear of being arrested in one version of the scene suggests that she may have committed some terrible crime in the past. Another version of the scene introduces the idea that the whole family have colluded in covering up a murder.

The character of Lewis appears as yet another skeleton in the closet. He is Brian and Alice's son, but he exists only within the discarded fragments of the scene. He is completely excluded from the final version. The discarded sections in which he appears, however, tell his story clearly. The first time he appears, he is presented as having a drinking problem. The second time, his drinking is linked to his father's rejection of him: 'Lewis, I wish you'd died at birth. If I'd known what you'd grow up like I'd have killed either you or myself the day you were born'.[39] The third time, Lewis expresses a desire to get all the family issues out on the table and resolve them once and for all. He is again rejected by the family and goes off to his own oblivion

---

[39] Churchill, p. 75.

with the words: 'No more. No more. No more'.[40] Through these three simultaneous but different versions of the scene, Lewis is given a narrative trajectory. The first scene outlines his problem, the second presents its cause, and the third offers the possibility of a resolution. Thus the simultaneous scenes both build to tell stories about the characters that exist beyond the main action of the scene.

Finally Susy arrives and the characters successfully reach the last line of the scene. The scene is then played through from beginning to end to cement it. When Brian reaches the final word of the scene, however, he finds he cannot say it and the whole scene resets to the beginning again. The action remains uncompleted. The play cannot move forward in time to the next scene and therefore the next event. In *Heart's Desire*, Churchill presents us with a play that fails to progress along the temporal axis of succession. By limiting this movement, Churchill opens up the possibility of writing a play, which presents us, not with a chain of progressive events, but instead with a number of simultaneous possible events. Our attention is moved away from the axis of succession towards the temporal axis of simultaneity.

Gertrude Stein and spatial organisation

Gertrude Stein argues that the structure of a play could be predominantly organised on the axis of simultaneity by ordering its elements through a system of spatial as opposed to temporal relationships. Stein's thinking about dramatic structure originates in a realisation that the tempo of a play and the tempo of an audience's emotional response to it are out of sync. The audience's emotion is always either 'behind or ahead of the play'.

---

[40] Churchill, p. 84.

> The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.[41]

The answer to this problem, Stein felt, was to organise the structure of a play on a spatial rather than a temporal model: 'if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead'.[42] Stein suggests that by halting the forwards temporal drive of the action, the element of suspense is removed and the audience are able to bring their emotional response to it back into sync with the play. As Jane Palatini Bowers explains: 'Because the text does not impel us forward in time, we can suspend our normal anticipatory response to theater and engage the event in a meditative way, suspended in the experience of the thing in and of itself'.[43] Stein puts forward the idea that when time is halted, our awareness expands out into space. This space or landscape, as Stein terms it, is a static one: 'nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there'. The magpies she sees in skies over the landscape in Ain are frozen in space: 'they hold themselves up and down and look flat against the sky … exactly like the birds in the Annunciation pictures'[44] The play is frozen in time and expands into space, allowing the audience to survey the elements of the play as if they are looking at a landscape, a portrait or a photograph in which those elements are positioned in a spatial relationship to each other, as opposed to the temporal organisation of Aristotelian-derived dramatic structure. As the elements are frozen in space the audience can consider them in any order they wish to, they can return their

---

[41] Gertrude Stein, p. 58.

[42] Gertrude Stein, p. 75.

[43] Jane Palatini Bowers, 'The Composition That All the World Can See: Gertrude Stein's Theater Landscapes', in *Land/Scape/Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. pp.121-144 (p. 140).

[44] Gertrude Stein, p. 80.

attention to one element many times or they can consider the relationship between any element and any other elements as they choose: 'any detail to any other detail'.[45] This produces an audience who are free to critically re-read the events of the play.

Stein's theory of landscape is most commonly thought of in terms that seem more at home in visual as opposed to textual dramaturgy. Stein's landscapes 'frame and freeze visual moments',[46] but as Carlson points out Stein's landscape is actually a 'lang-scape'.[47] He recognises, as is evident from an examination of Stein's plays themselves, that Stein's are '[l]andscapes that exist only in the language and the audience's imagination'. These landscapes are not visually represented in front of the audience, rather they are conjured up in the audience's mind through the use of words. As Carlson defines them: 'spatial configurations of language itself that, like landscapes, frame and freeze visual moments and alter perception'.[48] At times in Stein's plays and operas, such as *Four Saints in Three Acts*, these landscapes are created literally through the description of a visual image: 'Saint Therese very nearly half inside and half outside outside the house and not surrounded'.[49] At other times these landscapes do not clearly describe recognisable visual images but suggest a more conceptual landscape built purely upon language. For example, here Stein repeats the same five words positioned in different relationships to each other as she is trying to map the entire constellation of ways in which these words could be related to each other: 'With wed led said with led dead said with dead led said with

---

[45] Gertrude Stein, p. 77.

[46] Marvin Carlson, 'After Stein: Traveling the American Theatrical "Lang-scape"', in *Land/Scape/Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 145-158 (p. 147).

[47] Carlson, pp. 145-158 (p. 149).

[48] Carlson, pp. 145-158 (p. 147).

[49] Gerturde Stein, *Last Operas and Plays* (New York: Rinehart & Co, 1949), p. 446.

said dead led wed said wed dead led dead led said wed'.[50]

In her plays, Stein reaches for a way of spatially ordering a narrative so as to define, not the passage of time, but rather several simultaneous possible moments in time. Stein's play *Four Saints* is inspired by sets of photographs of the same person, that she saw in a photographer's shop window on the Boulevard Raspail in Paris. These sets of photographs show their subjects moving through the different stages of their lives (a girl slowly transformed into a nun) or performing different actions (a soldier giving alms or taking off his armour). Stein felt that these photographs described characters in terms of space as opposed to story: 'All these things might have been a story but as a landscape they were just there and a play is just there'.[51] The text of *Four Saints* includes descriptions of such sets of photographs:

> Saint Ignatius and more.
> Saint Ignatius well bound.
> Saint Ignatius might be very well adapted to plans and a distance.
> Barcelona in the distance. Was Saint Ignatius able to tell the difference between palms and Eucalyptus trees.
> Saint Ignatius finally.
> Saint Ignatius well bound.
> Saint Ignatius with it just.
> Saint Ignatius might be read.
> Saint Ignatius with it Tuesday.
> Saint Therese has very well added it.[52]

Each statement presents the audience with a lang-scape. As the statements succeed upon each other elements of the lang-scape are altered or re-organised. Stein guides the audience's imagination around a series of continually altering images. First we see Saint Ignatius 'and more', then the image alters to present him 'well bound' and so on, finally Saint Ignatius is transformed into Saint Therese. Stein can leads the

---

[50] Gerturde Stein, p. 476.
[51] Gertrude Stein, p. 81.
[52] Gerturde Stein, p. 455.

audience's eyes and ears from state to state in any order without regard for chronology. She can return us to a particular state through repetition and encourage us to re-read it. For example, we visit the image of Saint Ignatius 'well bound' twice. By organising a text in space as opposed to time, Stein is able to describe a set of simultaneous possible states and suggest non-chronological relationships between them. This opens up the possibly of finding a coherent system for ordering a dramatic narrative predominantly in terms of spatial as opposed to temporal structures.

The dramaturgy of space

Plays in performance exist in space. As Elam argues 'the theatrical text is defined and perceived above all in spatial terms'.[53] The spatial structures that inform playwriting, however, are under theorised and it is difficult to conceive how they could provide the predominant organisational structure through which a dramatic narrative is told, as Stein envisions. There are four ways thinking about the spatial orders or codes that exist within performance, and to varying degrees within the text of the play itself. I will define these as architectural, interpersonal, scenic and virtual. The architectural and the interpersonal codes are predominantly, though not exclusively, related to the text in performance. The scenic and virtual codes play a stronger role in the structure of the play itself.

The first spatial code, the architectural code, is related to the physical organization of the playhouse itself: its dimensions, the stage-audience distance, the structure of the auditorium (and thus the spectator's own position in relation to her

---

[53] Elam, p. 56.

fellows and to the performers) and the size and form of the stage. Some elements of this space are set in 'fixed-feature' spatial relations, such as the structural fabric of the building itself. Other elements will be 'semi-fixed-features' in that the spatial relationship between them can be changed, such as the stage, auditorium and lighting arrangements.[54] The architecture code of a performance space may be reflected in the spatial structure of a play, if the play is written for that particular space. For instance, Simon Stephens's play *Wastwater* (Royal Court, 2011) consists of three scenes which play out at exactly the same moment of time. The scenes were originally designed to play simultaneously in three different spaces in the Royal Court Theatre: the Theatre Upstairs which is located right at the top of the building; the Theatre Downstairs in which the stage is approximately at ground level; and in the Royal Court Bar in the basement. It could be argued that the spatial characteristics of the three scenes reveal a relationship with the spaces that they might have been originally written for. The hotel scene is set in a room on an upper floor. The garden scene is set at ground level. The scene in the car park occurs in an underground space. If a play is created for a particular architectural space, then it is likely that space within the play will be a negotiation of that particular space, both in terms of the features of the physical space and in terms of the relationship that that space creates between the stage and the audience.

The second spatial code is the interpersonal code. Elam considers two major aspects of interpersonal codes, or as he terms them '*informal*' codes: the distance between the characters' and 'the position of the characters within the stage space.[55]

---

[54] Elam, p. 62.
[55] Elam, p. 56.

Following Edward T. Hall's work on *proxemics*,[56] Elam defines four categories of distance between people, which characterise the relationship that they are enacting: intimate (physical contact and near touching positions), personal (1.5-4 feet), social (4-12 feet), and public (12-25 feet).[57] These distances on stage are read as defining the social relationships between the characters. A dissonance between the character's spoken definition of their relationship to another character and the actual distances that are enacted between the characters create subtext. The stage itself is divided up into zones, for example upstage centre or downstage right. He recognises that these zones are encoded with significance and this may vary depending on the architectural coding of the space. For example, he defines a figure occupying a downstage position on a proscenium arch stage as appearing more dominant than a character occupying an upstage position and a raised figure as more dominant than figures on lower levels.[58] Interpersonal spatial relationships may be indicated in the text of a play, but are more frequently decided upon during the rehearsal and production process.

The third spatial code, the scenic code refers to the presentation of the space of the scene onstage, in terms of the set and props. The scenic code is thought of primarily of as defining, in concrete spatial terms, the particular locale in which the action of the scene is happening: 'part of the specific inventory of a dramatic text that enables the author to achieve a convincing three-dimensional quality'.[59] The elements that produce the scenic code are classed by Elam as predominantly semi-fixed-features in that they are 'movable but non-dynamic' features such as furniture,

---

[56] Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
[57] Elam, p. 65.
[58] Elam, p. 59.
[59] Pfister, p. 271.

flats, props etc.[60] The scenic code physically defines the space that the characters of the performance inhabit for the audience. In combination with references to different spaces in the dialogue, which Pfister aptly terms 'word-scenery', the scenic code helps to locate the audience in a specific space at a specific time in a specific world.[61] This is the spatial code most frequently invoked in playwriting manuals in terms of the setting or the location of the action. Scenic location is positioned as important because it has a shaping effect on the behaviour of the characters. As Noel Greig states, grounding his argument firmly in verisimilitude, '[l]ocation and setting spell out certain 'rules', or conventions of behaviour, that will operate on the characters, just as they do in life'.[62] The scenic code however, can also be used symbolically to reflect the state of an individual or of society as a whole. The spatial positioning of scenic elements can be used to communicate elements of character and narrative. The apparently naturalistic setting of *Hedda Gabler* provides the audience with symbolic representation of her character. The French windows express her desire for freedom, the picture of her father symbolises the influence he has over her life and the stove is a physical representation of her fiery passion. The spatial relationship between these objects and the character of Hedda indicates her inner emotional state. For example, when her husband Tesman mentions that her former admirer Loveborg has returned to town, Ibsen indicates that Hedda '[s]*its in the armchair by the stove*' so suggesting her passionate feeling towards him.[63] The relationship between the character and the scenic code can also define the character's

---

[60] Elam, p. 63.
[61] Pfister, p. 269.
[62] Noel Greig, p. 121.
[63] Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*, trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 2002), p. 30.

relationship to the world that they inhabit. A harmony between the visual appearance of the character and the scenic code suggests a character who is well integrated into their world. In contrast a visual dissonance between the visual appearance of a character and the scenic code suggests a character who is at odds with their world. In these ways, the scenic code can be used, not only to describe a character's environment, but also to suggest the ways in which character is conditioned by the environment, which they inhabit. This is particularly true of realist drama, as Pfister notes, with its focus on the way in which 'the figures are conditioned by external circumstances'.[64] In this case, as Noel Greig observes, the scenic code becomes 'an active driving force, just not a background'.[65]

The final spatial code that Elam explores is the idea of a virtual code. Virtual spatial relations involve the depiction of 'a domain which does not coincide with its actual physical limits, a mental construct on the part of the spectator from the visual clues that he receives'.[66] This might range from the pictorial representation of a space larger than the stage on a backdrop. I would argue that Elam's definition of virtual space applies to Pfister's 'word-scenery' or what Marvin Carlson's 'lang-scapes'. Here space is described in words, producing an image of space in the mind of the spectator, rather than a concrete scenic representation of it.

The spatio-temporal aspects of a play are highly structured. Dramatic time is though of as present tense, abbreviated, subjective and predominantly ordered on a temporal axis of succession, which is seen as the principle organisational component of dramatic structure. Dramatic space is imagined in terms of the nature of the

---

[64] Pfister, p. 265.
[65] Noel Greig, p. 125.
[66] Elam, p. 67.

performance space, the positioning of the actors' bodies within that space, the location of the scenes and the relationships that these locations create with the dramatic narrative and its characters and finally in terms of the virtual spaces that are invoked in the dialogue. Stein envisages a kind of play in which the temporal axis of succession would no longer form the basis of its dramatic structure. Instead she is searching for a way of ordering a dramatic narrative predominantly through space as opposed to time. The mechanics of such spatial organisation are hard to envisage, within the context of the spatial dramaturgy of a play, as articulated in contemporary playwriting manuals or even in dramatic theory. While the text of a play is imagined to provide a framework for the spatial aspects of its performance, it will frequently leaves many of these details open. Elam's spatial codes seem inadequate for Stein's project and Stein's own work as a playwright falls short of a fully embodied realisation of her theories. Her plays offer the spectator landscapes that are confined to the virtual code.

Maisie, in Churchill's *Heart's Desire*, offers a more concrete way of thinking of about the organisation of play on the axis of simultaneity. Maisie recognises in her digression about Australian animals that in any one moment of time, many events are happening in many different spaces at once. This more concrete notion of the temporal axis of simultaneity demands an expression in spatial terms, as it suggests the need to represent events occurring in many different spaces at exactly the same moment in time. This way of thinking about the axis of simultaneity and spatial organisation negotiates a similar spatio-temporal dramaturgy present in social life under post-Fordism. As Roland Robertson notes, the forces of globalisation an have produced in the social subject an 'intensification of consciousness of the world as a

whole'.[67] The contemporary individual has wider awareness of events occurring in distant locations around the globe, than they would have had a hundred years ago. As Foucault argues we have moved from a nineteenth century conception of time as 'history' into an 'epoch of simultaneity'.[68] Serious drama orders its structures along the axis of temporal succession, so continuing to maintain that 'the rhythm of lived experience' is reflected realistically in drama through 'a sequence of time-limited, place-specific, purposeful scenes'.[69] It fails to acknowledge or negotiate an ever-widening gap between its representation of the lived experience of time and space and the social subject's actual lived experience of time and space under post-Fordism beyond the theatre doors.

Physical unity

A brief survey of the spatio-temporal aspects of dramatic structure, demonstrates that dramatic time and space have a particular dramaturgy, which is thought to be realistic but arguably may not reflect our contemporary experience of lived time and space under post-Fordism. This section of the chapter will leave this argument behind for a moment, while it considers the main ways in which the spatio-temporal structures of drama are imagined to correspond to the spatio-temporal structures of lived experience. This will reveal how the spatio-temporal drama structures reproduce or produce spatio-temporal dramaturgies of social life, hence allowing us to re-imagine the political agency on structural terms.

---

[67] Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 8.

[68] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Www.foucault.info*, 2011 <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> [accessed 23 May 2011].

[69] Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays*, p. 13.

Historically two main spatio-temporal structures are involved in disputes over verisimilitude. In the first structure, dramatic time and space are seen as identical to lived time and space because the spatio-temporal structures of the play mirror the audience's actual experience of time and space whilst watching the performance. The eighteenth century German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing refers to this as 'physical unity'. In the second structure, dramatic time and space are argued to mirror lived time and space because the spatio-temporal rhythms of the play reflect the spatio-temporal rhythms of normal behaviour in the society for which the play is written. Lessing refers to this as 'moral unity'.[70] Physical unity is created through the use of the unities of time and place. Although the unities are rarely referred to directly in contemporary playwriting manuals, the notion of physical unity lives on in the concept of closed time and space. Manfred Pfister defines closed time as 'the exclusion of all chronological discontinuity' and closed space as 'the omission of all changes of locale'.[71] Moral unity, on the other hand, is historically associated with the arguments of those who opposed any strict adherence to the unities of time and place, and instead argued for what is now termed open time and space, which allows the action of a play 'jump in time' or 'shift in locale'.[72] This section of the chapter will explore the politics of the claims of each to verisimilitude, beginning with physical unity.

Physical unity is achieved through a strict adherence to the unities of time and place. These unities are born out of the assumption that dramatic time and space needs to physically correspond to the audience's experience of time and space during

---

[70] G. E. Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1962), p. 138.
[71] Pfister, p. 249.
[72] Pfister, p. 253.

a performance, in order for the audience to believe what they are seeing. This assumption in turn is rooted in the assumption that theatre audiences consist of a vulgar class of people, who possess a limited imaginative capability. The origins of the unities of time and place lie in Renaissance translations and commentaries on the *Poetics*, rather than in the *Poetics* itself. Aristotle does not explicitly refer to unities of time and place in the *Poetics* and so the idea of 'Aristotle's toolkit of the unities – of place, of time, of action' is a fallacy.[73] The only unity Aristotle is concerned with is the unity of action. He makes no mention of the significance of place, and as to time, he merely observes the tendency of the tragedies of his time, such as *Oedipus Rex*, to represent the chronological events of one day: 'tragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a single day'[74]

Lodovico Castelvetro rereads Aristotle in a way that assumes the need for a physical correspondence between dramatic time and space and actual time and space as experienced by the audience during the performance. As Weinberg states, Castelvetro's reading of the *Poetics* shifts its focus from the structure of tragedy to the nature of tragedy's audience and its needs: 'all aspects of poetry are considered not in terms of the artistic exigencies of the poem itself but in terms of the needs or demands of a specifically characterised audience'.[75] Castelvetro conceives of the Greek audience as being made up of the general uneducated masses. Castelvetro states that poetry is designed to 'provide pleasure and recreation to the souls of the

---

[73] Steve Waters, 'Aristotle Didn't Know Anything About Theatre', *Guardian.co.uk*, 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2010/oct/04/aristotle-poetics-theatre-sophocles-euripides?INTCMP=SRCH> [accessed 26 April 2011].

[74] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 9.

[75] Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I, p. 504.

common people and the rude multitude'.[76] He bases this assumption on Aristotle's

observation that epic poetry can be considered superior to tragedy because it requires

a more cultivated audience: 'If the less vulgar art is superior, and in all cases what is

addressed to a superior audience is less vulgar … it is argued that epic is addressed to

decent audiences who do not need gestures, while tragedy is addressed to second-rate

audiences; if, then, tragedy is vulgar, clearly it must be inferior'.[77] Whereas Aristotle

frames this observation as an argument that can be made, Castelvetro reads it as a

statement of fact. Therefore he assumes that the audience are very literal minded and

lacking in imagination and concludes that the representation onstage must be as close

to reality as possible in order for the limited imaginations of the audience to be able

to engage with it:

> the audience will derive pleasure only if it identifies itself with the
> characters and the events; this identification is possible only if the
> audience believes in their reality; its belief in their reality will depend
> upon the credibility – the verisimilitude – of the presentation. It is here
> that imagination enters. If the audience were endowed with great
> capacities of imagination, it would 'believe' things far removed from the
> conditions of 'real life'; since it is not, it will 'believe' only what seems
> to it to be in the realm of its own experience, to be 'true'.[78]

This assumption shapes Castelvetro's reading of Aristotle's concerns about time and

space, consequently he concludes that his audience will need plays in which dramatic

time and space resemble their experience of actual time and space during the

performance as closely as possible.

Castelvetro's unities of time and place prescribe that a play should be set 'in a

small area of place and in a small space of time, that is, in that place and in that time

---

[76] Ludovico Castelvetro, *Castelvetro on the Art of Poetry*, trans. by Andrew
Bongiorno (Binghampton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies,
1984), p. 19.
[77] Castelvetro, pp. 309–310.
[78] Quoted in Weinberg, I, pp. 506–507.

where and when the actors remain engaged in acting, and not in any other place or in any other time'.[79] The unity of place is defined as a single location: 'that vista alone which would appear to the eye of a single person'.[80] His version of the unity of time, not only insists that dramatic actions must happen in one temporal setting over a small space of time, but clearly implies that dramatic time is both continuous and passes at the same rate as actual time. This can been seen in his reading of Aristotle's statement that 'tragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a single day'[81] as a rule about the maximum period of time that an audience could physically endure to watch a performance:

> … the restricted time is that during which the spectators can comfortably remain seated in the theatre, which, as far as I can see, cannot exceed the revolution of the sun, as Aristotle says, that is twelve hours; for because of the necessities of the body, such as eating, drinking, excreting the superfluous burdens of the belly and bladder, sleeping, and because of other necessities, the people cannot continue its stay in the theatre beyond the aforementioned time.[82]

Castelvetro assumes that if the span of time represented onstage is twelve hours, then the performance time must also be twelve hours. The audience will not have the stamina to watch a play for longer than twelve hours, therefore the maximum span of time that can be represented onstage is twelve hours. This conflation reveals that Castelvetro imagines dramatic time as continuous and as passing at the same rate as actual time and he states this clearly earlier in the same passage: 'the time required for the performance of a tragedy equals that which would be required if the tragic

---

[79] Quoted in Weinberg, I, p. 509.
[80] Quoted in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre : a Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 49.
[81] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 9.
[82] Quoted in Weinberg, I, p. 505.

action actually occurred in the world'.[83] Taken in their most literal sense, the unities of time and place imagine an absolute physical correspondence between dramatic time and space and actual time and space as experienced by the audience while watching the performance.

Peter Szondi argues that physical unity is the foundation of what he terms absolute form. Absolute form describes drama's attempt to position itself as a presentational rather than representational; 'not a (secondary) representation of something else (primary); it presents itself, is itself'. The actor is positioned as the character; the 'actor-role relationship should not be visible'.[84] The presence of both the author and the spectator is denied. The dialogue is not written, nor is it addressed to any listeners beyond the dramatic world of the play. The drama is 'conscious of nothing outside itself'. The spectator is encouraged towards a position of 'complete identity' with the dramatic action and is drawn into the world of the play as if nothing else existed outside of it: 'the spectator is pulled into the dramatic event'.[85] Absolute form requires an absolute correspondence between the structures of dramatic time and space and lived time and space, in order to position the dramatic event as presentational rather than representational. Dramatic time and space are 'naturalised' through this correspondence. They become 'invisible' and the audience are discouraged from any productive reflection on the relation of the spatio-temporal structures in drama to the spatio-temporal structures of social life.

---

[83] Castelvetro, p. 87.
[84] Szondi, p. 9.
[85] Szondi, p. 8.

The Author

Recently, the most successful attempts to produce a physical unity between dramatic time and space and actual time and space as experienced by the audience while watching a play, have relied not on producing a complete identification with a dramatic world in the spectator, as in Szondi's absolute form, but rather they have situated the performance in the world of the spectator. The performers ostensibly play themselves, acknowledge the presence of the audience and share the same space and the same time frame as them. If the performance space is a theatre, then the performance is set in a theatre. If the performance starts at 7.45pm, then the time is 7.45pm. If the performance has a performance time of 75 minutes then the time period represented in the performance is also 75 minutes. As the performers in Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* inform the spectators:

> You don't see a room that pretends to be another room. Here you are not experiencing a time that pretends to be another time. The time on stage is no different from the time off stage. We have the same local time. We are in the same location.[86]

They link this kind of performance directly to the use of the unities: 'All three cited circumstances, taken together, signify the unity of time, place and action. Therefore this piece is classical'.[87]

Tim Crouch's *The Author* (Royal Court, 2009) also employs this technique. Crouch states that in this way all of his plays 'subscribe to the Aristotelian unities, in terms of the nature and structure of the narrative'.[88] His application of the unities of time and space in *The Author*, however, ultimately emphasises rather than erases the

---

[86] Peter Handke, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 9.
[87] Handke, p. 19.
[88] Stephen Bottoms, 'Authorizing the Audience', *Performance Research*, 14 (2009), 65-76 (p. 67).

differences between dramatic time and space and actual time and space as experienced by the audience during the performance. *The Author* tells the story of the production of a shocking play, through the eyes of the writer who writes it, the actor and the actress who are in it and an audience member who watches it. The sexual abuse and violence represented in the play seeps into the lives of its makers. The actor violently attacks the audience member. The author is accused of abusing the actress's baby and commits suicide in a floatation tank.

This is a play that is performed 'within the heart of the audience'.[89] Dramatic space and time appears to be commensurate with the audience's lived experience of space and time during the performance. The text of the play specifies that the performance 'is set in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court Theatre'. There is 'no "stage"' defined in the theatre, instead two seating banks are positioned opposite each other with no performance space in between.[90] The audience sit looking directly at each other and the actors sit in amongst the audience as part of them. The presentational as opposed to representational nature of the performance is indicated by the blending of actor and character into a single personage. The actors share the same names as their characters. Tim Crouch is Tim, Vic Llewellyn is Vic and Esther Smith is Esther. During the performance, time appears to pass at the same rate as clock time. Adrian refers to the flashing lights fifteen minutes before the end of the performance and fifteen minutes before the actual end of the show the audience of *The Author* are treated to a '*brilliant light show*'.[91] The actors tell us a

---

[89] Lyn Gardner, 'The Author', *Guardian.co.uk*, 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/sep/30/the-author-review> [accessed 14 September 2011].
[90] Tim Crouch, *The Author* (London: Oberon, 2009), p. 16.
[91] Crouch, p. 46.

story about past events, but in the telling of it they appear to share the same present moment as us. They are not asking us to imagine a second fictional present moment with a different time frame as would be created by the action of a fictional dramatic world represented before us on a stage.

In actuality, *The Author* heightens the tension between the dramatic and the lived, the representational and the real, rather than decreasing it. It actively works to expose and aggravate these tensions. The line between dramatic time and space and actual time and space may be drawn in a different place from where it is usually drawn, but it is still very present in performance. I saw the play at both the Royal Court and at the Northwall Arts Centre in Oxford. In Oxford, the fictional nature of the space of the play is obvious. Crouch states that: '*The Author* is always set in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court Theatre – even when it's performed elsewhere'.[92] In Oxford, the audience are ostensibly in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court, but they are actually in the North Wall Theatre in Oxford. There is a dual awareness of space; of the dramatic space and the actual space. Even when the play is performed at the Royal Court, however, a tension between dramatic space and actual space is present. The Royal Court in Crouch's play is not actually the real Royal Court. It's a fictionalised version of the Royal Court that draws heavily on the actual Royal Court in its construction. Most of what we are told about the Royal Court in the play is true. The rehearsal room is 'Just to the side of this building. Just past stage door',[93] friends do get 'five pound off the top ticket prices'[94] and there is a

---

[92] Crouch, p. 16.
[93] Crouch, p. 51.
[94] Crouch, p. 32.

Japanese restaurant on the King's Road 'where they come and cook at your table'.[95] One very important fact, however, is not true. The play that Tim describes having written for the Royal Court in *The Author* was never performed there. The play has echoes of plays that have been staged there. The audience are told, for example, that the stage crew find it difficult to clear up all the blood after the show. This fact echoes the difficulties that Aleks Sierz states the crew had clearing up the blood after performances of Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (Royal Court 2006). Esther tells us that during the run of Tim's play: 'The stage was a mess at the end of the show. Poor old stage management spent hours clearing it up at the end'.[96] This bears a striking resemblance to the crew notes for *Motortown*: 'There was too much blood tonight so we had trouble cleaning the blood'.[97] During a performance of *The Author* at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, the audience are in two spaces at once – the fictional Royal Court and the actual Royal Court. The tension between the dramatic space and the actual space persists.

A similarly dual relationship exists between the actual time and the dramatic time frames of the play. Though the play appears to run in one continuous time frame, it does not. The action is broken up into scenes between which there are interludes of music and silent darkness. Time is split into distinct sections. Crouch identifies the moments of music as allowing the audience some relief from the pressure of the performance: 'Music is present in the play as a release valve. It brings us into the here and now and helps the audience to feel good about being together. It

---

[95] Crouch, p. 50.
[96] Crouch, p. 45.
[97] Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 131.

is a treat!'[98] This note highlights the fact that the audience are experiencing more than one time frame whilst watching the play and part of the function of the interludes is to bring them back into the present. The audience experience three distinct frames of time in this performance and there is nothing unconventional about the time frames that are invoked in terms of dramatic structure. The audience experience a sense of actual time. Alongside this they experience two time frames within the dramatic world of the play. The first is a sense of what is happening in the present moment of the play, as it is defined by its dramatic action. The second is a sense of what has happened in the past as defined by the narrative that the characters narrate to them. What is unusual about *The Author* is the way that these two time frames are balanced in the play. The dramatic action within the present time frame of the play is very minimal. Mostly the actors' actions consist of telling their story to the audience during the scenes and waiting with the audience in the interludes. The action that happened on the stage of the theatre in which the audience is ostensibly sat happened in the past. In the retelling it is played out again but only in the imagination of the audience. The interludes allow the audience a break from the pressure of the action that is created in the internal space of their own imaginations. A moment to return to the present and be together with those around them.

The relief that these moments provide should be a 'treat' but yet these interludes feel uncomfortable.[99] One explanation of this is the uncomfortable associations that are created with music in the play itself. Music is linked to images of violence. Arab music plays in the background of the video Esther sees of an

---

[98] Crouch, p. 16.
[99] Crouch, p. 16.

American hostage being beheaded.[100] Esther sings us a snatch of the song 'We're All in This Together' from *High School Musical* that she sang as marched against the war amongst banners bearing the picture of a dead Iraqi girl killed in the Coalition bombings.[101] A refrain from the same song is repeated directly after the description of Vic's vicious beating of Adrian.[102] In addition to this, I would argue that the audience's discomfort in these interludes is rooted in way that they manipulate the audiences sense of the rate at which time is passing. The duration of the performance appears to match the duration of the present tense dramatic action played out in the play, but the duration of the action feels longer than the time it takes to play. This effect is produced by the long interludes between the scenes, which extend time, so that the time that we are sat in the auditorium feels longer than it actually is. Here the music does provide relief as Crouch suggests, as its rhythm measures out the time that passes for us making its passing feel more comfortable. Something is happening. The pause feels long but not unbearably long. In moments, when we are plunged or faded into silent darkness the pause seems interminable. Here the audience experience time in the theatre from the point of view of the actor. Actors are frequently instructed to hold pauses and silences in the action for longer than feels instinctively natural. From the actor's point of view dramatic time passes more slowly than actual time. When the action freezes on stage for an actor time moves in slow motion. This is particularly true when things go wrong onstage. In the interludes of *The Author*, the audiences experience this slowing and stretching out of time as an actor would. In this way *The Author* is doing something very unusual as

---

[100] Crouch, p. 51.
[101] Crouch, p. 27.
[102] Crouch, p. 54.

the audience experience dramatic time moving at a slower pace, not just than dramatic time's average abbreviated rate, but than actual time.

There is another way in which these interludes manipulate the audience's sense of time. Crouch indicates pauses in the text of *The Author* not with the usual notation of 'beat', 'pause' or 'silence' but rather with the word '*Space*'.[103] He is envisaging these moments not in terms of a duration of time, but rather as a creation of space. In the play's stage directions, there is an echo of Stein's observation that when time is halted it expands into space. Like Stein, Crouch relies on language to create the main elements of his play in *The Author*. In the play's frequent pauses, the audience are given space to review what they have just been told. They are free to survey the landscape that the play builds in their imaginations and to consider the relation of its elements to each other, and even to discuss it with their neighbour. There is space for them to examine any emotional response to the acts of violence and abuse that the play describes. In this sense, dramatic time and actual time cannot be conflated in the play, as dramatic time is repeatedly frozen to allow the audience to re-read the performance, while actual time continues to pass at steady rate.

At first glance, there appears to be a physical unity produced between the representation of dramatic time and space in *The Author* and the audience's experience of lived time and space during the performance. The play appears to be presentational rather than representational. Instead, however, the performance works to highlight the constructed nature of the performance. *The Author* plays with the idea that the performance is happening in actual time and space, and in doing so makes the audience more conscious, rather than less conscious, of tension between

---

[103] Crouch, p. 17.

the representations of time and space conceived within the performance and actual time and space as the audience live it.

Moral unity

Physical unity, as produced by the unities of time and place or, in contemporary terms, closed time and space, is the first way in which dramatic time and space are imagined as being commensurate with lived time and space. The second way that such a correspondence is thought is through the assumption that the spatio-temporal structures of the play need to mirror the spatio-temporal rhythms of normal everyday behaviour in the society for which the play is written. Lessing designates this second form of spatio-temporal verisimilitude 'moral unity'.[104]

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics of the neoclassical unities argue that a strict adherence to them produces a lack of verisimilitude because it condenses the action of a play into an unrealistically short time period and locates some of the action in a space where it could not occur without contravening social conventions. Instead they argue that playwrights should be able to use what contemporary playwriting manuals term open time and space. Open time and space describes every spatio-temporal structure that allows for jumps in time and space. The challengers of the unities find the idea that the events of a lifetime can be compressed into the continuous action of one day as absurd as the defenders of the unities find the idea that the audience will accept the idea that many years have passed between two scenes. Georges Scudery criticises Corneille on these terms:

> in the short time needed to recite 140 lines, the playwright has Rodrigue
> go home, prepare for the duel, go to the appointed place, fight, overcome

---

[104] Lessing, p. 138.

and disarm Dom Sanche, return his sword to him, order him to visit
Chimène – add to this the time needed for Dom Sanche to reach
Chimène's house, and you will see how impossible this is in 140 lines: a
major construction flaw.

The events of the play are compressed into too short a time frame to be believable.

Antoine Houdar de La Motte argues that it is unrealistic for events to be as

concentrated in time as the unity of time demands, as it produces a 'précipitation

d'évenements qui n'a aucun air de vérité'. Instead he asks for the freedom to use 'une

étenduë de tems vraisemblable & proportionnée à la nature des sujets'.[105] At the same

time he notes of the unity of place, that '[i]l n'est pas naturel que toutes les parties

d'une action se passent dans un même apartement ou dans une même place'.[106] La

Motte is searching for a representation of events in accordance with spatio-temporal

rhythms. Lessing considers such moral unity to be more important than physical

unity: 'moral unity must also be considered, whose neglect is felt by every one, while

the neglect of the other, though it generally involves an impossibility, is yet not so

generally offensive'.[107]

Moral unity reflects normative patterns of social behaviour. Bourdieu argues

that our behaviour in everyday life is shaped by spatial-temporal rhythms. These

spatio-temporal rhythms define socially acceptable behaviour through the idea that

certain actions must be performed 'in the proper place at the proper time'.[108]

Conformity to these spatio-temporal rhythms is important because they structure the

lived experience of a particular social group and define that group's conception of

themselves and the world that they inhabit: 'the temporal forms or the spatial

---

[105] Antoine Houdar de la Motte, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1754), IV, p. 40.
[106] la Motte, IV, p. 38.
[107] Lessing, p. 138.
[108] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1977), p. 162.

structures structure not only the group's representation of the world but the group itself, which orders itself in accordance with this representation'.[109] Behaviour that defies these rhythms is seen as deviant:

> Working while others are resting, staying in the house while others are working in the fields, travelling on deserted roads, wandering around the streets of the village while others are asleep or at the market – these are all suspicious forms of behaviour.[110]

This mirrors the arguments for moral unity. Both Bourdieu and the advocates of moral unity stress the importance of time and place in defining the social acceptability of actions. Hence, this form of unity can truly be though of as 'moral' unity, as it argues that the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of a play should mirror the spatio-temporal rhythms that define normal behaviour under the prevailing social order.

Spatio-temporal rhythms are not universal or transhistorical but are specific to a particular society and stand in relation to its economic relations. Karl Marx states that: 'Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself'.[111] Bourdieu investigates the relationship between the temporal structures of a society and its economic relations. He concludes that different temporal structures go hand in hand with different modes of production. Based on his studies of the social life of the Kabyle of Algeria, Bourdieu suggests that temporality in pre-capitalist agro-pastoral societies is ordered in a circular structure of 'eternal recurrence',[112] based on the patterns of the agrarian year, which support the accumulation of symbolic capital in the form of 'a heritage of commitments and debts of honour, a capital of rights and

---

[109] Bourdieu, p. 163.
[110] Bourdieu, p. 161.
[111] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Politcal Economy (Rough Notes)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 173.
[112] Bourdieu, p. 148.

duties' through the reproduction of rituals.[113] The movement of such a society towards a capitalist mode of production is accompanied by a transformation of 'circular time into linear time, simple reproduction into indefinite accumulation'.[114] David Harvey, also sees shifts in a society towards capitalism as going hand in hand with shifts towards a linear, mechanised and objective temporality: '[i]ncreasingly seen as a mechanised division fixed by the swing of the pendulum, time's arrow was conceived to be linear both forwards and backwards'. This shift in the conception of time is important because of 'the significance of such a conception of homogeneous and universal time to conceptions of the rate of profit (return on stock capital over time, said Adam Smith), the rate of interest, the hourly wage, and other magnitudes fundamental to capitalist decision-making'.[115] Gurvitch too links competitive capitalism with the idea 'time in advance of itself', where the temporality is not only linear but dynamic, with the present conceived as rushing headlong towards the future.

Just as certain temporal structures are seen as standing hand in hand with certain economic structures, so certain spatial structures are seen as determining and determined by certain modes of production. Henri Lefebvre states that '*(Social) space is a (social) product'*.[116] Every mode of production produces a particular space and is produced by that space: 'we may be sure that the forces of production (nature; labour and the organization of labour; technology and knowledge) and, naturally, the relations of production play a part – though we have not defined it – in the

---

[113] Bourdieu, p. 178.
[114] Bourdieu, p. 162.
[115] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 252.
[116] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 27.

production of space'.[117] Shifts in modes of production go hand in hand with shifts in spatial structures. The spatial practices of feudal societies are founded on '[m]anors, monasteries, cathedrals – these were the strong points anchoring the network of lanes and main roads to a landscape transformed by peasant communities'. In comparison, the spatial practices of capitalist societies are founded on 'the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices'.[118] The ancient 'absolute space'[119] of pre-capitalist societies, with the sacred place at its centre, has given way over time to the capitalist 'space of accumulation' which has the marketplace at its centre instead.[120]

These cultural theorists articulate highly structured spatio-temporal dramaturgies of social life, which are illuminating when placed in relation to the spatio-temporal structures of drama. Physical unity can be seen as problematic because it does not consciously engage with the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of social life. Instead, it presents dramatic time and space as unstructured and experienced in a way that is identical with lived time and space. It avoids a meaningful interrogation of the structures of either. Moral unity presents a different problem. It argues that the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of drama must resemble the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of social life in order to be realistic. In doing so it reproduces the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of social life through dramatic structure in a way that mediates the spatio-temporal structures of the prevailing hegemony without negotiating them. Serious drama articulates a moral unity through its spatio-temporal structures. While a few serious plays are written in closed time and space, the vast majority are open time and

---

[117] Lefebvre, p. 46.
[118] Lefebvre, p. 53.
[119] Lefebvre, p. 234.
[120] Lefebvre, p. 263.

open space. When this open time and space framework is combined with the premise that these locations shape the characters' behaviour 'just as they do in life' then a moral unity is produced between the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of the play and the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of social life as defined by the prevailing hegemony.[121] In addition to this, the linear structure of the temporal axis of succession, which constitutes the fundamental organisational structure of serious drama, mirrors the linear time structures that are associated with the rise of capitalism. The structural politics of serious dramaturgy are revealed to be conformist as opposed to challenging.

The idea that the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of drama stands in relation to a spatio-temporal dramaturgy of social life in which different spatio-temporal structures go hand in hand with different social and economic structures is illuminating, however, when applied to the experimental dramaturgies employed in David Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* and David Greig's *San Diego*. Both these plays are ordered around spatio-temporal structures that challenge our assumptions about the spatio-temporal structures of drama and our understanding of the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of contemporary social life. These two plays engage with the idea that time and space have become increasingly compressed under post-Fordism. *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* enacts a temporal crisis, while *San Diego* presents us with a spatial one. Their experimental spatio-temporal dramaturgies negotiate the gap between the spatio-temporal structures of serious drama and our lived experience of time and space. In doing so, they articulate a potentially productive structural politics.

---

[121] Noel Greig, p. 121.

Time-space compression

David Harvey argues that in late capitalist society, our experience of both time and space has become increasingly compressed. Consequently the temporal axis of succession, which constitutes the fundamental organising principle of serious drama, no longer reflects our lived experience of time in the world outside the theatre. If, as Harvey argues, 'individual experience always forms the raw material of works of art' then a shift in our experience of time and space should logically result in a shift in our use of spatio-temporal structures in art.[122]

Harvey states that under the forces of capitalism 'time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is'. While the dramatic mode may be thought of as present tense, this is a distinctly different form of perpetual present from the one Harvey is describing. The present tense of drama is, as already noted, in dynamic equilibrium. In this present, there is a net movement forwards into the future, as the future is constantly moving into the present and the present into the past. In Harvey's present, there is no underlying movement between future and the past as 'the present is all there is'.[123] This shrinking of time, Harvey argues, is a direct result of changes in the organisation of time and space in order to facilitate increasingly effective commodity exchange. The foundations of these changes were laid during the Enlightenment with its drive to rationalise time and space. Time, as previously noted, became mechanised with the invention of the chronometer and so subject to objective, universal and precise measurements. Similarly space become finite and knowable. Mathematically accurate maps describe the whole of the globe, and

---

[122] Harvey, pp. 261–262.
[123] Harvey, p. 240.

combine with improvements in navigation, to enable the definition of trade and communication routes. This makes geographical space seem both more connected and more distinct, as it allows for 'strong senses of national, local, and personal identities to be constructed in the midst of geographical differences'.[124] Maps also enable the definition of land as private property; the fragmentation of land into separate parcels and 'the buying and selling of space as a commodity'.[125]

The practical rationalisation of time and space lays the foundations for spatio-temporal compression. It is, however, increasing competition between states and other economic units that sets the forces of spatio-temporal compression into motion. Profit, in simple terms, depends on increasing the flow of capital. Harvey states that as society became more driven by profit, the 'accumulation of wealth, power and capital became linked to personalised knowledge of, and individual command over, space'.[126] The ability to traverse large distances in short times becomes an economic advantage. This involves the collapsing of space and speeding up of time, which can be termed the 'annihilation of space through time'.[127] Improvements in technology enable better transport and communication links, as well as an increased turnover in the actual production of the commodities themselves. The faster distances can be spanned and the faster commodities can be produced the faster the flow of capital. This acceleration has a compressing effect on our experience of time and space 'characterised by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us'.[128]

---

[124] Harvey, p. 250.
[125] Harvey, p. 254.
[126] Harvey, p. 244.
[127] Harvey, p. 258.
[128] Harvey, p. 240.

Since the 1970s, Harvey suggests, this acceleration has increased in intensity, bringing about 'an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life'.[129] This has several causes: an increase in the rate of production facilitated by new organisational structures; improved systems for communication and distribution resulting in a faster circulation of commodities; and a move towards electronic banking which increases the rate at which money flows. The notion of fashion is employed by the producers of mass market goods to increase consumption, so that consumers feel the need to replace perfectly functional goods with more fashionable ones. This is combined with a move from the consumption of material goods to the consumption of services, not just terms of personal and business services but also in the form of entertainment and experiences. This movement from physical to ephemeral goods increases the rate of consumption. The focus shifts onto the production of commodities that are instantaneous and disposable. This produces what Alvin Toffler terms 'the throw-away society',[130] in which a throw-away mentality is not only related to the consumption of commodities, a 'decreased duration in man-thing relationships',[131] but also to the turnover of values that underlie social life itself, '*whatever* the content of values that arise to replace those of the industrial age, they will be shorter-lived, more ephemeral than the values of the past'.[132] In this way the 'accelerative thrust in the larger society crashes up against the ordinary daily experience of the

---

[129] Harvey, p. 284.
[130] Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 47.
[131] Toffler, p. 50.
[132] Toffler, p. 269.

contemporary individual'.[133] In addition to this increasing acceleration, Harvey

argues that, in recent years, there has been a crisis in the representation of economic

value within the capitalist system. Money no longer acts as a secure measure of

value. It has become increasingly dematerialised, in that it no longer has a tangible

link to precious metals and is progressively devalued through inflation. The volatile

fluctuations of the currency market reflect the increasing unreliability of money's

purchasing power.

These factors have led to what Harvey terms a 'crisis of representation in

advanced capitalism' whose nature he sums up in the following terms:

> The central value system, to which capitalism has always appealed to
> validate its actions, is dematerialising and shifting, time horizons are
> collapsing, and it is hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it
> comes to assessing causes and effects, meaning or values.[134]

This crisis which has at its heart a crisis in the representation of time and space is

reflected, Harvey argues, in postmodern works of art: 'If there is a crisis of

representation of space and time, then new ways of thinking and feeling have to be

created'.[135] He explores this purely in relation to cinema, which he argues has the

greatest capacity to deal with the representation of spatio-temporal themes, because

of its serial use of images and ability to cut back and forth across space and time. He

does note however, that its two-dimensional spatial form 'a spectacle projected within

an enclosed space on a depthless screen'[136] is a drawback, as is the role that cinema

plays as 'the supreme maker and manipulator of images for commercial purposes'.[137]

Theatre, I would argue offers a better medium for exploring the expression of the

---

[133] Toffler, pp. 32–33.
[134] Harvey, p. 298.
[135] Harvey, p. 322.
[136] Harvey, p. 308.
[137] Harvey, p. 323.

spatio-temporal concerns of late capitalist society. It combines the mimetic qualities, which Harvey finds so effective in cinema, with a superior ability to portray three-dimensional concrete space. Unlike cinema, it presents its audience with moving, living and breathing figures as opposed to fleeting two-dimensional images. Excepting the megamusicals of the West End, theatre is generally produced for a small specialised local market, as opposed to a global one. A significant proportion of theatre, particularly in Britain, relies on the support of subsidy rather than existing to generate profit. Eldridge's play *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* and Greig's *San Diego* are both plays whose experimental dramaturgies that mediate and negotiate the social subject's changed experience of time and space under spatio-temporal compression.

Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness

Eldridge's play *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* (Royal Court, 2005) articulates a complete breakdown in the temporal axis of succession in its structure and situates its protagonist as suffering from spatio-temporal compression. It tells the story of a banker, Joey, who has to re-evaluate his life when his mother is diagnosed with breast cancer. He takes his girlfriend, Kate, on holiday to the States and asks her to marry him. After his mother's death, he discovers that his father, Ronnie, has started a relationship with her nurse, Maureen. His mother's death and his father's infidelity cause him to have a breakdown. He leaves Kate, moves back in with his father and eventually succeeds in driving Maureen out of his father's house. He decides to volunteer to tutor school children who are having difficulties with reading. He meets a young boy called Trevor and he feels that they have become

friends. When Trevor is murdered, Joey feels that he has failed in his responsibilities towards him. He becomes friends with Joey's mother, Shanika, and starts to recover from his breakdown. He starts to help a new student with his reading. Maureen moves back in with his father and Joey moves out.

Through its spatio-temporal structure, the play articulates Joey's subjective experience of time and space in his moment of crisis. There is a sense of a beginning and an end in the play's first and final moments, but the actual events of the narrative are jumbled together rather than told chronologically, and are mixed up with Joey's memories and dreams. The play starts when Joey moves back in with his father and ends at the point when he finally moves out. It is primarily organised around a set of father/son relationships; Joey's relationship with his father and his relationship with Trevor. The story of Joey's relationship with Trevor forms a spine of actual events around which the other events in the play are plotted. Woven around this, Joey and his father struggle to rebuild their relationship. Joey's relationships with the women in his life, Kate and his mother, are plotted through a jumble of memories. Amongst all this, Joey's imagination is haunted by the ghost of Trevor, who wanders in and out of other moments in time and space.

The action of play reflects Joey's inability to narrativise, that is to shape his experience into a coherent narrative form. Joey is present on stage throughout the performance, so indicating that the audience are viewing the action from his perspective. The play communicates his attempt to put the pieces of his life back together again. Joey cannot organise his experiences in a linear succession of events through time. When Shanika tells Joey about Trevor's murder, Joey tries to communicate his experiences in a stream of impressions, memories and thoughts:

> **Joey** I went to Wales.

> **Shanika** Did you?

> **Joey** To Penally. There's a castle there. My mum and dad always took us as kids. I went with my best friend. Colin. He'll know what to do. I was going to write Trevor a letter. I – we saw the vicar. I went to a wedding once and a bishop conducted the service. Are you hungry. I've got a sandwich. Do you like cheese?[138]

Joey's thoughts are not unconnected. He moves from thinking about his friend Colin, who always knows what to do in a moment of crisis, to the thought that he didn't know what to do to save Trevor. He connects the vicar he sees in Wales in a field to the bishop who married two of his friends. The events, however, are not recounted chronologically and they move around randomly from space to space. Ronnie attempts guide Joey out of this confusion by telling him a chronological account of what happened to him the day before:

> It's about doing things, son. It's about getting up in the morning and doing things. To me it's about getting up, having a slice of bread and jam and getting in that cab and I'm happy in that cab. The people I've met. The wonderful things I've heard. The stories. Yesterday, I had a couple in the there: they weren't talking. Young couple, looked like they wanted to die, both of them. I kept looking in the mirror. I saw him put his hand on her hand. And she put her hand on his hand. And he kissed her on her ear and she smiled and I came home full of it.[139]

Ronnie communicates the idea that life is not only about doing things, it's about doing things that are connected in the right order. In this case, the right order is a linear narrative based on temporal succession, located in a concrete sense of space. Ronnie gets up, has breakfast and goes to work. The couple fall out with each other. The man offers a sign of peace. The couple make up. Ronnie's life is made meaningful both by the stories that he witnesses inside his cab and the stories that he

---

[138] David Eldridge, *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* (London: Methuen, 2005), p. 43.
[139] Eldridge, p. 55.

hears. These coherent chronological narratives are the 'wonderful things' that he feels are the secret to being happy.[140] If Joey cannot shape his experience in this way or relate to the narratives of others then, in Ronnie's eyes, it is no wonder that he is in constant state of distress.

The play abounds with images of Joey's struggle with linearity. When Joey helps his father Ronnie build a fence, Ronnie constantly questions Joey's ability to keep the line of the fence straight:

Joey holds a fence panel steady for Ronnie.

Ronnie Keep it straight.

Joey I am

Ronnie Hold it.

Joey I am.

Ronnie Stroll on.

Joey I am holding it straight.

Ronnie It's not.[141]

Even after the fence panel has gone, Joey's hands '*remain in mid-air*' tracing the elusive straight line of the fence. There is an inability to follow straight lines inscribed in Joey's reading and writing. He writes a letter to Kate in an attempt to put down his feelings honestly, but his words are just 'ravings'.[142] The words in their lines on the page do not make coherent sense. He is supposed to teach Trevor to read, to follow lines of words and make sense of them, but he fails to so this as well. Joey's failure to form straight lines reflects his inability to form a chronological narrative.

---

[140] Eldridge, p. 51.
[141] Eldridge, pp. 26–27.
[142] Eldridge, p. 29.

The events of the play are plotted in a way which reflects the muddled attempts that Joey makes at forming chronological narratives. Events become muddled and spatio-temporally compressed into a single present moment in which Joey is trying to synthesize his experiences into a coherent whole. About halfway through the play, Joey says to Kate that he feels as if they are 'floating, drifting'[143]. As a spectator, I experienced a sensation of floating or drifting in time and space, when watching the performance at the Royal Court. The set was a bare black stage. The characters flowed in and out of the action. There was no distinction in the staging of a difference between actual events, memories and dreams. There was no indication, beyond the clues within the text, to the location of the play's action in time and space. Consequently, past, present and imagined events appear to occur within the same time frame, all at once. It is difficult to distinguish between them and to put the events in chronological order, so all the events of the play feel as if they have been collapsed into a single present moment. As such the play suggests, through its spatio-temporal structure, that the only moment of time that exists is the present, whilst articulating a relationship to space where several spaces seem to collapse into each other. Its structure is reminiscent of the crisis of representation that Harvey suggests is occurring under the forces of capitalism: 'time horizons are collapsing, and it is hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it comes to assessing causes and effects, meaning or values'.[144]

Time patterns within the play indeed suggest that Joey is experiencing a perpetual present. Movements and interactions are repeated, and this is particularly

---

[143] Eldridge, p. 40.
[144] Harvey, p. 298.

true of the relationship between the two sons within the play, Joey and Trevor. Joey's first encounter with Trevor repeats in his mind. Joey and Trevor bump into each other as the action flows from scene to scene, greeting each other with a hello as they pass by.

> **Joey**   Hello.
>
> **Trevor**   Hello.[145]

The connection between the two is emphasized through Joey's physical mirroring of Trevor. During their first encounter, Trevor '*takes a toothpick out of his hair and sucks it*'.[146] Joey picks up and repeats action, '*picks his teeth with a dental stick;*'.[147] Soon after we see Trevor and Joey sitting next to each other. Joey now has completely adopted Trevor's habit. While Trevor '*picks his teeth*', Joey sports '*a toothpick in his mouth*'.[148] The two sons of the play are equated with each other through these mirrored repetitive movements. The scene in which Joey imagines Trevor's death begins with both characters facing each other, picking their teeth. Joey greets Trevor with the usual 'Hello', but Trevor refuses to mirror his greeting. Trevor has now changed his response to 'Hi'.[149] The mirroring of the hellos symbolises Joey's deep need to connect with Trevor. The repetition of the these encounters with Trevor emphasises how Joey's failure to form a 'fatherly' relationship with the fatherless Trevor, and by extension the breakdown of his own relationship with his father, lies at the centre of his distress. There is a disruption of the connection between father and son.

---

[145] Eldridge, p. 4.
[146] Eldridge, p. 6.
[147] Eldridge, p. 9.
[148] Eldridge, p. 20.
[149] Eldridge, p. 29.

The figure of Trevor is frozen in time, like the images in the photographs that he takes with his precious manual camera. In Joey's presence, he is presented as perpetually bleeding, marked by the violence of his death. In the scene, where Joey and Trevor first meet, there is blood on his coat. Next time Joey sees him, his hand is bleeding. In a dreamed meeting, blood pours from Trevor's mouth. The blood becomes symbolic of Joey's failure to connect with Trevor. Trevor constantly floats the edge of Joey's peripheral vision. While Joey tries to convince Kate to let him move back in with her, he is distracted by the presence of Trevor on the edge his field of vision. The figure of Trevor, as constructed in Joey's mind, is always moving away from him. Every time they passed and greeted each other in the Royal Court production, Trevor was the one to move away. At the end of the scenes between Trevor and Joey, Trevor is the one to exit, while Joey remains. At times, Joey calls after Trevor's disappearing figure, 'Hello! Hello! Hello!'[150] Trevor is a figure that is perpetually present on the periphery of Joey's vision but always escaping his grasp.

In the creation of a perpetual present, Eldridge removes the temporal axis of succession from its position as the principle organising structure of a play. While some critics thought the play was 'difficult to piece together' and did 'not fully escape the pitfalls of incoherence and repetition',[151] others such as Paul Taylor found the play 'beautifully structured'.[152] This begs the question, as to how the play is structured if it is not primarily structured through its temporal aspect. The answer is

---

[150] Eldridge, p. 26.

[151] Gerald Berkowitz, 'Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness', *The Stage,* 2005 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/7850/incomplete-and-random-acts-of-kindness> [accessed 26 May 2011].

[152] Paul Taylor, 'Incomplete And Random Acts Of Kindness', *The Independent,* 2005 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/incomplete-and-random-acts-of-kindness-royal-court-491922.html> [accessed 26 May 2011].

that the temporal movement in time in this play is defined through space. While space was physically undefined in the Royal Court's production, the order of events in the story was made clear by the movement of objects through space and references to particular spaces in the dialogue. The letter that Joey writes to Kate is an object whose movement allows the temporal order of the scenes in which it appears to be clearly determined. The letter to Kate is first mentioned in the dialogue as something that Joey thinks it might be a good idea to do. The second time it appears Joey physically gives it to Kate and she takes it away with her. The third time it appears Ronnie physically has it, as Kate has returned it back in the post. The fourth time Maureen mentions that she found it in the rubbish after Ronnie threw it away. The narrative of the letter indicates that these four scenes are plotted chronologically. Other objects indicate the different temporal orderings of other scenes. Joey's mother's engagement ring first appears in scene nine, in which Kate returns the ring to Joey. Later Maureen gives the ring to Joey after his mother's death. In the same scene, Kate takes the ring from Joey and asks him to marry her. The movement of the ring clearly indicates that the first scene with the ring in the plot comes chronologically before the second scene with the ring in the story. The next time we see the ring, it is on Kate's finger and signals to the Bishop that she and Joey are engaged. The position of the ring indicates that the last scene in the plot comes chronologically between the other two scenes in the story.

Particular spaces are used in a similar way to indicate the order of events. There are three distinct scene locations that indicate specific points in time to the audience. The first of these locations is Wales. There is only one scene set in Wales but references to it locate other scenes in a temporal relationship to it. In scene five,

Joey mentions to Trevor that he's 'going to Wales'[153]. In scene eight, Joey meets a priest in Wales who tells him about 'Odo de Barri'[154]. In scene twelve, Joey mentions Odo de Barri to Trevor. This indicates that these three scenes are ordered chronologically. Another space that clearly indicates a point in time is the hospital. As with Wales, there is a single scene set in the hospital, just after Joey's mother's death. Mentions of the hospital in other scenes then locate them as happening before this point. In the second to last scene of the play, Kate asks Joey how his mother got on at the hospital, so locating this scene towards the beginning of the story, even though it comes towards the end of the plot. America is the final space that anchors the audience in time. In the second to last scene, Kate talks about going to America. The scenes in America are located as happening after this scene, but before Joey's mother's death.

In the dialogue, references to certain locations position the action of the play even more precisely in time. Joey and Kate's trip to America ends with 'the greatest bar on earth' where they can 'have a cosmopolitan and watch all the helicopters flying around'.[155] After the scene with the Bishop, when they are engaged, Kate asks Joey if he remembers 'the lovely barman who served us the cosmopolitans'.[156] Joey reminds her that they can't go back there now. This makes it clear that the bar they are referring to was the bar at the top of World Trade Centre. This locates the first scene as happening before 11 September 2001 and the second scene as happening after. Iraq is another location used as a temporal marker. The priest that Joey meets in Wales states that there is a big demonstration on in London that day. This

---

[153] Eldridge, p. 6.
[154] Eldridge, p. 13.
[155] Eldridge, p. 37.
[156] Eldridge, p. 65.

identifies the date of the scene in Wales as exactly Saturday 15 February 2003. In other scenes there are references to watching the war in Iraq on television. When Shanika comes to tell Joey about Trevor's death, he asks her if she is 'following the war?' and whether she'd heard of 'Umm Qasr' before.[157] This positions this scene as soon after the 21 March 2003, which was the day that Allies entered the town. Eldridge uses particular spaces not only to define the temporal order of the events, but also to locate these events at a precise point in historical time.

When time compresses to a perpetual present, Eldridge indicates that space becomes the principle by which people orient themselves. Space is compressed at the same time, in that many spaces are present within one physical space. In his travels, memories, and through the media, Joey travels quickly from space to space annihilating the distance between them. Iraq is in his living room and America in his head. Amidst all this chaos, Joey orientates himself through his relationships to space. He uses spaces of personal significance to anchor himself. He constantly repeats the facts he knows about Topanga Canyon.

> It begins in the San Fernando Valley.
> And runs to the Pacific Ocean.
> Some people think 'Roadhouse Blues' was written there.
> No one knows Marvin Gaye was there.
> There are racoons.
> Sometimes there are mudslides.
> Sometimes there are UFOs.
> I never saw any.[158]

He repeats them at moments of stress. In a dream, he tells them to Trevor to comfort him as he cradles his dying body in his arms. Topanga canyon is a space in which Joey felt happy. It is this happy space to which he clings in his confusion and his

---

[157] Eldridge, p. 42.
[158] Eldridge, p. 20.

distress. In the play, it is clear that Joey's confusion and distress are part of a mental breakdown that he is suffering in the wake of the traumatic events of his mother's and Trevor's death. It can be argued that the spatio-temporal aspects that shape Joey's experience of his mental breakdown reflect in a broader sense the crisis in spatio-temporal structures that Harvey links to the experience of late capitalism. Thus, Eldridge's play captures the experience not only of mental distress but, in a wider sense, of the postmodern condition.

San Diego

Whereas Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* articulates a crisis of temporal succession under the pressures of post-Fordism, Greig's *San Diego* (Tron/Edinburgh International Festival, 2003) articulates a crisis of space. This is play that also compresses time. The action of the play takes twenty minutes of dramatic time, but the performance of the play takes much longer. This is a play that moves through space as opposed to time. It is a play about the experience of space under post-Fordism and as such it articulates a spatial logic as much as a temporal one. In the main storyline of the play, a playwright called David Greig visits San Diego. On the way to the theatre, he gets lost and is stabbed by an illegal immigrant called Daniel. The pilot who flew David Greig's plane to San Diego and a prostitute called Amy try to save him, but he dies. Another David finds himself as a patient in a mental hospital. He falls in love with a patient called Laura, who is co-incidentally the pilot's daughter. Together they escape to a beach in Scotland, where Laura attempts to commit suicide and David saves her. The subplots of the play tell the stories of: a woman, Marie, who is having a spiritual crisis; an actor, Andrew, who is

playing a fictional pilot in a film; and an illegal immigrant, Daniel, who is searching for his mother with the help of two tramps, Pious and Innocent. All the characters in the play are lost. Greig has stated that his work is pervaded by this sense of being lost: 'I fear that all my work concerns lostness in some way or another; homelessness; identity; not quite knowing who one is'.[159] The play focuses on this idea of lostness and the idea of belonging, as the journeys of the characters through the space of San Diego eventually take them to spaces where they feel more at home.

The play is ordered through relationships between of different kinds of space. It sets up relationships between capitalist spaces that are inscribed with the pressures of consumption and globalisation and pre-capitalist spaces inscribed with images of agro-pastoral villages and nomadic communities. In Lefebvre's terms, the capitalist 'space of accumulation',[160] with the marketplace at its centre, is placed in negotiation with pre-capitalist 'absolute space', which places the sacred at its centre instead.[161] At the same time, the play productively juxtaposes three interrelated forms of spatial production. Lefebvre terms these three ways of producing social space '[s]*patial practice*', '[r]*epresentations of space*' and '[r]*epresentational spaces*'.[162] Spatial practice relates to the material production of space in terms of the physical environment and the flows that connect its different spaces. Spatial practices include built environments, transport and communications.[163] Representations of space are the conceptualised representations that society produces to define its space. They include 'maps and plans, transport and communications systems, information

[159] David Greig, 'Physical Poetry: David Greig in Conversation with Caridad Svich', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 29 (2007), 51-58 (p. 86).
[160] Lefebvre, p. 263.
[161] Lefebvre, p. 234.
[162] Lefebvre, p. 33.
[163] Harvey, p. 220.

conveyed by images and signs'.[164] Representations of space 'are certainly abstract, but they also play a part in social and political practice'.[165] They reproduce established social relations between people, objects and the spaces they inhabit. Representational spaces exist only in the imagination: 'This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate'.[166] Representational spaces include artist's sketches, utopias and imaginary landscapes.[167] Greig's play juxtaposes these three kinds of spatial production against each other in ways that highlight a discord, rather than a harmony, between the spaces they produce.

The play's juxtaposition of capitalist and pre-capitalist space is inherent in its literal setting inside an aeroplane. The San Diego that the characters are lost in is not the 'real' San Diego, but rather a fictional version of San Diego dreamt up by the playwright David Greig during a twenty minute drunken nap, as his plane comes into land at San Diego airport. In the original production at the Edinburgh International Festival, the face of the actor playing David Greig surveyed the action of the whole play from a video scene reminding the audience that they were watching a 'strange surreal dream play'.[168] The space of the plane in which David Greig has his dream of San Diego is a site of time-space compression and therefore representative of the forces of post-Fordism. The plane crosses time zones as it flies and so within its space many moments in time are compressed into the same moment. It is both

---

[164] Lefebvre, p. 233.
[165] Lefebvre, p. 41.
[166] Lefebvre, p. 39.
[167] Harvey, p. 221.
[168] David Greig, 'Edinburgh Preview: David Greig', *The Observer*, 2003 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2003/jul/27/edinburghfestival2003.features4> [accessed 20 August 2011].

'3.17pm San Diego Time, 11.17pm London time'.[169] It is a space that simultaneously invokes and compresses many distant spaces into a single space. In the airport in Toronto, a Scottish playwright flying to the American city of San Diego drinks Canadian 'Molson' beer whilst watching a 'Filipino woman refuelling a 747'[170] and reading 'in a two-day old British newspaper about a Quebecois biologist' who had led a flock of orphaned geese back to 'their summer breeding grounds in the Arctic'.[171]

At the same time, however, the space inside the plane is positioned as offering a desirable degree of spatio-temporal security amid the confusion outside. As one of the Davids who works in the conceptual agency tells us, 'time and place no longer exist in the real world'. This is disturbing for people because a 'person needs to know where they are, where they're going and what time it is'. In a plane, they do. The only time that exists is universal coordinated time; time measured in accordance with the earth's rotation on its axis. This is 'real' clock time. It does not shift and change from time zone to time zone. The space of the plane itself does not alter as the plane moves through space. There is a ticket that states where each passenger is going and where they should sit so the 'cabin of the aircraft is the only space where we can be certain we belong'. The screen on the back of the seat in front offers us a reassuring representation of space in the form of the moving map. We can locate ourselves in space; we can be sure 'where we are going'. The aircraft is a space in which we feel can safe and secure amidst spatio-temporal confusion, it is 'home'.[172] It is like the mother goose in the news story, David Greig reads, about the Quebecois

---

[169] David Greig, *Selected Plays 1999-2009* (London: Faber, 2010), p. 8.
[170] David Greig, p. 7.
[171] David Greig, p. 8.
[172] David Greig, p. 82.

biologist, who leads orphaned children home. It is the God that Marie is searching for, when she is overcome by the strange feeling the she needs to pray. She prays to 'whoever's up there' as the plane comes into land. Her prayer is answered as '*The huge sound of the plane overwhelms her'*.[173]

In addition to this, the plane is represented as a pre-capitalist absolute space. In the third act, the employees in a conceptual consultancy, rethink the idea of the plane. The plane stands as at the centre of the play as a symbol of post-Fordism, of the networks and flows that connect its spaces. The consultants rethink the plane in terms of the pre-capitalist notion of the village. The plane is a community in itself. The Boeing 777 is designed to carry 256 passengers, which one of the conceptual consultants informs us is the size of the ideal human community: 'The human mind evolved to cope with a community of two hundred and fifty-six people'.[174] The inhabitants of the pre-capitalist village have a sense of 'belonging'. It is their 'place of birth'.[175] the villagers enact the spatio-temporal rhythms of everyday pre-capitalist society: 'Men chew betel nut / They spit juice on the ground / In a lazy arc / It's slow. It's a rhythm'. The village has a 'symbolic centre'. This symbolic centre is a 'transformative space'. It is neither 'a pub' nor a 'village square' nor a 'Banyan tree'[176] nor a 'well' nor a 'creche'. Instead it is a 'place of praying' filled with 'Smoke. Darkness'. It is a 'secret chamber' and the domain of the 'shaman' or the 'magician'.[177] The village's sacred and cryptic centre identifies it as an absolute space.

---

[173] David Greig, p. 14.
[174] David Greig, p. 83.
[175] David Greig, p. 72.
[176] David Greig, p. 74.
[177] David Greig, p. 76.

Absolute space is a 'fragment of agro-pastoral space' rather than a capitalist space. It is inhabited by 'peasants, or by nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists'.[178] It is a space that continues to be conceived of as part of nature and it is a space that is lived rather than conceived in representations or through knowledge. It is a space of the body rather than the mind, 'meaning addressed not to the intellect but to the body'.[179] It has at its centre a sacred space endowed with religious or magical power. It is a holistic space, 'at once and indistinguishably mental and social, which *comprehends* the entire existence of the group concerned'.[180] This vision of an agro-pastoral absolute space is relocated by the consultants to the plane. The 'cockpit' of the plane becomes the space's magical centre and the pilot by association becomes the village 'chief'.[181] The plane's spatial characterisation is a contradictory one, as it enfolds within it spaces of dislocation and belonging, spaces of post-Fordism and an absolute space.

The space of San Diego also enfolds the seemingly contradictory spaces of post-Fordism and absolute space. The spaces of the first half of the play are dominated by spaces of post-Fordism. There are spaces of work: a film set, a brothel and a call centres. There are spaces of transit: a plane, a motel and the freeway. Things are produced and consumed. The Pilot, Andrew and the Stewardess drink beer and whiskey, Pious and Innocent shape meat into patties, and David the patient and the Pilot look at pornography. Space itself is consumed. The desert is described as literally eating away at San Diego: Pious imagines that 'the desert is hungry for

---

[178] Lefebvre, p. 234.
[179] Lefebvre, p. 235.
[180] Lefebvre, p. 240.
[181] David Greig, p. 77.

the city'.[182] The body too becomes subject to this hunger. Laura consumes her own flesh. She describes this process in food preparation terms, rather than in terms of a mental illness, invoking the production and consumption processes of the meat industry. She tells the counsellor that she is not cutting herself, she is 'butchering' herself. She states that she wants to 'cured'.[183] Laura grounds her relationship to David in a series of puns equating love with the concept of consumption. Laura askes David, 'Do you want me tender?'[184] Laura's blurring of love, sex and consumption may make her feel 'fucking fabulous', however, it does physical harm to her body: '*Laura comes in, limping badly*'.[185] She is conscious of the pain as she screams in pain, when she cuts herself.[186] The processes of post-Fordism are positioned through Laura's acts of consumption as harmful to the social subject.

In the second half of the play, absolute spaces appear within San Diego and eventually dominate the space of the city. The characters who were lost find a sense of belonging in these spaces. Daniel and Pious visit Paul McCartney to find out the truth of what happened to Daniel's mother. Paul McCartney's office corresponds to the sacred space of the chief in the village. It's a 'place you're not allowed into',[187] 'It's dark. It's behind a door. And it contains … everything'.[188] The office is positioned as the magical centre of an absolute space. The space is a 'transformative place' as it brings Daniel to a realisation about his true reason for coming to San

---

[182] David Greig, p. 45.
[183] David Greig, p. 48.
[184] David Greig, p. 84.
[185] David Greig, p. 89.
[186] David Greig, pp. 36, 86.
[187] David Greig, p. 76.
[188] David Greig, p. 77.

Diego.[189] The fictional pilot, that Andrew is playing in the film, is found by a fictional Bedouin in the desert on '*the point of death*'.[190] The Bedouin is not a real Bedouin, but his '*white disdash*' imbues him with the same authority.[191] The Bedouin offers Andrew's wife Marie sanctuary in his fictional encampment, which again echoes the consultant's concept of the plane as a village. Both are villages with a 'well'[192] and spaces where men and women have different social lives.[193]

As the play progresses, its spaces are consumed by nature and become more and more dominated by sand. The city of San Diego is consumed by the desert, as Pious earlier predicts it will be. The action moves in space between a beach in San Diego, the Nevada desert and a beach in Scotland. In these sandy environments, the characters find a sense of belonging. As the Bedouin points out, they were all in need of 'more desert'.[194] Laura finds her sense of belonging on a beach in Scotland: 'It's definitely the place'.[195] There she reconnects with a strong innate sense of direction: 'I know where I'm going / It's in my brain / I know – I can see a direction,'[196] like the geese that fly past the beach on their way to Greenland. At the end of the play, Greig returns his characters to the elements. The sea enters the space. Amy the prostitute and the pilot meet on a San Diego beach and '*walk into the sea holding hands*'.[197] When Daniel's mother describes the life that they would have together in

---

[189] David Greig, p. 74.
[190] David Greig, p. 89.
[191] David Greig, p. 94.
[192] David Greig, pp. 75, 95.
[193] David Greig, pp. 74–75, 94–95.
[194] David Greig, p. 101.
[195] David Greig, p. 109.
[196] David Greig, p. 114.
[197] David Greig, p. 120.

San Diego, she promises him that 'We'll go swimming in the ocean'.[198] David uses the sea to save Laura, after he realises that she has taken an overdose. He makes her 'seasick'.[199] In the end, Daniel returns not to the sea but to the air. He takes flight on the plane 'high up in the Jetstream'.[200] There is a spatial progression in the play from the networks and flows of post-Fordism, through spaces of pre-capitalist societies back to the desert and finally to the sea and the air. There is a progression from the complexity of streets and maps in the first act to the 'simplicity' of the desert and the beach, the sea and the air.[201]

The character of these absolute and natural spaces is not as clear cut as the preceding description of the spatial movement of the play implies. These absolute and natural spaces are still enfolded within spaces of post-Fordism. The Bedouin encampment, where Marie finds sanctuary, is actually part of a film set. As a space, it is both ancient and modern simultaneously. It has 'total coverage' for her mobile phone.[202] The plane is rethought as an agro-pastoral village as part of a rebranding of air travel as a product. Its aim is to allay the anxiety that 'acts as a disincentive to air travel'.[203] On one hand, a utopian reading of the play is disturbed by fact that such absolute spaces are the product of capitalism. On the other hand, the play could be read as offering spaces of resistance to a totalising capitalism, as even within its own spaces, earlier spaces from different modes of production continue to persist. As Lefebvre argues: 'Nothing disappears completely, however; nor can what subsists be defined solely in terms of traces, memories or relics. In space, what came earlier

---

[198] David Greig, p. 112.
[199] David Greig, p. 120.
[200] David Greig, p. 119.
[201] David Greig, p. 100.
[202] David Greig, p. 76.
[203] Lefebvre, p. 82.

continues to underpin what follows'.[204]

At the same time, the space of San Diego enfolds the space of post-Fordism and absolute space into each other, it generates layers of spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces. The city is both a physical space, the representation of a space as defined by a guide book and an imagined space only existing in David Greig's dream. At the beginning of the play, a disjuncture between spatial practice and representations of space is enacted. The characters are lost in the city. Its spatial practices, the transport and communication networks that connect its spaces, are disrupted. Laura tries to call her father but the phone is never answered. David Greig's 'automatic' car fails to take him to the correct destination.[205] Representations of space, such as maps, that should help the characters locate themselves are useless. David's hand drawn map of the location of the theatre is no use to him. The prostitute Amy is unable to find Kevin, the Pilot, using her map. All the geographical points of reference which would help the characters locate themselves have disappeared from sight. Kevin cannot find the street names that would help Amy locate him and there is no indication of where the Pacific ocean is from the window of his apartment, despite its name 'Pacific View'.[206] Maps of space as it is conceived, do not relate to the physical infrastructure of the city. These representations of space fail to reflect spatial practice.

The representations of space that the characters use to attempt to locate themselves fail to relate to the physical space of San Diego, because the San Diego that the characters inhabit bears little relation to the spatial practice of the real San

---

[204] Lefebvre, p. 229.
[205] David Greig, p. 15.
[206] David Greig, p. 18.

Diego. Greig's San Diego is a representation of space. At the beginning of the play, David Greig tells the audience that he has been reading the *Blue Guide to San Diego* on the plane as 'I always like to know the facts about a place'. The San Diego, in which the play is set, is an expansion of the San Diego described in the guide book. The facts about the city becomes expanded out into narrative and space in the play. David Greig tells the audience that San Diego has served as the 'backdrop for several episodes of *America's Missing Children*'. San Diego is indeed a space where people disappear from view. The illegal immigrants Pious, Innocent and Daniel are people who do not officially exist. Daniel is searching for his missing mother. The pilot's daughter Laura can never reach her father on the phone. Andrew and Marie's baby is never seen, but only heard breathing through their baby monitor. San Diego is a space that is both 'anonymous' and 'familiar'. It is a space, the guidebook states, that there are few cultural representations: 'San Diego has featured in almost no fictions, films, novels or plays', apart from the film *Top Gun*. It is the generic American city, that is used in films as 'a substitute for other American cities'.[207] It is a city that consists of reproduced spaces. Its theatre is 'an exact reproduction of Shakespeare's Globe'.[208] Its inhabitants stay in houses that are not homes, global hotel chains, motels and anonymous apartment blocks, connected by a system of nameless highways. The inhabitants themselves are anonymous. It is a city in which 'everybody is called Amy'.[209] The generic nature of the space in *San Diego* is accentuated in its staging. The same sofa and television stand for the apartment that the Pilot stays in and the motel that Andrew and Marie are living in. The same bed

---

[207] David Greig, p. 35.
[208] David Greig, p. 34.
[209] David Greig, p. 56.

stands for a bed in a San Diego brothel and in a London hospital.

San Diego is positioned by the guide book as the embodiment of the American dream. It 'has the highest quality of life of any city in the United States'.[210] This idea is embodied in the immigrant made good narrative of Patience/Amy, Daniel's Nigerian Mother. She came to San Diego with nothing after being fired from her singing job. She worked her way up from a 'massage parlour'[211] and has now 'diversified into real estate'.[212] The space that she brings with her onto the stage is '*the balcony of an expensive beachfront house*'.[213] The characters of the illegal immigrants Pious and Innocent offer an inverse view of the standard of living in San Diego. Their space is that of the excluded. Lefebvre argues that capitalist space creates centres of accumulation which 'concentrate wealth, means of action, knowledge, information and 'culture'', which act as points of political power. These centres 'expel all peripheral elements with a violence that is inherent in the space itself'.[214] The poor are moved away from the centre. Pious and Innocent are left to scrape a life together on the peripheries, inhabiting a space '*Under the freeway, beside a small muddy gutter*'.[215] The violence innate within this space is hinted at in the guidebook's statement that the water in the Pacific is 'exactly the same temperature as blood'.[216] Blood runs through the peripheral spaces in the play. David Greig bleeds to death in the dust at the side of a highway, while later Innocent is shot under the freeway bridge.

---

[210] David Greig, p. 7.
[211] David Greig, p. 111.
[212] David Greig, p. 112.
[213] David Greig, p. 108.
[214] Lefebvre, p. 332.
[215] David Greig, p. 24.
[216] David Greig, p. 38.

The guide book offers David Greig a representation of the space of San Diego. The space that it describes is what Lefebvre terms an abstract space. Abstract space is generated by representations of space, such as maps or plans. Abstract space is '[f]alsely true' and generates a 'false consciousness'[217] of space because it contains 'representations derives from the established order: statuses and norms, localized hierarchies and hierarchically arranged places, and roles and values bound to particular places'.[218] Abstract space is 'repressive in essence'.[219] David Greig's San Diego is an abstract space because it is not generated from lived experience but from a representation of the city in a guide book. It is a place inscribed with physical and mental distress. Marie and Andrew's baby is suffering from a rash that could be caused by the heat or the water there. They have 'brought the boy into a terrible world. / So terrible even his skin reacts to it'.[220] Marie is suffering from severe anxiety: 'After every breath, I'm scared the next breath isn't coming'.[221] Laura is a 'Suicidal. Manic. Self-harmer' and suffers from an inexhaustible hunger. David has 'attention deficit disorder' and he is 'not interested in anything'.[222] Representations of space and the abstract spaces that they produce are positioned as a source of both disorientation and distress for the social subject.

The spatial practice of the real San Diego is enfolded in the representations of space in its guide book and in turn these representations of space are enfolded in representational spaces as David Greig's San Diego is ultimately the imagined space of his dreams. San Diego is a space in which other spaces are imagined. The film set

[217] Lefebvre, p. 310.
[218] Lefebvre, p. 311.
[219] Lefebvre, p. 318.
[220] David Greig, p. 60.
[221] David Greig, p. 12.
[222] David Greig, p. 54.

imagines the Nevada desert to be a desert in the Middle East near Abu Dhabi. It imagines a Bedouin and a Bedouin camp. Andrew the actor plays the imaginary pilot of an imaginary plane, which crashes into this imaginary desert. San Diego acts as an 'unnamed backdrop' and so is open to constant re-imaginings.[223] It is a dynamic and shifting space, which 'disorders representations of space and transforms them into representational space'.[224] In doing so, it critiques the relationship between spatial practices and representations by opening up the disjuncture between them. As such it is productive of new spaces, and therefore of new sets of social and economic relations that go hand in hand with them. Greig's *San Diego* imagines and attempts to represent a space that has agency.

The spatio-temporal dramaturgy of drama stands in relation to the spatio-temporal dramaturgy of social life. Serious drama offers representations of time and space which claim to mirror time and space as they are lived in everyday life. In doing so it reflects normative representations of time and space without negotiating their relationship to our changing experience of time and space under post-Fordism. Serious drama is structured predominantly on the axis of temporal succession, whose linear sequential structure mirrors the linear structures that are associated with the rise of liberal capitalism and more recently with financialisation's alluring myth of unending economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s. Serious drama's claims to verisimilitude are therefore troubled by the notion that lived time is no longer experienced as linear and progressive but as compressed, due to the forces of time-space compression produced by post-Fordism, producing a shift in our conception of temporality away from succession and towards simultaneity. A play such as

[223] David Greig, p. 7.
[224] Lefebvre, p. 232.

Eldridge's *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness*, that articulates a dramaturgy that mimics the time-space compression of post-Fordism can be seen as politically productive because it highlights a disjunction between representations of time and space in dramatic structure and our lived experience of time and space. David Greig's *San Diego*, in turn, presents us with an experimental dramaturgy that produces spaces within the space of post-Fordism that are or have the potential to be free from its governance.

3 - Plot and Story

In examining the rift between the spatio-temporal structures of dramatic structure and the lived experience of time and space under post-Fordism, we find a need for spatio-temporal structures that are more simultaneous and that have a spatial as well as a temporal organisational basis. A shift in spatio-temporal structures automatically leads to a demand for a shift in the structure of the dramatic narrative as dramatic narrative is plotted through time and space. The process of shaping experience into a narrative through mechanical plot structures becomes increasingly difficult if lived experience of time and space is no longer linear. In this chapter I will argue that recent British plays have experimented with alternative approaches to the construction of the dramatic narrative and that these approaches are political on two counts. Firstly, these plays suggest alternative casual models to the logic of cause and effect that underlies mechanical plot structures. Secondly, they question the ethics of the socio-psychological causation, asking whether all actions can or should be justified by locating their causes in the social circumstances or psychology of the character who commits them.

I will start by examining the plot/story distinction and arguing its continuing utility as a tool for analysing the structure of the dramatic narrative. The plot story relationship can viewed in two ways. In the first the story is positioned as a stable referent and the plot as a variation on it, whilst in the second the situation is reversed, the plot being the stable referent and the story the variant. The first part of the

chapter will explore the structure of dramatic narrative on the assumption that story is the stable referent and plot a variation of it. Aristotelian plot structure will be linked to Louis Althusser's concept of mechanical causality, which takes the form of a billiard ball model of cause and effect. The causal structure of a plot will be directly related to its complexity or, as Aristotle terms it, its magnitude. Konstantín Stanislavski's acting system will be positioned as the basis of a more contemporary approach to plot structure that, like Aristotle's unified action, has its basis in mechanical causation, but, unlike Aristotle's unified action, takes a psychological approach to plot structure. Bertolt Brecht's argument that mechanical plot structures are problematic because they reflect capitalist models of consumption and reduce the spectator's capacity to act and think, will be used to problematize this type of dramatic narrative. The relationship between the economic structures of post-Fordism and mechanical causal structures will be further explored by reading Mike Bartlett's play *Contractions* through Slavoj Žižek's concept of over-identification. debbie tucker green's *Generations* will be read as offering an alternative model of plot structure rooted in an expressive causality through its use of what Derrida terms iteration. Finally, Goold and Power's version of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* will be read as articulating a model for a structural causality through an employment of the Brechtian structures of the 'not … but' and the footnote.

The second part of the chapter will explore the dramatic narrative from a different perspective, assuming plot to be the stable referent from which a variety of stories can be constructed. The absence of story in Martin Crimp's *The City* will be investigated. Following on from Lyotard's observation that narratives define criterias

of competence, the role of socio-psychological narratives in condoning harmful actions will be explored. Through a reading of Mark Ravenhill's *The Experiment*, I will argue an ethical dimension for the absent or disrupted story through its definition of the limits to the acceptability our actions.

Plot and story

The dramatic narrative is theorised as composed of two distinct elements, plot and story. David Edgar defines story as 'the bare, chronological succession of events drawn on in a fiction' and plot as 'the events as they are ordered and connected'.[1] The relationship between plot and story can be viewed from two fundamental and opposing perspectives. In the first story is thought of as the invariable raw material from which a writer may construct many differently plotted retellings of the same story. In the second, the plot is seen as the invariable raw material from which each individual audience member can generate their own personalised story.

This division of the dramatic narrative into plot and story dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. In Aristotle's view the story is the stable referent and the plot a variant of it. Constructing a Greek tragedy, as Aristotle describes it, is a process of adapting pre-existing stories. The existing story provides the raw material, which the playwright adapts into dramatic structure through the process of plotting. When adapting a pre-existing story for the theatre, Aristotle states that it is not necessary to show all the events of the story from which the plot is drawn, 'one should not compose a tragedy out of a body of material which would serve for an epic'.[2] Thus

---

[1] David Edgar, *How Plays Work: A Practical Guide to Playwriting* (Nick Hern Books, 2009), p. 19.
[2] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 30.

plotting involves the selection of the events from the story to be shown. Plot (*mythos* or *muthos*) is defined by Aristotle as the 'organisation of events'.[3] In contrast to events in the world outside the theatre, Aristotle sees the events of a play's plot as having a defined structural organisation, 'what is action in real life becomes muthos, that is, an ordered sequence of events'.[4] Plotting is the process of selecting the appropriate events from the story and organising them into an ordered sequence. For Aristotle, plot is primary, 'the most important thing of all',[5] and he indicates that a playwright's skill lies not in her facility with dialogue, but rather in her ability to select and organise the events of a story into a plot: 'the poet must be a maker of plots rather than of verses'.[6]

A similar relationship between plot and story is articulated around 2300 years later, in the work of Russian Formalist, Shklovsky. He applies the plot and story distinction across literature and concerns himself with the job of clearing up a blurring of the two terms: 'The concept of plot (*syuzhet*) is too often confused with a description of the events in the novel, with what I would tentatively call the story line (*fabula*)'.[7] He defines the distinction between the two terms as being between the narrative of the story and the structure through which that narrative is told: 'the plot of Eugene Onegin is not the love between Eugene and Tatiana but the appropriation of the story line in the form of digressions that interrupt the text'. Like Aristotle, Shklovsky sees the story as the invariant foundation on which a plot may be built:

---

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 11.
[4] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Kenneth McLeish (London: Nick Hern, 1999), p. 10.
[5] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 11.
[6] Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. 16–17.
[7] Viktor Shklovskii, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), p. 171.

'the story line is nothing more than material for plot formation'.[8] Shklovsky argues

that plot is built up from *motifs*. A *motif* is the simplest narrative unit, an event. He

postulates the presence of a mediating communication system, in his observation that

the structure of the plot is a result of 'the artist's conscious choice'.[9] The structural

choices that the author makes in the process of arranging motifs from the original

story into a plot carry the author's meaning, when viewed in a dialectical relationship

with a foundational invariant story. In this version of the plot and story relationship,

the structure of a work of art is assumed to contain the 'force of will driving an artist

to create his artefact piece by piece as an integral whole'.[10]

Story is normally thought to be the stable basis of narrative whereas plot is

seen as interpretative. Jonathan Culler states that 'there must be various contrasting

ways of viewing and telling a given story, and this makes 'story' an invariant core,

and a constant against which the variables of narrative presentation can be

measured'.[11] Meaning is located in the different ways that one story is plotted by

different writers; in the difference between their interpretations of it. The work of

another Russian Formalist, however, suggests that the plot and story relationship can

be turned on its head. If plot is positioned as the stable basis of narrative, then story

can be viewed variable. Vladimir Propp suggests that all Russian fairy tales are

composed from 31 motifs or, as he terms them, functions. Each of the 31 functions

describes a different event, such as 'The hero leaves home'[12] or 'The false hero or

---

[8] Shklovskii, p. 170.
[9] Shklovskii, p. 44.
[10] Shklovskii, p. 41.
[11] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 170.
[12] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1958), p. 36.

villain is exposed'.[13] The plot of each fairy-tale is made up from a selection of these functions, which are organised into a specific order by Propp and while not every motif from the list is part of the plot of every tale, the order of the motifs is fixed. Propp's system of plot construction still implies some degree of selection but the organisation is pre-determined. The process of plotting here is less variable, but the 31 fixed plot motifs generate a large number of possible stories. The story has become the more variable factor.

Keir Elam points out that the relationship between the spectator and the text is a more active one than is often assumed. The audience do not receive the dramatic text complete, but rather they play a vital role in its construction. This is also true of story:

> The drama is usually considered as a 'given', offered to the spectator as a ready-structured whole through the mediation of the performance. The reality of the process is altogether different. The spectator is called upon not only to employ a specific *dramatic* competence (supplementing his theatrical competence and involving knowledge of the generic and structural principles of the drama) but also to work hard and continuously at piecing together into a coherent structure the partial and scattered bits of dramatic information that he receives from different sources. The effective construction of the dramatic world and its events is the result of the spectator's ability to impose order upon a dramatic content whose expression is in fact discontinuous and incomplete.[14]

This approach assumes that the audience are as versed in the structures of a dramatic text as the playwright. The playwright constructs a dramatic text with reference to these rules and the audience then use these rules to decode it. They use the incomplete information that they are given in the plot to build the story to which the plot refers. The story is not something that exists as a stable basis beneath the

---

[13] Propp, p. 56.
[14] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 88–89.

dramatic text, rather it is a construct within the mind of the spectator and the story constructed from any one particular plot may vary from individual to individual.

Culler explains this process of story construction with reference the discovery of Oedipus's guilt in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The witness to the murder of Laius says that a band of robbers committed it:

> He said that robbers,
> Not one man, a whole band of them,
> Met on the road and they murdered the king.[15]

If Oedipus is Laius's murderer then the witness's testimony should state that it was a lone traveller who murdered the king. The chance that Oedipus is innocent is never dispelled. Oedipus constructs the fact of his guilt based on his reading of the events that are presented to him: 'His conclusion is based not on new evidence concerning a past deed but on the force of meaning, the interweaving of prophesies and the demands of narrative coherence'.[16] He employs the same reading process that Elam sees the spectator of a play using to construct a coherent story from the play's plot:

> he anticipates events, attempts to 'bridge' incidents whose connection is not immediately clear and generally endeavours to infer the overall frame of action from the bits of information he is fed. In trying to project the possible world of the drama, the spectator is principally concerned with piecing together the underlying logic of the action[17]

The spectator assumes that, as Brian Richardson puts it 'a self-consistent, unitary story will always be able to be inferred from the events presented, regardless of the sequence of their presentation'.[18] The events of the *Oedipus Rex* lead to the conclusion of Oedipus' guilt, despite evidence to the contrary, because the

---

[15] Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by Don Taylor (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 11.
[16] Culler, p. 174.
[17] Elam, p. 108.
[18] Brian Richardson, 'Plot after Postmodernism'in *Contemporary Drama in English*, 14 (2007) 55-67 (p.59).

assumption of his guilt forms the basis of the most coherent story. Therefore story

can be considered as a non-existent referent as opposed to an invariable foundation

of the dramatic narrative: 'an abstraction from the *sjuzet*/plot as such, is a *paraphrase*

of a pseudo-narrative kind, made, for example, by a spectator or a critic in recounting

the "story" of the drama'.[19]

Thus two converse views of the relationship of plot to story become equally

valid:

> In the first the plot is seen as an interpretation of the story. In the second
> the plot generates the story, the narrative creates its own sequence of
> 'real events' through the need for the characters and the audience to find
> a cohesive story behind the plot.[20]

These two different views of the relationship of plot to story place the primary

production of meaning in a different place. The first locates it in the writer's

construction of the plot, as David Edgar puts it, 'the play's meaning is demonstrated

by the way it's put together'.[21] The second locates it in the act of reading, drawing on

Barthes observation that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination'.[22] Both

viewpoints, however, are inscribed by the same causal structures, whether these

structures are employed in the process of construction or of reading. Although, as

Brian Richardson states, we may feel that with 'more expansive concepts we will be

able to better comprehend and more effectively appreciate the most innovative works

of our time', the plot and story binary still serves as a useful tool with which to

examine the causal nature of dramatic structure.[23] As Fredric Jameson argues: 'It

---

[19] Elam, p. 108.
[20] Culler, pp. 175–176.
[21] Edgar, p. 28.
[22] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 148.
[23] Richardson, pp.55–67 (p. 66).

does little good to banish "extrinsic" categories from our thinking, when the latter continue to have a hold on the objective realities about which we plan to think'.[24] Thus, while some contemporary plays appear to employ innovative approaches to structure, I would continue to argue that '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' holds.[25] In attempting to articulate new structural possibilities for dramatic narrative, it can be more productive to analyse them through the lens of the structures that are already in use.

Aristotle, magnitude and mechanical causation

Plotting, according to Aristotle, involves not only the selection of events from the story, but also the linking of these events through mechanical causation into a linear structure. This type of plot structure will be referred to as a mechanical plot. Story here is the stable basis of the dramatic narrative, while plot is variant. In addition, the causal structure of a plot stands in relationship to the play's magnitude or size, as causal structures determine the complexity of it as an object. The more complex the causal structure, the larger the magnitude of the object it produces. While mechanical causal structures guide the audience towards a 'correct' reading of a particular play's story, other causal structures aim to encourage a process of re-reading, which asks the audience to consider many possible versions of events.

Althusser outlines three forms of causality. The first form, mechanical causality, is based on the empirical concept that 'a determinate effect could be

---

[24] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 10.
[25] Richardson, pp.55–67 (p. 66).

related to an object-cause'.[26] This is a billiard ball model of cause and effect. The second form, expressive causality, relates to the Hegelian idea that that the nature of a whole object determines the nature of its elements:

> it presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole.[27]

Expressive causality does not think of the whole as a structure, instead it is a "spiritual" whole in which every element is infused with the nature of the whole's inner "spiritual" essence. The third form is structural causality. In *Capital*, Althusser reads Marx as raising a question about the effectivity of structures that implies a third causal model:

> *by means of what concept, or what set of concepts, is it possible to think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations, by the effectivity of that structure?... In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality?*[28]

In this third form, the nature of a structure is produced by the effects of all the structural relationships between its elements. Ben Brewster clarifies the difference between the three forms of causality using a theatrical metaphor:

> Empiricist ideologies, seeing the action on the stage, the effects, believe that they are seeing a faithful copy of reality, recognising themselves and their preconceptions in the mirror held up to them by the play. The Hegelian detects the hand of God or the Spirit writing the script and directing the play. For the Marxist, on the contrary, this is a theatre, but one which reflects neither simple reality nor any transcendental truth, a theatre without an author; the object of his science is the mechanism which produces the stage effects.[29]

---

[26] Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), p. 201.
[27] Althusser and Balibar, p. 206.
[28] Althusser and Balibar, pp. 205–206.
[29] Althusser and Balibar, p. 347.

The idea that plots should follow a mechanical causal structure is articulated in the *Poetics* by Aristotle in his concept of the unity of action. The unity of action provides the budding tragic poet with a useful tool for the plotting of a tragedy from an epic story as it provides an ideal model to shape the processes of both the selection and organisation of events from the original story. Although the *Poetics* was written during the 4th century BC and specifically in relation to the tragic theatre of Athens, Aristotle's unity of action continues to persist in serious drama's thinking about plot construction. In *How Plays Work*, Edgar acknowledges that in his description of the narrative progression of a play, he is still 'following the philosopher Aristotle'.[30]

Aristotle states that beauty consists of two elements: magnitude and order. An appropriate magnitude is 'such as can readily be taken in at one view, so in the case of plots: they should have a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory'.[31] The appropriate magnitude for a plot is that of a single unified action: 'When he [Homer] composed the Odyssey he did not include everything which happened to Odysseus ... instead he constructed the Odyssey about a single action of the kind we are discussing'. Therefore Aristotle recommends reducing any story down to its essential and components in order to identify this single action clearly. The poet must dispose of irrelevant events: 'If the presence or absence of something has no discernable effect, it is not part of the whole'.[32] A single unified action, and therefore a good plot, can be summed up in a brief outline. Aristotle reduces the Odyssey down to its single unified action as an example:

---

[30] Edgar, p. 17.
[31] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 14.
[32] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 15.

> A man has been away from home for many years; he is kept under close observation by Poseidon, and is alone; at home affairs are in such a state that his property is being squandered by the suitors, and plots are being laid against his son. Despite being shipwrecked he reaches home, reveals his identity to a number of people and attacks. He survives and destroys his enemies.[33]

The poet then takes these episodes and elaborates on them. In the case of the epic, this technique is used to increase the poem's length, however in a play the episodes are 'concise'.[34] Aristotle warns that a single action is not necessarily synonymous with a single protagonist. A single person may perform a large number of actions but these actions are not necessarily unified because they are performed by the same person as 'a single individual performs many actions, and they do not make up a single action'. They do not necessarily 'constitute a unity'.[35]

The concept of the single unified action also helps the playwright with the organisation of the events selected. Aristotle articulates his description of good plot through the language of causation. An event must occur, he says, 'because' of another event, not just 'after' it,[36] or as E. M. Forster puts it in a more recent definition of the difference between story and plot: 'The king died and the queen died' is story but 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is plot.[37] Aristotle states that a plot should be 'an imitation of a complete, i.e. whole, action' and that a whole is something which has 'a beginning, a middle and an end'.[38] A beginning is an event which is not caused by something that precedes it, but results in another event that occurs because of it. A middle is both caused by an event that precedes it

---

[33] Aristotle, *Poetics*, pp. 28–29.

[34] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 28.

[35] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 15.

[36] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 18.

[37] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 86.

[38] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 13.

and results in another event that occurs because of it. An end is caused by an event that precedes but it but does not necessarily cause anything.

EVENT A   ⟶   EVENT B   ⟶   EVENT C
(Beginning)   (Middle)   (End)

There must be a chain of causation that links the events that happen to the protagonist and the actions she performs as '[t]here is an important difference between a set of events happening because of certain other events and after certain other events'.[39] This chain of causation must arise in line with probability, in terms of events that are likely to happen as the result of previous events. Therefore a unified plot can be more specifically defined as 'a series of events occurring sequentially in accordance with probability or necessity'.[40] For an event to be probable or necessary, it must be an event that 'would happen'. In other words, the event portrays an action that is conceivable within the context of the prevailing social order: 'the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity'.[41] The social basis of the probable and the necessary is well illustrated by the examples of probable and improbable actions that Aristotle gives. He considers it improbable, for example, that a woman could display courage or cleverness in the same way that a man can.[42]

Aristotle identifies two basic types of unified plot structure. The first is the simple plot or action, which is 'defined, continuous and unified, and in which the change of fortune comes about without reversal or recognition'. The second type,

---

[39] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 18.
[40] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 14.
[41] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 16.
[42] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.

and the one that Aristotle considers superior, is the complex plot. In a complex plot, the change in fortune does involve a reversal, or a specific type of reversal called a recognition. This reversal constitutes a single major change in the direction of the play's action, 'a change to the opposite in the actions being performed'.[43] Aristotle elaborates on his original trio of beginning, middle and end and transforms it into complication, reversal and resolution. The single unified action is now split into the three stages of the complex plot. First there is the complication or knotting: the chain of events that lead up to the reversal from good fortune to bad fortune. The major reversal constitutes the axis of the play. Finally there is the resolution or unknotting; the chain of events that are set into motion by the reversal of fortune. The reversal at the centre of the play's action literally changes the direction in which the play's action appears to be heading. For example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus is initially engaged in trying to solve the murder of Laius in order to save the people of Thebes from sickness. The complication leads us to believe that he has escaped the destiny which has been mapped out for him by the Oracle, but the play's reversal shows us that Oedipus was on the path towards fulfilling the prophecy all the time. In trying to avoid his fate, Oedipus fulfils it. The reversal occurs at the moment in which Oedipus and the audience become aware of the true direction of the play's action.

---

[43] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 18.

REVERSAL

Middle

COMPLICATION   RESOLUTION

Beginning   End

TRUE ACTION
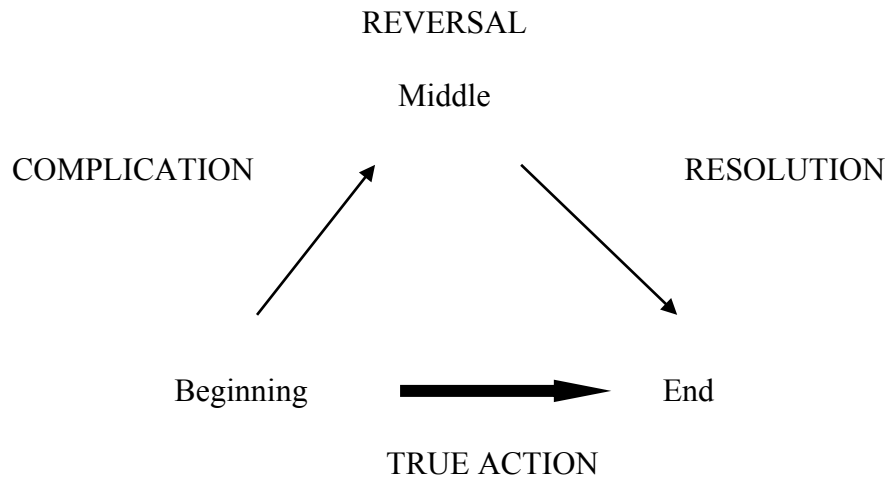
Aristotle stresses that the most effective kinds of reversal or recognition are those which arise out of a chain of logical causation: 'The best recognition of all is that which arises out of the actual course of events, where the emotional impact is achieved through events that are probable'.[44] The reversal must be both be both plausible and in retrospect seem inevitable. It must 'come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability'.[45] Chance events may astonish an audience, but they will be more astonishing if 'they appear to have happened as if for a purpose'.[46] After a reversal, there is a change to the opposite in how the tragic hero's actions are read, however there is no alteration to the fact of the actual actions themselves. It is the context of the actions that has changed with the reversal. At the beginning of the play, it is known that Oedipus killed an old man on the road to Thebes. By the end of the play, it has become clear that Oedipus killed his real father on the road to Thebes. Oedipus' actions were leading him towards his destiny all along. This line of action, rather than the initial

---

[44] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 27.
[45] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 18.
[46] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 17.

expectation of a different course of action in the complication, is the single unified action of the play. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus and the audience misread the direction of the action, the reversal reveals the 'correct' reading of the events.

Aristotle offers the playwright a clear set of guidelines concerning good plot structure. The basis of a good plot is a linear chain of probable events. These should be linked into a sequence by mechanical causation. The best kind of plots have a three-part structure based on the idea of complication, reversal and resolution, where the reversal marks a complete change in the direction that the audience are led to believe that the action is heading. Aristotle's concept of the single unified action remains the basis for thinking about plot construction in serious drama. Edgar states that 'plot is the way the story is presented dramatically to reveal an action'.[47] This action consists of a 'project', which Edgar defines as something someone sets out to do, for example 'the project of the Achilles story is his mother's ambition to arm him for a life of military glory'. This project is then followed by a 'contradiction', or in Aristotelian terms 'a reversal'. Edgar defines this as 'a clause beginning with the word 'but'', for example, carrying on the Achilles story, 'but her means of doing this is the very thing which brings about his untimely death'.[48] Thus serious drama continues to draw heavily Aristotle's notion of the complex plot, the single unified action and the reversal that reveals the 'correct' reading of events.

---

[47] Edgar, p. 23.
[48] Edgar, p. 25.

Stanislavski, conflict and mechanical causation

Aristotle notes that: 'Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in action and the goal of life is an activity not a quality'.[49] In this twentieth century translation of Aristotle, I would argue that are traces of a more contemporary approach to plot structure. It is unlikely that when Aristotle refers to the idea that has been translated as 'the goal of life', he means this in the psychological sense that these words now imply. Aristotle's notion of the goal of life in his philosophy is tied up instead with the concept of final causes. To explain an action by invoking its final cause is to explain it in terms of the teleological purpose that Aristotle conceives of all living and non-living things being subject to. For example, the final cause of rain would be to provide plants and animals with water. Rain has no desire to provide water for plants and animals, its final cause is innate within its form as rain. Our contemporary psychological interpretation of the phrase 'the goal of life' implies a personal desire that drives a character to take actions to fulfil it, rather than an Aristotelian final cause. Noel Greig describes plot in these psychological terms as: 'The progression of events by which the protagonist achieves/fails to achieve their conscious/unconscious goals'.[50] In this approach, plot is structured through the characters' pursuit of their various desires, the obstacles they are confronted with and their ability or inability to overcome them. Edgar too invokes this conception and in doing so, locates its origin: 'What characters do is pursue objectives, an insight which was codified by the Russian director Stanislavsky into a theory of acting which implies a theory of writing'.[51]

---

[49] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 11.
[50] Noel Greig, *Playwriting: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 118.
[51] Edgar, p. 48.

This contemporary conception of plot structure draws its basis from Stanislavski's 'grammar of acting'.[52] Stanislavski's system of actor training was designed to shift actors away from a concentration on the expression of feeling and towards a concentration on performing actions. In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski outlines a system of actions, obstacles and objectives, as an analytical tool for the actor to use in approaching the creation of a role. The same system is now frequently employed as a tool by writers to create the playtext in the first place. In describing the way that this system can be related to plot construction, I am going to use terms for Stanislavski's system, as I have experienced them most commonly being applied in practice, whilst working as a playwright and an actress in British theatre. I am employing these, rather than the original definitions of the terms, as the system now in use has mutated over time, due to the numerous different interpretations of Stanislavski's system by later practitioners. I will, however, refer back to Stanislavski's original thinking in order to explain the relationship of this system to the concept of mechanical causal development. I will take 'objective' to mean what a character wants in a scene or a 'unit' (section) of a scene, 'action' to be the intention with which a character performs a specific activity in order to achieve an objective, and 'obstacle' to be the thing that prevents a character's action from achieving their objective, whether this obstacle is another character's action, an external obstacle or an inner resistance within the character.

On a scenic level, a playwright can use the system to construct a plot in the following way. Each character is given an objective. This objective is a personal desire, expressed as "the character wants to ____". Usually, the different characters'

---

[52] Konstantín Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. v.

objectives in a scene are in direct or indirect conflict, in order to create obstacles. Each line of dialogue or each physical gesture in the dramatic text constitutes an activity, through the performance of which a character hopes to achieve their objective. The intention behind each of these activities can be described, as Max Stafford-Clark explains, 'by a transitive verb and gives the character's intention or tactic' – for example 'to seduce', 'to threaten' or 'to incite'.[53] The use of verbs as opposed to nouns in the description of objectives and actions is vital because objectives and actions indicate 'motion or action'.[54] Each time a particular action fails to achieve the character's objective, the character must try a different action. This system of thinking about the action of the plot is well exemplified in Max Stafford-Clark's analysis of a brief extract from Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*:

> **Objectives for the scene: Kite wants to seduce Wilful, Silvia wants to fend off Kite**
>
> Kite: **Befriends** – Sir, he in the plain coat is Captain Plume; I'm his sergeant and will take my oath on't.
>
> Silvia: **Warns** – What! You are Sergeant Kite!
>
> Kite: **Pleases** – At your service.
>
> Silvia: **Snubs** – Then I would not take your oath for a farthing.[55]

In this exchange, the reaction of one character causes a reaction from the other producing a chain of causation, with every interaction.

The progression of the play as whole is understood in terms of its super-objective. This is the through line of action that runs through the whole play, drawing all the smaller lines of action within its scope: 'This through line galvanizes all the

---

[53] Max Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George: The Account of a Rehearsal* (London: Nick Hern, 1997), p. 66.
[54] Stanislavski, p. 123.
[55] Stafford-Clark, p. 67.

small units and objectives of the play and directs them toward the super-objective. From then on they all serve the common purpose'.[56] Everything in the play must point towards the play's super-objective, 'even the most insignificant detail, if it is not related to the *super-objective*, will stand out as superfluous or wrong'. Stanislavski defines the super objective as the 'basic purpose of the play'.[57] Each scene, composed of its individual moments of action and reaction, draws towards this line of over-arching action, so producing a mechanical causal structure, not dissimilar to Aristotle's single unified action: 'All the minor lines are headed towards the same goal and fuse into one main current'.[58]

THE THROUGH LINE OF ACTION ⟶ THE SUPER-OBJECTIVE

Stanislavski identifies the strength of a play's super-objective with the quality of the play itself: 'the greater the literary work, the greater the pull of its super-objective'.[59] A play without a strong through line of action has a 'kind of deformed, broken backbone [and] cannot live'.[60]

Aristotle and Stanislavski offer different approaches to plot construction. Aristotle's is rooted in a belief that beauty in art is produced through order and appropriate magnitude. Stanislavski's system is based in a belief that action is always motivated by personal desire. Both systems, however, share similarities in their structure, in that they both privilege mechanical plot structures, in which the action

---

[56] Stanislavski, p. 274.
[57] Stanislavski, p. 271.
[58] Stanislavski, p. 276.
[59] Stanislavski, p. 271.
[60] Stanislavski, p. 277.

progresses on the basis of mechanical causality. The similarity between the two is further heightened by contemporary translations of Aristotle, which read him through the filter of Stanislavski's psychological analysis of plot structure.

Brecht and the politics of mechanical plot structures

The concept of the mechanical plot may remain central to serious drama's structure, but its dominance is not unquestioned. Brecht positions his epic theatre in direct opposition to principles that Aristotle sets forth in the *Poetics*. Though he is responding to the rise of naturalism, in which Stanislavski's acting system plays an influential role, Brecht positions his epic theatre in opposition to the theatre of Aristotle, not of Stanislavski and Ibsen. He states that: 'The theatre of our time still follows Aristotle's recipe'[61] and sees the principle of 'linear development' at the heart of Aristotle's conception of dramatic structure as highly problematic.[62] He argues that mechanical causal structure reproduces capitalist models of consumption, whilst diminishing the spectator's capacity to question or resist capitalism's structuring of the social order.

Brecht argues that mechanical plot structures encourage the audience to be emotionally engaged in the events on stage. Emotional engagement is undesirable in a political theatre because it puts the audience into a 'trance',[63] generating in them a state of extreme passivity:

> We see entire rows of human beings transported into a peculiar doped state, wholly passive, sunk without trace, seemingly in the grip of a severe poisoning attack. Their tense, congealed gaze shows that these

---

[61] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 87.
[62] Brecht, p. 37.
[63] Brecht, p. 136.

> people are the helpless and involuntary victims of the unchecked lurching of their emotions.[64]

Brecht describes the dramatic theatre's production of emotional engagement in capitalist terms. The dramatic play engages its audience by creating 'a growing demand' in the spectator for the 'supply' of an event. Brecht states that in order for this emotional engagement to occur the audience requires the action to progress between two points in a predictable manner, 'emotions will only venture on to completely secure ground, and cannot survive disappointment of any sort'. Aristotle's 'single inevitable chain of events' provides just such a secure ground for emotional engagement. [65]

In addition to this, Brecht sees Aristotle's mechanical plot structure as presenting events as unalterable and therefore reducing the spectators ability to resist the dominant social order: 'bundling together the events portrayed and presenting them as an inexorable fate, to which the human being is handed over helpless despite the beauty and significance of his reactions'.[66] Aristotle argues that theatre should tell '*universal*' stories. It deals with the way that events always '*would* happen' to a certain kind of person: 'The universal is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity'.[67] According to Brecht, a mechanical plot, produces this sense that event A will always lead to event B, which will always lead to event C under a given set of circumstances, whilst Aristotle's insistence on a sense of completeness, in which the movement of any part of the play's structure will disrupt the play as a whole, allows

---

[64] Brecht, p. 89.
[65] Brecht, p. 45.
[66] Brecht, p. 87.
[67] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 16.

for little flexibility. Aristotle's model produces the sense that the events of the plot are inevitable and at the same time suggests that these events constitute a kind of universal pattern which mirrors the course of events in the outside world. There is little sense of an alternative course of events, that is what else 'could have' happened if the characters had reacted differently to the events, made different choices or taken different courses of action under the given circumstances. Brecht is searching for a dramatic structure that suggests this idea of what 'could happen' instead of what 'would happen'. Brecht is trying to produce a sense that not only are the characters capable of altering their own path under the given circumstances, but that the given circumstances, the social conditions under which the characters operate, are also alterable. In the Aristotelian model, '[c]onditions are reported as if they could not be otherwise',[68] and if presented in a naturalistic style as 'a spontaneous, transitory, authentic, unrehearsed event',[69] then these conditions are not only fixed but also naturalised; presented as the natural state of things. Whereas Aristotle places importance on the idea of the 'universal', for Brecht it is vitally important that the given circumstances or social conditions are historicized; presented as 'the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period'[70] and that 'the conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and 'universally human''.[71] The sense of inevitability and universality in Aristotelian based drama makes the spectator passive. It 'wears down his capacity for action' . Brecht feels that theatre should

---

[68] Brecht, p. 277.
[69] Brecht, p. 141.
[70] Brecht, p. 139.
[71] Brecht, p. 140.

affect the spectator so that it 'arouses his capacity for action', by demonstrating that social conditions can be changed.[72]

Brecht argues that mechanical plot structures not only wear down the spectator's capacity for action, but also restrict their ability to question the social order, through narrowing their structures of thinking. Mechanical plot structures do not allow for divergences or digressions. The action is kept on the straight and narrow and this way of thinking is reproduced in the spectator, keeping their thoughts firmly on a similar path. As the spectator moves forward with the action, their perception is blinkered. They can 'think about a subject' but only 'within the confines of the subject'. Brecht states that 'this passion for propelling the spectator along a single track where he can look neither right nor left, up nor down, is something that the new school of play-writing must reject'.[73] Thus Brecht rejects mechanical plot structure on three counts: it reproduces capitalist structures of consumption; it wears down the spectator's capacity for action as it present events and social conditions as unalterable; and finally it narrows the spectator's structures of thinking, keeping them on the straight and narrow. In Brecht's eyes, mechanical plot structure is repressive in its nature.

Contractions

Brecht calls for playwrights to abandon mechanical plot structure altogether but Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* (Royal Court, 2008) is a play that demonstrates how a rigid adherence to mechanical causation in plot structure can act as a critique of mechanical causality. As with the plot and story, mechanical causation remains a

---

[72] Brecht, p. 137.
[73] Brecht, p. 44.

useful tool for examining dramatic structure, despite that the fact that this form of causation has been superseded by 'the indeterminacy principle of modern physics'.[74] As Jameson observes, though mechanical causation is somewhat outmoded:

> I would want to argue that the category of mechanical effectivity retains a purely local validity in cultural analysis where it can be shown that billiard-ball causality remains one of the (nonsynchronous) laws of our particular fallen social reality.[75]

As mechanical causality is still in use in dramatic structure it remains a tool with which we can analyse that structure.

The usual way in which a playwright is encouraged to challenge the 'so-called universal rules of playwriting' is by breaking them. Noel Grieg believes that 'rules are there to be broken', however he qualifies this by stating that 'we can break them only if we know them inside out'.[76] David Edgar thinks that 'playwrights acknowledge both that there are legitimate formal expectations, but that they have the right – cussedly – to defy them'.[77] In accordance with this line of logic, the way to challenge the dominance of mechanical causation in plot structure, is to break its rules. The problem with the concept of rule-breaking, however, is that the playwright is still working within the parameters of the rules. To break a rule, as is evident in the quotes above, it is necessary to invoke the rule in question. Rule breaking both breaks rules, whilst at the same time reproducing the rules that are being broken.

Žižek argues that the assumption that breaking the rules challenges them is incorrect. Instead, he argues that to break rules is actually to comply with the current prevailing hegemony. He suggests that on the underside of public law there is a

---

[74] Fredric Jameson, p. 9.
[75] Fredric Jameson, p. 10.
[76] Greig, p. 99.
[77] Edgar, p. 205.

shadowy unwritten code that permits but does not acknowledge certain kinds of transgression and that these periodic transgressions are vital to maintaining public order. Žižek puts forward the idea that these transgressions help cement the social bonds within a community through common guilt. For example, in the military, transgressions of official regulations, such as the illegal punishment of a fellow soldier, reaffirm the cohesion of the unit. Žižek states that:

> explicit, public rules do not suffice, so they must be supplemented by a clandestine, 'unwritten' code aimed at those who, although they violate no public rules, maintain a kind of inner distance and do not truly identify with *l'esprit du corps*.

Žižek argues that these transgressions are built into the social order and consititute, rather than a challenge to it, a condition of its continuing stability: 'What most deeply 'holds together' a community is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community's 'normal' everyday rhythms, but rather *identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law's suspension*'.[78] Thus the action of breaking the rules reinforces the social bonds which maintain the stability of a community, rather than challenging them.

In contrast, Žižek argues that a strict adherence to the rules may constitute a more effective method of challenging them. Breaking the rules requires a level of cynicism, as the ability to transgress necessitates the ability to put an ironic distance between the individual and the prevailing social order. It is commonly assumed that ironic distance from the system constitutes a subversive attitude, however it could be argued that ironic distance towards the prevailing system is actually the normative attitude:

---

[78] Slavoj Žižek, 'Why Are Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst Not Fascists?', in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings Volume Two,* ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 64.

> What if, on the contrary, the dominant attitude of the contemporary 'post-ideological' universe is precisely cynical distance towards public values? What if this distance far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system *requires* cynical distance?

Cynicism, which is commonly perceived of as a threat to the prevailing social system, is actually the ultimate way of complying with it, the norm and not the exception. Thus Žižek turns the usual way that we conceive the action of rule-breaking on its head. Breaking the rules is repositioned as the normative action. He argues, instead, that a strict adherence to a set of rules may be a more effective way to challenge them. A complete compliance with the structures of a hegemonic system may expose it more effectively than their transgression: '*it 'frustrates' the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but represents an over-identification with it'.*[79] For an example of how this tactic of over-identification might work in practice, Žižek looks to the work of the Neues Slowenisches Kunst movement. In the 1987, a group of artists from the movement known as Novi Kolektivizem, won a competition to produce a poster to commemorate The Day of the Communist Yugoslav Youth. Their winning poster was an reproduction of a 1937 Nazi Propaganda poster in which the insignia had been altered to Yugoslavian equivalents. The poster identified so completely with the values of the communist system in Yugoslavia that it was chosen to represent those values, but the revelation of the poster's origin effectively exposed the their authoritarian nature. If Žižek's concept of over-identification is applied to plot structure, it suggests that a strict adherence to mechanical causation could challenge this structure more effectively than breaking its rules would.

---

[79] Žižek, p. 65.

Mike Bartlett's play *Contractions* presents a critique of the nature of mechanical plot structure through its strict adherence to it. This is a play with the idea of rules at the heart of both its content and its structure. The play is about Emma, who falls in love with her work colleague Darren. Unfortunately, she seems to have forgotten about or simply not read a clause in her employment contract which prohibits her from having romantic relationships with the people she works with. The play offers us two different approaches to dealing with a set of rules. In the first part of the play Emma tries to circumvent the rules, assuming that, although the rule about having romantic relationships is clearly outlined in her contract, it is one of those rules which you are allowed in practice to transgress. In the second part of the play, Emma attempts to fulfil her desire to be with Darren, by following the terms of her contract to the letter. In both cases, Emma's attempts to conduct a relationship with Darren fail.

Emma assumes, as Žižek suggests, that there is a level of transgression permitted by any system of rules. In the first scene the Manager brings her attention to the rule in question:

> No employee, officer or director of the company shall engage with any other employee, officer or director of the company in any relationship, activity or act which is wholly, predominantly or partly of a nature which could be characterised as sexual or romantic, without notifying the company of said relationship, activity or act.[80]

Emma seems to believe that the rule does not apply to her, even though she has agreed to abide by this rule by signing the employment contract, which contains it. She decides not to notify the Manager about her feelings for Darren, despite the fact that the rule compels her to do so. To the manager's repeated prompts asking if there

---

[80] Mike Bartlett, *Contractions* (London: Methuen, 2008), p. 7.

is 'anything else' Emma would like to tell her, Emma answers no.[81] For Emma, the

freedom to bend the rules is part of what it means to be human:

> You're a person.
>
> You could just let me go.
>
> If you wanted to.[82]

On the surface, the play deals with an interpersonal struggle between Emma

and her Manager. It charts Emma's Stanislavskian pursuit of her personal desires and

her attempts to deal with the obstacles that are put in her way, so adhering firmly to a

mechanical plot structure. Each action that Emma takes, in order to achieve her

desire of having a relationship with Darren, produces a corrective reaction from the

Manager, in order to split Emma and Darren apart again in accordance with the rule.

In the first movement of the play, Emma deliberately flouts the rules by going out for

a romantic dinner with Darren. When questioned about this by the Manager, she lies,

stating that the dinner was not romantic, therefore she wasn't breaking the rules. The

manager reacts by telling Darren that the dinner was not a romantic dinner, causing

Darren to break up with Emma. In the second movement of the play, Emma tells the

Manager about her relationship with Darren in accordance with the rule in her

contract. The Manager responses by asking Emma to enter into a new contract

setting out an end date for the relationship. Emma gets pregnant, assuming that this

means that the relationship can continue beyond the end date outlined in the second

contract. The Manager responds by threatening Emma with breach of contract,

forcing Emma to finish the relationship. Emma has the baby and so the Manager

relocates Darren to Kiev, because the baby constitutes a continuing sexual

---

[81] Bartlett, p. 8.
[82] Bartlett, p. 48.

relationship. The baby mysteriously dies and Emma argues that Darren should now be able to return from Kiev. The Manager informs Emma that Darren doesn't think that there's anything for him to come back to now that the baby is dead. Darren and Emma's relationship is ended again. Every move that Emma makes towards her desire of being with Darren, is successfully countered by the Manager and Emma is brought back in line with the strictures of the contract she has signed. The structure of the plot resembles Aristotle's complex plot, in that the play contains several reversals of the action that bring Emma back into line with the rule outlined in her contract. In each scene, the audience initially believe that Emma's actions will ultimately achieve her objective of having a successful relationship with Darren, in the same way that the audience are at first led to believe that Oedipus may escape his fate in *Oedipus Rex*. The Manager reverses the effects of all of Emma's actions, so bringing her back into line, not with a pre-destined fate, but rather with the economic relations defined by her contract.

Emma's Stanislavskian journey is an emotional one and the means that she employs to achieve her objective become more and more emotional as the play progresses. In scene eight, Emma tries to gain the Manager's support by encouraging her to empathise with the pain that Darren and Emma experienced when Emma ended their relationship:

> I told him what you said, and he said that we would have to leave. That he couldn't bear the thought of not being with me. He held my hand and told me that no one could pull us apart. He said that he would protect me, and that we could live as a family. That we would make it work somehow. But I said with a baby, we can't afford to be out of work, we just can't, the way things are these days. That we had to think of the baby first. Then he started to cry and I took my hand away, and we sat for about five minutes not saying anything.

 The manager's response is completely devoid of emotion. She is purely rational. She simply to points out Emma's inability to measure time correctly 'I've got that you sat together without saying anything for ten minutes'.[83] By scene twelve, Emma's emotional agitation has reached such a height that she can only express herself by vomiting in front of the Manager. The Manager is an unemotional brick against which Emma can only bang her head harder and harder.

The character of the manager operates, not on an emotional plane, but on a purely mechanical one. The manager represents the authority of post-Fordism. She views the world purely in terms of economic relations and the contracts that are used to define and protect them. She displays the rationality that Weber and Sombart attribute to capitalist systems, but none of the social virtues. Her rationally is applied without compassion in her quest to secure maximum efficiency from her employees. She has no name and cannot offer one despite Emma's demands for one. She is purely identified with her character role, that of the manager. Emma repeatedly appeals to the Manager's humanity. She asks the Manager to acknowledge a need for the 'Mess. Play. Failure',[84] that Bartlett positions as the essence of human nature. The Manager cannot be humanised. All Emma's emotional attempts to do this fail. The Manager understands nothing about human emotions. She cannot empathise with Emma and Darren's suffering. She can only define love in legal terms, as her explanation of the meaning of the word romantic reveals: 'Any gesture, indication, communication (verbal or otherwise), appearance, message, understanding or organised meeting or event which is perpetrated with a view to advancing the

---

[83] Bartlett, p. 32.
[84] Bartlett, p. 49.

relationship towards love'.[85] This immunity to both love and pain is summed up in Emma's question 'Do you bleed?'[86] This question points up the inability of the Manager to feel pain, and at the same time invokes the concept of love and sexuality, through its link to menstruation. It echoes Shylock's famous appeal for the recognition of his humanity 'if you prick us do we not bleed?',[87] and the manager's failure to respond to the question, brings her humanity in to question.

The Manager is purely concerned with the accumulation of capital. Her concern is the health of the company, not the well-being of her employees. She only remembers her 'duty of care'[88] to Emma and sends her to 'see someone',[89] when her 'sales figures are down'.[90] The Manager only understands relationships in terms of economics. Emma's personal relationships should exist purely within the private sphere, but because they are seen as threatening economic relations, they are drawn into the public sphere and redefined in economic terms. By the end of the play, Emma has learnt to define herself purely in economic terms. She measures her health through the health of her sales figures, the economic value that she produces for the company: 'My sales figures are back to normal after the meeting with the doctor. My concentration is far better. I think it's all going very well. Thanks'.[91] The Manager has brought Emma fully back under control. There are moments in the play, where Emma appears to be able to escape from the system, but she is shown as being helplessly at its mercy because she needs money. It is the need for her and Darren to

---

[85] Bartlett, p. 12.
[86] Bartlett, p. 43.
[87] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (London: Routledge, 1988), III, i, 58.
[88] Bartlett, p. 46.
[89] Bartlett, p. 47.
[90] Bartlett, p. 46.
[91] Bartlett, p. 51.

provide for the baby which forces them to split up, as the only other choice is redundancy. When Emma attempts to leave the company herself, the threat of being sued for breach of contract forces her to stay. As Emma herself states 'without money you can't live any life, can you?'[92] She is trapped by the financialisation of her day to day life. Economic concerns ultimately take priority over human relationships. By the end of the play Emma is a model employee but the process has dehumanised her. Apart from being able to define her economic value to the company through the communication of her sales figures, she is only able to respond to questions and her answers consist of little more than yes or no. Watching the process of her dehumanisation in the original production at the Royal Court was, as Sam Marlowe noted in The Times, an 'intensely disturbing experience'.[93] As Randy Martin observes the 'refusal or inability to take up the new social contract has punishing effects'.[94]

In *Contractions* we can see an image of a financialised society, in which we assume that we are still free and able to bend the rules, but which our indebtedness and the accumulation of personal capital controls our every move, even in the private sphere. This is a system in which economic relations take priority over human relationships. Bartlett's strict adherence to the rules of dramatic structure at a narrative level serves to highlight the full extent to which economics has claimed the linear narrative of human progress for itself: '[f]inancialisation makes a noble attempt to adhere economic movement to the passage of time in a way that progress

---

[92] Bartlett, p. 32.

[93] Sam Marlowe, 'Contractions', *Times Online*, 2008 <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article4067597.ece> [accessed 6 October 2009].

[94] Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 10.

once did'.[95] He takes the very structures that Brecht criticises as supporting capitalist society through the inscription of the economic relations of supply and demand within them, and by strict adherence to these rules uses them to show how financialisation narrows human existence down to a purely economic basis.

Generations

While Bartlett's strict adherence to mechanical plotting reveals the problematic political nature of this structure, debbie tucker green's *Generations* (Young Vic, 2007) offers an alternative model of plot construction, one which invokes notions of absence and decay through repetition. The play articulates the devastation of three generations of a black South African family and slowly reveals the cause of this devastation, an unidentified disease, by implication AIDS. The play articulates a structure in which the sum of the effects produced within the system is revealed to be caused by a single factor that pervades the whole system. As such the model of causality here is predominantly expressive.

Generations centres around a single scene, in which a family take part in the cooking of a meal together. Their conversation revolves around the passing down of cooking skills from generation to generation, 'I was the cooker – you was the cookless – I was the cooker who coached the cookless. I coached you to / cook',[96] and a shared understanding of the sexual connotations inscribed in the idea of cooking:

> GRANDMA He looked like he needed a meal.
>
> You looked like you needed a meal.

---

[95] Martin, p. 10.

[96] debbie tucker green, *Trade and Generations* (London: Nick Hern, 2005), p. 72.

DAD	I needed a meal.
GRANDAD	He looked like I did.
GRANDMA	You needed more than a meal
DAD	She looked well fed.
GRANDAD	Got more than a meal –
MUM	eh – what?
GRANDAD	Got more than I asked for.[97]

The scene is repeated five times, and at the end of each time, a character exits the stage. Each time, the scene is repeated it becomes progressively shorter, as each character's contribution to dialogue and the action of the scene is lost. The scenes themselves are underscored at various points by the singing of an African choir, whose dirge invokes the names of those who have died. The tone of their singing describes an emotional journey from 'jubilation to hushed lamentation' during the progress of the play.[98] By the final scene, only the grandparents remain to grieve over the deaths of both their children and grandchildren.

The structure of the play could be simply classed as repetitive, but can be more productively thought of as iterative. Derrida argues that both written and spoken communication are iterable. Communication does not function in line with an idealized model, in which an 'original' spoken or written utterance full of transparent intent or meaning is passed from an original producer to an original receiver. Instead communication involves the repetition of recognisable written and spoken marks,

---

[97] tucker green, p. 73.

[98] Kate Bassett, 'Generations', *The Independent*, 2007
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/equus-gielgud-londonbrgenerations-young-vic-londonbrthe-eleventh-capital-royal-court-upstairs-london-438823.html> [accessed 7 August 2011].

which do not contain meaning in themselves but are part of a recognisable code: 'The possibility of repeating and thus of identifying the marks is implicit in every code, making it into a network [*une grille*] that is communicable, transmittable, decipherable, iterable for a third, and hence for every possible user in general'.[99] Therefore, communication consists of the repetition of recognisable utterances from a shared code or of utterances which are readable within the context of a shared code:

> Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?[100]

People understand each other because communication involves the repetition of recognisable codes. Iteration, however, is not simply a case of repetition. Iteration is a process that involves both repetition ('identificatory' iterability) and variation ('altering' iterability): '"iterability" does not signify simply … repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this same idealized in the singularity of the event, for instance in this or that speech act'.[101] For example, in this attempt to communicate, that is to iterate, Derrida's concept of iterability, it is inevitable that I will alter it:

> Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat 'itself'; it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say *and* would have wanted to say, to understand something other than ... etc.[102]

Iteration is a process involving both reproduction and alteration, as part of what is

---

[99] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 8.
[100] Derrida, p. 18.
[101] Derrida, p. 119.
[102] Derrida, p. 62.

iterated is different, so only part of the 'original' utterance remains.

The repeated scene in *Generations* is iterative. Iteration, Derrida recognises, plays a role in ritual events and I would argue that these events themselves are iterations. The structure of a meeting, the launching of a ship or a marriage all involve the iteration of a certain ritual. There is a script, and though there may be variations on this script in each individual event, the overall structure of the script identifies it as a meeting, the launching of a ship, a marriage etc. This ritualised behaviour is heavily present in the iterated scene that is the basis of *Generations*. The scene is a representation of the ritual of cooking the family meal. The two main subjects of the characters' conversation are ritual activities that constitute rites of passage: courtship, and the passing of skills from one generation to the next. Their ritual nature is emphasised by their reproduction from generation to generation. The ritual passing down of cooking skills from mother to daughter, from daughter to granddaughter is invoked through the repetition of the words 'I coached her to cook'.[103] The characters also use the exact repetition of phrases to describe their own experience of the rite of passage of courtship:

MUM   This is how they start -

GRANDMA   oh.

JNR SISTER   Sis, 'this is how they start'

DAD   have to start somewhere -

MUM   oh.

GRANDAD *laughs.*

This is how your Father started with me.

---

[103] tucker green, p. 71.

GRANDMA   This is how your Father started with me.[104]

The ritual of courtship is positioned as a shared experience across the generations. Mum and Grandma mirror each other's words and reactions exactly. Grandad's laugh implies a recognition of the situation being described. The quotation marks around the Jnr Sister's repetition of her mother's words imply the process of direct citation. She is learning the ritual. In both the first and the second scenes, the words of courtship that pass between the Girlfriend and the Boyfriend are also enclosed in quotation marks. On one hand this indicates the fact that the Girlfriend is recounting a past event that happened elsewhere to her family, but the quotation marks can also be read as suggesting the iterative nature of the courtship ritual. In the Boyfriend's courting of the Girlfriend, he is reproducing a ritual with an identifiable and recognisable script.

While the first scene enacts the reproduction of experience from generation to generation, the rest of play enacts the breakdown of this reproduction. At the end of each repetition of the scene a member of the family's passing is lamented by the choir and they leave the stage. The youngest generation of the family disappear first, the Jnr Sister at the end of scene one, followed by the Boyfriend and the Girlfriend at the end of scene two. The middle generation follow next, Dad at the end of scene three and Mum at the end of scene four. In the final scene, the grandparents are left alone. The chain of repeated rites of passage is broken. Whereas the first scene enacts the passing of skills and experience from generation to generation, the last scene, with its final repetition of the grandparent's lines, becomes a lament for a break in the chain of inheritance. They are left to repeat what remains of the scene

---

[104] tucker green, p. 73.

alone. The lines '*I coached her to cook*'[105] and 'He asked her if she could cook'[106] become mournful memories of the younger generations that have been lost.

With the loss of each character, the scene decays as the words and actions of that character are lost. Despite this, each scene continues to make sense within its own context, as if each scene is a 'original' self-contained conversation in its own right. It is clear, however, when viewing the scenes in sequence, one after another, that the omitted lines change and alter the meaning of the dialogue and the tone of the scene. As the lines are iterated, their sense alters. In the first scene, a fiery exchange between the Jnr Sister, the Girlfriend and Boyfriend implies that the Boyfriend is attracted to the Jnr Sister:

BOYFRIEND   'You look like – '

JNR SISTER   'Does she look like someone who can't?'

BOYFRIEND   'You look like someone who could – '

GIRLFRIEND   'Do I look like someone who couldn't?'

JNR SISTER   'She doesn't look like someone who / couldn't.'

BOYFRIEND   'You look like someone who should.'[107]

In the second scene, with the Jnr Sister's lines omitted, the remaining lines imply that the Boyfriend is attracted to the Girlfriend:

BOYFRIEND   'You look like – you look like someone who could – '

GIRLFRIEND   'Do I look like someone who / couldn't?'

BOYFRIEND   'You look like someone who should.'[108]

[105] tucker green, p. 87.
[106] tucker green, p. 86.
[107] tucker green, p. 74.
[108] tucker green, p. 79.

The scene that is repeated is ostensibly the same scene, with one more actor's lines omitted each time. Though the words that the actors speak remain the same, their meaning and tone is significantly altered by the absence of the omitted lines. As Gerald Berkowitz notes, 'lines that were once joking take on the colours of nostalgia, anger or grief with each new loss'.[109] The play's structure may appear repetitive but it is actually iterative in the sense that it is repetition that produces variation.

As each scene is iterated, the previous versions of the scene are invoked. The omitted lines remain as a palpable absence, as does the missing actors' physical presence from the stage. Though the scene dwindles in terms of its content with each iteration, the weight of what has been lost increases. As Lyn Gardner notes, 'the stage suddenly becomes crowded with an appalling absence'.[110] This sense of absence is accentuated by subtle changes in the tense and subject of the lines of the dialogue, which shift the absent characters out of the present moment and into past. The tense of the verbs in the lines moves further into the past. Dad's line about his daughter shifts from 'She doesn't cook'[111] in the first two scenes, where the Girlfriend is present, to 'She didn't / cook'[112] in the third scene, after she has left. The growing absence of characters is also indicated through changes in the subject of the lines. In the first two scenes, Mum addresses the line 'This is how your Father started with me' to her daughters.[113] In the third scene, both daughters are gone and subject of the

[109] Gerald Berkowitz, 'Generations', *The Stage*, 2007 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/16087/generations> [accessed 7 August 2011].
[110] Lyn Gardner, 'Generations', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/mar/01/theatre2> [accessed 7 August 2011].
[111] tucker green, p. 71.
[112] tucker green, p. 82.
[113] tucker green, p. 79.

line alters so that it is addressed directly to Dad, 'This is how you started with me'.[114] With the death of his daughters, Dad is no longer a father. In the fourth scene, Mum can no longer talk to Dad as he is gone, so the line changes its subject again, 'This is how he started with me'.[115] The actors' delivery in the Young Vic production took note of these changes. Like Dad, Grandad slowly loses his different roles within the family and this is marked by changes of subject within the text: from 'don't pay your Grandfather no mind'[116] to 'Don't pay your Father no mind'[117] to 'Don't pay it no mind'.[118] As Gerald Berkowitz observes, the actors imbued these subtle changes with the significance they imply, 'the play's most powerful moments coming in small horrors like … the discovery that Grandfather can no longer be called by that name'.[119]

The main movement in *Generations* is towards decay, but, as Derrida states, the variation inherent in iteration, which some linguists see purely as the corruption and contamination of idealized original meaning, also generates new meanings. Through the iteration of a spoken or written utterance, the 'moment of its production is irrevocably lost', but at the same time, the rupture of a utterance from its 'original' moment of production opens up new possibilities within the utterance. The utterance gains meaning through its transposition into new situations: 'One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or *grafting* it onto other chains'.[120] This generative process happens with the lines of dialogue in *Generations*,

---

[114] tucker green, p. 83.
[115] tucker green, p. 86.
[116] tucker green, p. 83.
[117] tucker green, p. 86.
[118] tucker green, p. 88.
[119] Berkowitz.
[120] Derrida, p. 9.

as they are iterated in scene after scene, gathering new meanings and altering their perlocutionary nature as the context of the situation shifts. The scene itself not only loses content in its iteration, but it also gains it, as over the course of the five scenes, the reason for the deaths is slowly articulated. Towards the end of the first scene and second scene, the boyfriend articulates the presence of the disease as an unfinished 'The – '[121]. He is unable to complete the utterance. The Jnr Sister, the Girlfriend and the Grandma ask him to clarify what he is saying, but he is unable to articulate the presence of the disease: 'The what is there to say?'[122] In the third scene the Dad iterates and builds on the Boyfriend's incomplete utterance, expanding it to 'This thing'.[123] In the fourth scene the Grandma iterates and expands the utterance again, 'This big dying thing'.[124] The actual nature of the dying thing is clarified by the Grandad in the final scene, 'This thing. This dying thing … This unease. This dis-ease'.[125] Through the process of the iteration of the scene, the cause of the deaths slowly comes to light. In this sense, tucker green's use of an iterative structure can read as employing a model of expressive causality. The play charts the decay of a family, and by implication a community and its culture, over time. The iterative process moves from a state of presence to absence with the loss of characters and their contributions to the family's shared rituals. Out of the growing absence, slowly emerges the presence at the centre that is its cause, the disease that is ravaging the family and its community, AIDS.

---

[121] tucker green, pp. 75, 80–81.
[122] tucker green, pp. 75, 81.
[123] tucker green, p. 84.
[124] tucker green, p. 87.
[125] tucker green, p. 89.

Complex seeing

tucker green uses the iteration of a single scene in *Generations* in a way that requires the spectator to read and reread the scene in order to draw conclusions about its meaning. Brecht argued that, instead of employing mechanical plot structures that guide a spectator down a single line of thought. In a similar way, the linear narrative of economic growth blinkers us. Its simplicity blinds us to the complexity of the workings of the contemporary financial mechanisms. Brecht argues a playwright should attempt to structure her plot in way that encourages the spectator to reread its events from different viewpoints. He calls this process 'complex seeing'.The structure of such a plot should encourage the spectator to think around the confines of what is presented to him, rather than only within them: 'it is perhaps more important to be able to think above the stream than to think in the stream'.[126] Complex seeing not only encourages the audience to reread, but also asks them to examine the attitudes that lie behind different possible readings. Through complex seeing, the act of seeing in itself is estranged.

Brecht's epic plot attempts to describe a different model of causation, which would produce an active complex seeing spectator rather than a passive one. Such plots would move 'in curves' as opposed to a 'linear development'. They would employ 'montage' rather than 'growth' and 'jumps' rather than 'evolutionary determinism'.[127] Brecht favours the use of 'diversions' which disrupt the supply and demand system of dramatic theatre and so disable the production of emotional engagement. These diversions would produce the broken-backed structure that Stanislavski dismisses as dead, but Brecht argues that breaking the plot's spine

---

[126] Brecht, p. 44.
[127] Brecht, p. 37.

productively disrupts the audience's emotional involvement by undermining the secure ground that is required for emotional engagement. As well as discouraging empathy, a broken-backed structure has the advantage of breaking the illusion that the events of the play are inevitable, 'an inexorable fate'. Instead the play would expose inexorable fate, is 'showing it up as human contriving'.[128] More specifically Brecht states that he is searching for a plot structure that 'knows no objective but only a finishing point, and is familiar with a different kind of chain, whose course need not be a straight one but may quite well be in curves or even in leaps'.[129] Rather than creating a linear chain of events, Brecht wants the playwright to make use of as many possible forms of causal connection as possible:

> The new school of play-writing must systematically see to it that its form includes 'experiment'. It must be free to use connections on every side; it needs equilibrium and has a tension which governs its component parts and 'loads' them against one another.[130]

Brecht's thoughts on scene structure are useful here in order to help clarify the kind of structure that he has in mind when he talks abstractly of curves, leaps and diversions. Whereas each Aristotelian scene leads to the next and is itself caused by the previous scene, 'one scene makes another', in epic structure Brecht states that it is 'each scene for itself'.[131] Each Brechtian scene is contained within itself. It does not contain any set up for the next scene and so does not raise a sense of expectation of how the action will develop. Neither is it necessary to have seen the previous scene in order to understand the context of the next scene. The next scene is not a necessary development of the previous one. Each scene is complete in itself: 'the

---

[128] Brecht, p. 87.
[129] Brecht, p. 45.
[130] Brecht, p. 46.
[131] Brecht, p. 37.

individual scenes contain their own meaning'. They exist both in isolation and as part of a larger structure in which they are not merely 'subordinate, purely functional component parts to an ending in which everything is resolved'.[132]

Brecht encourages the playwright to create irregular rhythms and patterns within her plot structure, so drawing the audience's attention to the construction of the plot through its divergences from the norm. Brecht explains this concept most clearly when he discusses the effect of irregular verse structures in poetry and his thoughts on verse construction can easily be expanded to apply to plot construction. He states that regular verse structures, particularly traditional rhyming structures, tend to pass by the listener's ear without the listener hearing the poem's content. The familiar properties of poetic structure identify the words that are heard as a poem, but not the particularities of the actual poem being read. The poem 'glide[s] past the ear'. The poem does not 'cut deep enough' into the listener's consciousness.[133] Brecht considers irregular verse strucutres to be more gestic than regular ones, 'irregular rhythms must further the gestic way of putting things'.[134] Irregular rhythms help the listener to listen, by drawing their attention to the poem by disrupting the listener's expectations. The listener questions the poem. Is it a poem? How is it a poem? The particularity of the poem, both in terms of its structure and its content is registered, and the listener becomes aware of the attitude of the poem towards its content; irregular rhythms expose the perlocutionary nature of the text. The same notion can be applied to dramatic structure. Familiar dramatic structures float pass the spectator like the regular rhythms of verse. The spectator recognises that they are watching a

---

[132] Brecht, p. 279.
[133] Brecht, p. 120.
[134] Brecht, p. 117.

play, but they may not actively engage with it. They may not register the actual content of the play nor the attitude that the play adopts towards that content. Disrupted dramatic structure draws the spectator's attention to the particularity of the play more strongly as their expectations are confounded; the spectator questions whether what they are seeing is a play and if so how it relates to their normal conception of a play. The spectator is activated because rather than being fed causal links by the playwright, they have to build the connections between the scenes themselves. The spectator is no longer manipulated by the performance like 'wax in the magicians' hands', but is instead 'enabled to have an experience'. The spectator is asked to make sense of what they seen, rather than trusting the playwright to make sense of it for them by guiding them towards a 'correct' reading of events. Brecht envisages a more democratic relationship between the spectator and the performance, where the spectator participates actively, 'is forced to cast his vote'.[135]

Brecht describes two structural tools, which could offer the playwright the possibility of working outside of the bounds of mechanical causality. The first structural tool is rooted in the idea of the 'not ... but'. This is a gestic construction defining a particular dialectical attitude, which implies that every sentence or gesture in a performance conveys a decision, 'not that, but this'. It contains both the negation of one possibility and the affirmation of another. This means that as well as conveying all the events that did happen, a playwright is able to convey the possible events that didn't happen. The idea of contradiction rather than unity becomes central to plot structure:

> the structural form didn't rule out all the individual's deviations from the
> straight course, as brought about by 'just life' (a part is always played

---

[135] Brecht, p. 39.

here by outside relationships with other circumstances that 'don't take place'; a far wider cross section is taken), but used such deviations as a motive force of the play's dynamics.[136]

Brecht articulates the concept of 'not ... but' most clearly in his descriptions of epic acting techniques:

> he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, so that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants.

Though the construction 'not ... but' suggests a binary way of thinking, Brecht makes it clear it is not a pure case of one thing or the other. The actor must project the many possibilities not taken alongside the one possibility that is represented onstage. All the things that a character 'doesn't do must be contained in what he does'.[137] The spectator must be able to discern all the events that don't take place as a result of a decision, as strongly as he can discern what does:

> The dialectical performance of the actor must somehow contain within it not only everything the character does do, but also that which the character does not do, so that there may be discerned some alternative to the events that take place on the stage.[138]

The represented must gesture towards the unrepresented. Sean Carney links Brecht's 'not ... but' to the Freudian concept of Verneinung or de-negation. The negation contained in the 'not ... but' both negates and at the same time affirms the possibility that is denied. As Jacques Lacan observes: 'what is simultaneously actualized and denied comes to be avowed'.[139] In order to negate a possibility it is necessary to first of all acknowledge that possibility, and by doing so we affirm its existence. The 'not

---

[136] Brecht, p. 46.
[137] Brecht, p. 137.
[138] Sean Carney, *Brecht and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 29.
[139] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960,* trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 64.

... but' in its own definition exists clearly at the level of text. Its very definition is in the form of a sentence construction. Thus it exists as much as a tool for the playwright as for the actor. The concept of the 'not ...but' suggests a possibility of a dramatic structure, which rather than a linear representation of what did happen, presents us with an ever-branching web of represented and non-represented possibilities, which suggests that both the state of the individual and the conditions under which she lives are alterable.

Brecht's second structural tool for producing a non-linear plot structure is the footnote: 'Footnotes and the habit of turning back in order to check a point need to be introduced into play-writing'.[140] Carney sees Brecht's theatrical footnotes as 'moments where the overall structure of the work gives way to a spontaneous alternative response'.[141] The footnote represents a failure of the linear to contain or represent thought. Thought has overspilled the structures that we have constructed in order to articulate it. These structures are exposed as insufficient. As Jameson puts it, a footnote:

> designates a moment in which systematic philosophizing and the empirical study of concrete phenomena are both false in themselves; in which living thought, squeezed out from between them, pursues its fitful existence in the small print at the bottom of the page.[142]

Carney posits that the footnote transforms the passive spectator into 'a reading spectator'.[143] The play becomes an object that must be read and reread. Complex seeing is induced in the spectator. Each rereading of the text produces a different reading, so that the play can never be enclosed within one definitive reading. Both

---

[140] Brecht, p. 44.
[141] Carney, p. 34.
[142] Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 9.
[143] Carney, p. 34.

the concept of the footnote and the 'not ... but' challenge, not only the idea of mechanical causation or development, but they also transgress Aristotle's law of magnitude. The plot structure with its digressions and its inscription of alternative actions aims to generate a plethora of possible readings and is no longer a structure that can be taken in as Aristotle thought desirable 'at one view'.[144] At the same time, the relationship between plot and story is no longer rooted in the first position, where the plot is seen as a variable interpretation of the story. Inside the relationship between plot and story moves towards the second position, where the elements of the plot are fixed in the playtext, but imply a variety of different stories, depending on how the spectator connects the events in her individual reading of them. The audience are encouraged towards an awareness of the attitudes and structures that shape the different readings of the play itself.

Six Characters in Search of an Author

Rupert Goold and Ben Power's free 'radical reworking' of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Headlong, 2008) can be read as utilising both the strategies of the 'not … but' and the footnote to create a predominantly structural causal form that asks the audience to reread and question the nature of reality. Goold and Power relocate the action of Pirandello's original play from a theatre to a television studio, where a producer is engaged in editing a drama-documentary on assisted suicide when six mysterious characters appear demanding that she tell their story instead. Goold and Power added a new fourth act to the play, which Kate Bassett in *The Independent* aptly retitled 'A Dozen Endings in Search of an Editor',

---

[144] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 14.

whose scenes which act as footnotes to Pirandello's original play.[145] The footnote scenes of this final act encourage the audience to reread the previous three acts in the manner of Brecht's complex seeing.

When the six characters burst into the play demanding an author, what they are really demanding is the creation of a mechanical plot to represent the family's complex story. They view their story as universal and ahistorical, while the roles that they are doomed to play within it are unalterable. The house in which the characters live could stand for any house. It is 'nondescript'.[146] The room in which the Father commits incest with his Stepdaughter could stand for any number of rooms in which similar events have occurred, 'it's meant to be representative ... it stands for all the rooms in which women have to do what you did'.[147] They see themselves as playing predefined roles and are doomed forever to repeat the same actions, as the Father explains: 'And no matter how many times our story is told, we are always the same. This mother will always weep, this girl will always laugh, I will remain for ever crucified with guilt'. The characters' story and the characters themselves are presented as unalterable, 'we are unchanging, immutable, fixed'.[148] The story is always heading towards its unavoidable tragic ending and once its action has been set in motion, it cannot be stopped. When the Producer tries to abandon the telling of

---

[145] Kate Bassett, 'Six Characters in Search of an Author', *The Independent*, 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/six-characters-in-search-of-an-author-minerva-chichesterbr-free-outgoing-royal-court-downstairs-londonbr-the-frontline-shakespeares-globe-london-866238.html> [accessed 15 October 2009].

[146] Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. by Rupert Goold and Ben Power (London: Nick Hern, 2008), p. 9.

[147] Pirandello, p. 45.

[148] Pirandello, p. 62.

the story in the third act, the Father orders her to, 'Finish what you began'.[149] This narrative produces, as Brecht would put it, a sense of 'inexorable fate'.[150] Its selection of events and their causal ordering produces the sense that behind the narrative, there is something that chooses the events and orders them, the author. There is a sense of a greater force at work, the force of a 'creator'.[151] Goold and Power link this narrative structure to the production of a sense of the divine, the idea of God. A scene from the documentary on assisted suicide, in which the Bishop of Ely is interviewed, flags up this connection clearly:

> Our fate is not entirely in our own hands, thankfully! Whatever you call the force that is beyond ourselves ... however you characterise that ... it is undeniable that it exists and that it controls aspects of our existence. Including when we begin and when we end. And that, I find reassuring. Our creator, our author ... these things are in his control.[152]

The concept of assisted suicide offers a challenge to this sense of life as a predetermined course of action as it offers the possibility that a human being may be able to choose for themselves when they end.

Goold and Power present our need to narrativise life as a kind of desperation and self-delusion. The Producer is presented as a 'narrative junkie'. Her need to narrativise is a compulsion, an addiction: 'like all addicts I chase my fix, I have to, to follow the story, no matter what the cost to me'. This reminds us of the image of Brecht's drugged spectators. The implication is that this narrative addiction is unhealthy. The Producer's dedicated pursuit of her drug has had adverse affects on other aspects of her life. She has had to make 'sacrifices' and it has meant 'missing out' on other possible elements of life such as 'long-term relationships' and 'kids'.

---

[149] Pirandello, p. 65.
[150] Brecht, p. 87.
[151] Pirandello, p. 37.
[152] Pirandello, pp. 36–37.

Like all addictions it involves an abdication of individual responsibility. As the Producer clearly states her work is 'bigger than me'. She is not in control of the action, 'This isn't my story'.[153] For the Producer, the process of translating the world into a mechanical plot structures is a way of accessing an objective truth and she clings to the idea that this truth that can be articulated through narrative. However both the content and the structure of the play in which she is cast as a character seek to expose the inadequacy of these structures. The world is not as fixed and linear as the process of mechanical plot construction suggests it is:

> Like your beloved films, you cling to the illusion of a consistent presence - your unchanging truth - but you are no more than twenty-four tiny truths a second - a set of flickering frames in an imitation of life. Yet you deny this fluidity! You cling to a fixed sense of what is 'real' like a life raft lest you drown.[154]

The play presents us with the repeated failure of a mechanical plot structure to articulate the stories that it is trying to plot. As in the original Pirandello, the characters' search for a objective linear retelling of the story is an impossible one. Despite their claim to be characters from such a story, the characters' competing versions of this story deny the possibility of an objective retelling of it. Their squabbling over the objective truth produces a type of the Brechtian 'not...but'. The Father and the Stepdaughter disagree over the details of their liaison at Mr Pace's and the nature of their relationship. To the Stepdaughter's explanation that she is wearing a black dress because she is in mourning, it is suggested that the Father said 'I understand, I understand'. The Stepdaughter immediately corrects this assumption with what she remembers as being the Father's real response, 'Well, then, why don't we just take off your dress?'. Even the Stepdaughter, however, cannot come up with

---

[153] Pirandello, p. 59.
[154] Pirandello, pp. 64–65.

the definitive version of the truth, as the next time she remembers the line, it is altered again, 'Well, let's take off this little dress at once'. She accuses the Father of trying to alter the scene's overall mood. She wants his actions played out in their full horror in order to justify the person that she has become, 'all the reasons why I am what I am', but the Father is trying to protect himself and attempts 'to piece together a sentimental scene, his little sob story'.[155] Both the Father and the Stepdaughter want the scene to present their actions in the most favourable light, and consequently they both see the scene differently.

The Son is a reluctant participant in the retelling of the family's story. He is silent for most of the play and separates himself from its action, '[l]ingering at the back of the group'. In his eyes, his part in the story is too small for him to be represented objectively by it. It doesn't take into account his whole character and he feels that he is 'an "unrealised" character dramatically speaking' in the story the other characters want to tell. He rejects the way that, despite his minor role, the other characters portray him as the 'villain'[156] of the piece and repeatedly protests their version of the events in which he is involved, 'This never happened'.[157] He doesn't feel himself to be part of the events that they are describing at all: 'I've got nothing to do with it, and I don't want to have; because you know well enough I wasn't to be mixed up in all this with the rest of you'.[158] The plot that the other characters are telling bears no relation to his story: 'This story you're trying to tell, I don't recognise it. I don't recognise any of this'.[159] His story is not the mistreatment of the

---

[155] Pirandello, p. 55.
[156] Pirandello, p. 33.
[157] Pirandello, p. 65,68.
[158] Pirandello, p. 32.
[159] Pirandello, p. 67.

mother and her new family by her previous husband, instead his story is one of abandonment, first by his mother when she left his father for her lover and then by his father, when he welcomed the mother and her new family back into his home. The audience are simultaneously presented, not only with with arguments over the version of events that should make up the plot, but also with multiple versions of the original story.

The failure of a mechanical plot to accomplish its goal of presenting an objectively true version of the original story is inscribed in the framing device of the drama-documentary. The process of the production of a mechanical plot is reproduced in the editing of the Dignitas documentary. The Executive is unhappy with the current rushes as he feels that they have yet to find the perfect dramatic narrative for the film. He holds up a fictitious Nick Broomfield documentary about a massacre during the Balkan War as an ideal plot model:

> when the Serbian soldier just cracked, I mean, he just wept, didn't he? ...
> And you see, why am I telling you, I mean, you know all this, of course
> you do, but then - when he cried, we knew, we just *knew*, that he'd been
> there at the massacre. And the whole story, the entire thing, hinged on
> that one moment, just suddenly from nowhere, it was extraordinary[160]

The Executive's plot model is recognisable as an Aristotelian complex plot, which hinges on one moment of reversal that produces a 'correct' reading of events. The plot model of an ideal drama-documentary is also described as having a serious drama narrative. It contains a range of 'intellectual positions, pro-life versus pro-choice, etc' embodied by the journeys of individual characters. It needs to be a 'people piece'.[161] Realism is positioned as the way to get to the heart of the matter. The Executive advises the Producer in pseudo-Aristotelian terms, to 'keep it real.

---

[160] Pirandello, pp. 15–16.
[161] Pirandello, p. 12.

Mirror up to nature, yes?'[162]

Despite following this model, the Producer feels that the current cut of the drama-documentary lacks the 'authenticity'[163] that she is searching for. Through the editing process, the cutting of the drama-documentary into a mechanical plot, the Producer excludes elements of the reality she is trying so desperately to capture. The mechanical plot narrows the Producer's conception of reality. The Father reprimands her for her inability to confront the full complexity of reality in pseudo-Platonic terms: 'You look at the world through your viewfinder and you see only shadows. Behind you is the fire and the flames flicker. Ignore the shadows, turn around and gaze on the thing itself'.[164] The image of looking at the world through a camera lens becomes a modern version of Plato's cave. The camera narrows the view and the images she sees through it become Plato's shadows. Her drama-documentary is full of them; its images are described as being '*at a distance and in shadow'*.[165] This image echoes the fictitious Broomfield documentary, held up as the pinnacle of the drama-documentary genre, which is titled *Shadows*.[166] As its title suggests even this masterful example represents a failure to capture a true glimpse of reality.

Reality is shown to be more complex than the linear structure into which the Producer is trying to press it. The Producer's cutting of her raw footage into a mechanical plot excludes and distorts the nature of the reality that she has filmed. In the opening sequence of the drama-documentary, the doctor Lully is '*dabbing at her eye'*, appearing unable to hold back the tears at the thought of the child Andrew's

---

[162] Pirandello, p. 16.
[163] Pirandello, p. 18.
[164] Pirandello, p. 61.
[165] Pirandello, p. 9.
[166] Pirandello, p. 15.

assisted suicide. In the '*unedited* LULLY *interview*', however, the action is markedly different: '*She stops mid-sentence, blinks and then giggles. She dabs at her eye'.*[167] Her thoughts about Andrew are not the cause of her 'tears', but rather a loose contact lens. She is so unperturbed by Andrew's impending death that she cannot even recall what she was saying about him before her contact lens distracted her. The editing process produces instead the socially appropriate response. The appropriate mood for the film's subject is positioned as serious, bleak and mournful through a montage of visual images, 'ANDREW'S FATHER *looking at a graveyard ...* ANDREW'*s empty bedroom ... a sudden flock of birds on the horizon. An Arctic hare sits upright ... camera pans mournfully to the sky'.*[168] The response that the producer creates for Lully through the editing process fits this mood. It is not an authentic reaction. Lully's routine attitude, with its less palatable implications, is edited into a more socially acceptable one.

Alongside this exclusion of the elements of reality that do not fit the desirable dramatic narrative, there is an exclusion of any undesirable connections that the drama-documentary makes with the world outside of it. When Lully's husband makes an obvious parallel between their work with assisted suicide and the 'To be or not to be'[169] soliloquy in *Hamlet,* this connection is discounted as a 'red herring'.[170] Hamlet is fiction, the documentary presents reality. The actress's connection of the film's score and 'the Renault Espace theme' is denied, as the link produces another uncomfortable parallel. The music that sells the car in the

---

[167] Pirandello, p. 11.
[168] Pirandello, p. 10.
[169] Pirandello, p. 12.
[170] Pirandello, p. 13.

commercial, is now linked to selling the *'spare, plaintive'* [171] tone of the documentary. The documentary becomes equated with the car. It becomes not art *per se* but commodified art; art as a product to be sold.

Goold and Power's adaptation of Pirandello's play from a theatrical context to the context of the drama-documentary critiques the ability of mechanical plot structures to reflect the complexity of reality. In the fourth act, Goold and Power attempt to represent the complexity of reality through a non-linear casual structure. This structure is made up of a series of expanding footnotes that, rather than moving the plot forward in the tradition sense, add layers to the action that the audience have already seen. This structure is akin to Brecht's concept of footnoting, and encourages an active rereading of the text in the manner that his concept of complex seeing suggests. Goold and Power justify their radical addition to Pirandello's play within the text, by referring to the idea that Pirandello was constantly rewriting *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and could never find a definitive version that he was satisfied with. As a result, the original play exists in several forms so, as the Executive states in the fourth act, there is no stable definitive text: 'Pirandello did about six different versions, I mean, he never left the thing alone, so we need to be clear which one we're getting authorisation for'.[172] This fact is further reinforced in a later scene where the audience see Pirandello struggling to produce a definitive version of his play.

The fourth act begins as a replay of the first. The action is repeated exactly, *'every move replicated'*, except that this time we hear a commentary from the Writer and Director over the top of the action. This device is made clear to the audience in

---

[171] Pirandello, p. 11.
[172] Pirandello, p. 84.

the initial action as we see the menu for the DVD of 'SIX CHARACTERS REMIX' on screen and watch as the cursor proceeds through the menu system and turns the director's commentary on.[173] The action on stage is represented alongside a voiceover that adds footnotes to it and asks the audience to reread the action they have already seen. The commentary flags up the importance of things that might have seemed incidental in the first viewing, for example the film's Danish location or the importance of the fact that the Producer has or had a sister who who suffered for a long time with an undisclosed illness. They stress the importance of setting up a naturalistic style at the beginning of the piece, both in the documentary film and in the initial scene between the production team and the Executive. The Writer and Director were working to make 'the Dignitas film feel authentic ... the world of Joanna and her crew to feel as realistic as possible'. In doing this they reveal to the audience the constructed nature of this reality, not only of the drama-documentary, but of the fictional story of the making of the drama-documentary. They identify the actress playing Lully by her name 'Anna-Maria' so increasing our sense of the distance between the actor and the character they are representing. They praise the naturalness of her performance, whilst at the same time stressing the constructed nature of that naturalness, 'even though everything she does is totally naturalistic, you're always aware that she's acting'.[174] At the same time the commentary creates links out to other influences lying outside of the main text of the play – 'Jonze/Kaufman films', 'Lars von Trier'[175] and 'Haneke'[176] - the kind of links that were removed in the editing of the drama-documentary in the first act. They explain

---

[173] Pirandello, p. 73.
[174] Pirandello, p. 75.
[175] Pirandello, p. 78.
[176] Pirandello, p. 79.

how these influences add layers to the range of possible meanings invoked by the play's world: 'the Dogme school was a kind of model for the idea of a film-making collective, what Joanna describes as a 'democracy'.[177] The process of rereading is also implied by the fact that only certain sections of the action, the audience have already seen is replayed. The Writer and Director select what they see as the important moments and skip the rest of the action in order to get to the parts that interest them: '*On screen a symbol 'x 16' is seen. Everyone moves through twenty seconds of fast-forward. Film whizzes by on the monitors'.*[178]

The action of the play is no longer presented in a linear sequence. At the end of this scene, we hear a knock on the door on the commentary soundtrack. The onstage action is paused and we hear the Father enter the room containing the Writer and Director. The Father begins the first line of his part in the original text, 'Excuse me ...' and we are invited to imagine that the Writer and the Director will now be subject to a visit by the six characters and the whole process of retelling their story will begin again in a different location with a different set of storytellers.[179] A Russian doll structure is suggested in the fourth act, where the first version of the play's plot is framed by another variation of the plot, which will in turn be framed in yet another variation and so on. The original version of the play the audience saw in the first three acts is only the smallest central doll inside the set.

Just as the audience are led to expect that another version of the retelling of the six characters' story is about to begin, the action of the fourth act cuts to a new scene in which we see two theatre makers, by implication Goold and Power,

---

[177] Pirandello, p. 80.
[178] Pirandello, p. 77.
[179] Pirandello, p. 81.

discussing the possibility of making a free adaptation of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Just as the characters of the Writer and Director had commented on the first act of the play, the theatre makers now comment on the conception of the director's commentary that opens the fourth act: 'We thought the DVD commentary was the bottom line, the truth, but no!' A footnote is now created to the footnote of the previous scene. Whereas the director's commentary commented on the play after the fact of its performance, the commentary in this footnote is commenting on the play before it even exists. The two theatre makers describe a future performance of the play for their potential investor, the Executive. The theatre makers, again describe the artistic choices that inform the play's structure and content. The play's setting is inspired by an office the theatre makers have seen down the hall from the Executive's office. The character of the Executive in the first act is based on the Executive in the fourth act, but with the addition of an 'odd goatee beard'.[180] In the production this parallel was heightened by the same actor playing both Executives and the action of this scene being viewed by both the character of the Producer and the audience through windows from the office down the hall in which the action of the first three acts had taken place. The action of this scene is again ended by the entrance of the characters who hack the two theatre makers to death.

The final conversation of the scene is a discussion of Pirandello's difficult relationship with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. This conversation is then footnoted in the scene that follows. The action of the play moves further back in time to Pirandello's study in 1925. In Italian, Pirandello discusses his inability to perfect

---

[180] Pirandello, p. 82.

the play with his maid. He feels that he is 'getting nowhere'[181] and 'can't seem to find an ending'. At the end of this scene it is the characters who enter and finish the play for him: '*The* FATHER *writes quickly and certainly in the book and then folds it shut'.*[182] The act finishes with a final footnote in which Hamlet, who in the first act had been cast out of the drama-documentary as a 'red herring',[183] makes a reappearance linking the ending of the play back to the documentary at beginning with its Danish location and its topic of assisted suicide. The Producer is then aided in committing assisted suicide by the characters. The final stage direction of the play, '*An End*'[184], avoids narrative closure by emphasising both the existence of different versions of the ending of Pirandello's original play and the multiple possible endings suggested by the footnote scenes that make up the fourth act. There may be other endings beyond the ending we have seen.

Like the director's commentary that opens the fourth act, these footnote scenes actively encourage the audience to reread what they have already seen. The final image of the Producer taking her own life at Dignitas takes us back to the documentary footage at the start of the play. Elements that seemed insignificant in the first viewing of the documentary are highlighted in the process of rereading. In the waiting room at Dignitas, the presence of the six characters, another '*family, dressed in black, also waiting*' with Andrew's parents, comes into view. The nondescript house in the opening shots of the documentary is now recognisable as the characters' house, as the third act set is in '*the garden of the house we passed in*

---

181 Pirandello, p. 85.
182 Pirandello, p. 86.
183 Pirandello, p. 13.
184 Pirandello, p. 87.

the opening film'.[185] The back office of the set is transformed into '*an exact replica of the Dignitas clinic'.*[186] The reference to the Producer's sister who 'was ill for a long time' becomes a mirror for the Producer's own suicide. The line between the Producer and her sister is blurred. New connections within the plot are made in the process of this rereading and spread like a 'virus'.[187] The connections made in the first reading of the play's action must now be rethought.

The idea of characters with fixed natures existing in a world with fixed spatio-temporal dimensions is challenged. The Producer's present self is separated from her younger self, who is seen on screen during the third act condemning assisted suicide: 'I just think that there are some moral absolutes. And euthanasia is one of them. It's just wrong'. Yet now ten years later she is completely altered, in her opinions and beliefs but also literally in her very self, as after seven years, the Father explains to her, there is no cell in her body that remains from the person who she was before: 'If every word in a book is changed, is it the same book? ... That woman, ten years ago, is biologically a completely different creature to the one before me now'.[188] Our sense of location is disrupted. It is not clear whether we are in Denmark or not, whether we are in an office, a studio, or a clinic, even whether we are inside or outside: '*the edge of a pine forest. Mist and snow swirls violently. The floor is still the floor of the office, but it's dusted with snow'.*[189] Our sense of time is dislocated by the footnoted scenes as they regress further and further into the past, while the Producer observing them with us stays firmly in the frame of the present. There is a

---

[185] Pirandello, p. 60.
[186] Pirandello, p. 87.
[187] Pirandello, p. 82.
[188] Pirandello, p. 64.
[189] Pirandello, p. 60.

sense that: 'Things are slipping. The rules are changing'.[190] We long for 'the illusion of a consistent presence ... unchanging truth'.[191] We search like the characters for a linear narrative and the promise of a rational explanation of the play's action is continually held out to us in the fourth act only to be 'hijacked'[192] as the six characters enter and end each scene. The play's structure reflects the doctor Lully's opinion of death:

> We all seek the elegant closure of a great novel or a magisterial symphony - the dying fall - but life is often more random, spiteful even ... There is not a clean page break to life's treasured narrative, but rather a meandering series of commas and hesitating, unfinished sentences.[193]

The audience are left to pull together the connections. They become the 'old "active audience"' as the Executive comments derisively with regard to the concept of montage, they 'make up a story even if nothing links them at all'.[194] The audience search in vain, just as the characters do, for a mechanical plot that tells a single coherent story.

Goold and Power's adaptation of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* presents us with a critique of linear narrative and offers an example of a non-linear causal structure that rejects Aristotle's insistence on a linear chain of events. It attempts to suggest, through its structure, a complexity to contemporary reality that exceeds expression through mechanical structures of causation. This complexity encourages the process of rereading and so marks a break with Aristotle's stricture that the magnitude of a work of art 'should be such as can readily be taken in at one

---

[190] Pirandello, p. 62.
[191] Pirandello, p. 64.
[192] Pirandello, p. 82.
[193] Pirandello, p. 13.
[194] Pirandello, p. 14.

view'.[195] The structure of this play demonstrates that Brecht's concept of the 'not...but' and theatrical footnotes are not just theoretical tools, but can be successfully utilised in the construction of plays. Using them, Goold and Power's adaptation of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* offers us a network of ever increasing alternative readings, and can be read as an attempt to produce a predominantly structural causal model in the structure's drive to reveal the mechanisms of own construction.

The construction of plot structures that enable 'complex seeing' critique the persistence of mechanical causal development. They expose its simplification of the more complex stories that it purports to tell. They imply that the creation of any linear narrative must involve the exclusion of important facts. The linear narratives such as that of unending economic growth become suspect. We begin the sense that there is a level complexity to the flow of capital in the contemporary world that is hidden from view. As Harvey argues, we come to realise that we will need 'a far better understanding of how capitalism works than we currently possess' if we are to avoid its adverse effects in the future.[196]

The City

Goold and Power's adaptation of *Six Character's in Search of an Author*, shifts us from viewing story as purely the invariant raw material for plot formation and repositions story as an variable abstraction created from the plot in the mind of

---

[195] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 14.

[196] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Profile Books, 2011), p. 38.

the individual spectator. In recent years plays, such as Martin Crimp's *The City* and Mark Ravenhill's *The Experiment*, have exploited the idea that story is a variable of plot in order to create dramatic narratives that disrupt the story-making process completely. These plays contain recognisable plot elements, but their structure makes it impossible for the spectator to integrate all the plot elements into a coherent story.

Martin Crimp's *The City* (Royal Court, 2008) presents its audience with what Richardson terms an 'irretrievable, contradictory, potential and self-negating *fabula*'.[197] The plot structures of this play disrupt the story-making process to the point where there appears to be no access to a story at all. *The City* is about a middle-class couple, Clair and Chris, who live in a city. Clair works as a translator, while Chris works in the city and their relationship is characterised by their inability to communicate clearly with each other. They supposedly have two children, although the daughter is the only one ever onstage. One of their neighbours, Jenny, is a nurse whose husband is working as a doctor in a war-torn city. Chris loses his city job and finds it difficult to get another. He ends up working behind the meat counter of a local supermarket. Clair meets a writer, Mohamed, at a railway station and there is a hint of a sexual liaison between them.

The play has a profoundly dislocating effect on the spectator. Critics described the original production as 'disquieting'[198] and 'unsettling,'[199] Robert Hewison aptly comparing the discomfort he experienced to the 'feeling of being

---

[197] Richardson, pp.55–67 (p. 66).

[198] Michael Billington, 'The City', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/apr/30/theatre2> [accessed 28 October 2009].

[199] Paul Taylor, 'The City', *The Independent*, 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/the-city-royal-court-london-818719.html> [accessed 28 October 2009].

above an abyss'.[200] Michael Billington noted that 'the brilliance of this 80-minute

play lies in how it allows the audience to create its own story'.[201] Ian Shuttleworth

made the best attempt at a straightforward narrative summary of the action:

> What we infer from meagre hints and from things left unsaid is that,
> following Chris's redundancy from a corporate position, he spends
> almost a year failing to land a job (in the end settling for something
> lowlier) and finding his latent marital insecurity bursting into rancid
> bloom. Clair, meanwhile, is trying to cope with her husband, her career, a
> demanding client and her own always uncertain sense of identity.[202]

The critics and other audience members came up with conflicting theories as to what

the play is about. Hewison reads the play as a critique of capitalism. He positions the

title of the play as referring to London's financial district and contextualises Clair's

internal city, which we discover has been destroyed and deserted, 'there was nothing

– nobody – just dust',[203] as representative of the destructive effects of capitalism on

both the world and the individual mind: 'the City is a city of the mind, a place of the

imagination that is as broken and bereft as Fallujah, itself an emblem of the

commercial warfare that is business life'.[204] For Edgar the story of the play is

explained in an entry in Clair's diary which is read out towards the end of the final

scene. In this speech we learn that Clair has created a city in her mind and she once

believed that within this city she would find 'an inexhaustible source of characters

and stories'[205] for her writing. Thus Edgar concludes the play is about this internal

---

[200] Robert Hewison, 'The City', *Times Online*, 2008
<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/artic
le3850262.ece> [accessed 28 October 2009].
[201] Billington.
[202] Ian Shuttleworth, 'The City', *FT.com*, 2008
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/72e59eaa-1b87-11dd-9e58-0000779fd2ac.html>
[accessed 29 October 2009].
[203] Martin Crimp, *The City* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 62.
[204] Hewison.
[205] Crimp, p. 61.

city and 'a fiction written by one of the characters'.[206] Paul Taylor posits the idea that Crimp is writing about an individual failing of imagination, 'a play where stories fall apart and where the characters are gradually revealed to be, at least partly, the deformed figments of an imagination that's resentful at its lack of true creativity'.[207] This explanation fits neatly with the words of Fernando Passoa that Crimp quotes on the title page of his script, 'Everything we do, in art and life, is the imperfect copy of what we intended'.[208]

The play's contents hint that what we are seeing is political issue-driven drama. Billington notes that the play's themes are 'insecurity, fear, fractured parent-child bonds, global persecution'.[209] There is a current of violence towards children running through the play. In the first scene a child is kidnapped, in the second the children are locked in the playroom, in the third Clair worries that the children have 'bruises under their dressing-up clothes'.[210] In the fourth scene Charlie (by implication the girl's brother) is bleeding to death elsewhere. There is also an implication that the play is exploring human rights. In the first and fourth scene we hear about the writer Mohamed's experience of torture. In the second and fourth scene we are told about the war-torn city whose inhabitants are 'clinging on to life'.[211] The character Chris turns from businessman to butcher, this change visually represented in his change from a suit to a supermarket uniform, so providing a basis from Hewison's interpretation of the play being centred around the destructive nature of business and its disregard for human rights.

---

[206] Edgar, p. 115.
[207] Paul Taylor.
[208] Crimp, p. 5.
[209] Billington.
[210] Crimp, p. 37.
[211] Crimp, p. 23.

If we take the supposition that Clair is the writer of the play and that she is writing the play that we are seeing, as Edgar and Taylor do, then what the play lacks is not imagination but story. Clair has plenty of imagination. She creates interesting characters with detailed backstories: Jenny the nurse who is haunted by the images of the war her husband is involved in; Mohamed the writer who is separated from his daughter and then must deal with her sudden death; the little girl whose brother is bleeding to death elsewhere; Chris the businessman who loses both his job and his sense of self-worth, only to find meaning again working as butcher; Clair the translator who wishes to write and is tempted to have an affair with her client. Clair creates a world for her characters in which some live in a sterile but pristine city 'full of green squares, shops and churches ... schools where, when there was a lull in the traffic, you could hear children playing'[212] while far away others 'cling on to life' hiding in the drains of a war torn city which an army is pulverising into 'a fine grey dust'.[213] The problem with Clair's fiction is not her lack of imagination but the lack of coherent narrative connection between the different elements that she creates. There is a complete absence of story. She fails to make the narrative connections that would make sense of both the events that her characters are involved in and the past events that they describe.

While there may be a lack of story here, there is plot. The play contains a series of events and continually hints at connections between them through coincidence, repetition and imagery. It gives the impression of following conventional plot structures. Crimp critiques the very structures he is employing as he writes. The language of the play gives instructions on how it should be played,

---

[212] Crimp, p. 61.
[213] Crimp, p. 22.

'while you and I are sitting in front of the fire like this'. Sometimes these instructions are followed. At other times Crimp indicates that they are not: '*There is no fire. They are not sitting*'.[214] The play's mimetic impulse is challenged, as there is a disjunction between situation described in the dialogue and the situation represented onstage as indicated in the stage directions. The writing justifies its choices, especially in terms of the characters' motivations. Everyone feels the need to explain their actions and the actions of others to everyone else:

> **Clair** You're only saying that you love me because you feel bad about yourself and you hope that saying you love me will make you feel like a better person than you are.
>
> **Chris** On the contrary: I'm saying I love you because I feel good about myself. I have some very good news.[215]

There is also a sense of the play being written as it is spoken, as if the characters are making it up as they go along. For example, when Clair fills in the details of her meeting with Mohamed and we get a sense of her building relationships and finding reasons for the actions she witnessed when she saw the nurse drag the little girl away:

> it was nothing as serious as he'd led me to believe. Because the girl was his daughter, and the woman – who – I was right – is a nurse at a nearby hospital – the Middlesex – was his sister-in-law. The girl – because they'd just got off the train – the girl had been brought here to stay with the sister-in-law. But the man – the father – had decided at the last moment to buy his little girl a diary ... his sister-in-law despised him. Which is why – thinking about it ... the moment he was out of sight she'd deliberately dragged the little girl off.[216]

We have a sense of a plot structure being brought into being. The events are being organised into a logical pattern. There is an awareness of the process of plot

---

[214] Crimp, p. 56.
[215] Crimp, p. 30.
[216] Crimp, pp. 7–8.

construction, which we recognise on a moment to moment basis. The characters are attributed socio-psychological causes for their actions. The play however, refuses to organise its events and make narrative connections between them in a way that can yield a coherent story. There is an abyss of story at the heart of the play and we become aware of our role as spectators in the process of constructing story because all our efforts to do so are frustrated.

In the first scene Clair and Chris discuss their unusual days. Here we recognise some conventional features of opening scenes. Firstly we are presented with the idea of the ordinary routine interrupted by an unusual incident that kick starts the action of the play. The first two lines flag up this structural device to the audience:

Chris How was your day?

Clair My day was fine. Only–[217]

Secondly the scene seems heavily expositional. Chris and Clair tell each other the stories of their unusual days, outlining the initial events which we expect to develop into the backbone of the play. Clair meets the writer who gives her the diary in which she will begin to write and with whom she will start a relationship. Chris, we discover, is in danger of losing his city job. Their language is overtly expositional. The two characters tell each other things that logically they would both already know and therefore would not need to be spoken, for example Chris establishes that they have children: 'There are, as you are well aware, two small children sleeping in this house, and I'm not going to leave them fatherless'.[218] Lastly, the other characters that we will meet are introduced in this section. The little girl is Mohamed's daughter who has been taken away from him. The nurse who drags her away is Jenny.

---

[217] Crimp, p. 7.
[218] Crimp, p. 13.

In the second scene things have altered. Chronological time has passed. Chris has lost his job. This is indicated by the fact that he has changed from a suit into casual clothes and Clair's explanation of Chris's over attentive behaviour, 'he's got like this since he lost his job'.[219] The characters who were introduced in the first scene have shifted positions. Jenny, the nurse, who took the child from the railway station, is now Jenny the nurse whose window overlooks Chris and Clair's garden. It is as if the nurse character from the first scene has been re-cast in a more suitable role. Jenny's objective is to get Chris and Clair's silent and, at this point, absent children to stop 'running up and down shouting and screaming'.[220] Her function within the scene however, is to introduce the world outside the city, a function that she fulfils with a long story about her husband's experiences despite its tenuous connection to her objective. She is racked with worry about her husband and the shouting and screaming of the children adds to her already high stress levels, making it impossible to sleep. She has the time to tell her story in a two page monologue despite her insistence that she doesn't have much time, 'I can't stop'.[221]

Scene two acts as a key to the rest of the play, as the scenes that come after it are connected to it and to each other through echoes of it. The destroyed city in Clair's final speech echoes the war-torn city of Jenny's speech in the second scene:

> But when I reached it found it had been destroyed. The houses had been destroyed, and so had the shops ... I looked for the people clinging on to life ... in the drains ... there was nothing – nobody – just dust.[222]
> they're attacking a city – pulverising it, in fact – yes – turning this city – the squares, the shops, the parks, the leisure centres and the schools – turning the whole thing into a fine grey dust ... in this city: people in all

[219] Crimp, p. 26.
[220] Crimp, p. 24.
[221] Crimp, p. 17.
[222] Crimp, p. 62.

sorts of unexpected places, clinging on to life ... down there – deep under the city – in the drain.[223]

Crimp's use of language throughout the play invites the audience to make such connections. There is a general lack of specificity, marked by a lack of adjectives and adverbs. The adjectives that Crimp does use tend to be very simple and child-like, often limited to indications of the colour and size of an object, for example 'a bright green woman with a bright green baby'[224] or 'your house is much bigger than my tiny flat'.[225] This universalises the objects that are referred to. A house could be a house in any city. A woman with a baby could be any woman with a baby. There is nothing to distinguish between the objects. To define one thing from another. Therefore the audience are free to connect the objects to each other as if they were all one and the same object. The 'small knife with a stainless serrated blade being used to cut the soldier's heart out'[226] in scene two, becomes the '*small serrated kitchen knife*' that Jenny gives Clair for Christmas in scene five.[227] Repetition is also used in the visual dramaturgy of the play. Jenny and the girl are strongly linked to each other. The nurse outfit that we are told the woman is wearing in scene one is worn by Jenny in scene two and is identical to the nurse outfit worn by the girl in scene four. The pink jeans that the girl is wearing in scene one are worn by both Jenny and the girl in scene five. In scene two Chris offers to help Jenny off with her coat. In scene four he helps the girl take her coat off and then tries to help her put it back on again. In scene two Jenny tells us that she plays the piano. In scene four we see Chris and the girl sitting by a piano that he asks her to play. In scene five, Jenny '*runs her*

---

[223] Crimp, pp. 22–23.
[224] Crimp, p. 23.
[225] Crimp, p. 20.
[226] Crimp, p. 24.
[227] Crimp, p. 55.

fingers over the keyboard without making any sound' and later the girl attempts to play the piano, and keeps getting stuck.[228] A strong relationship is implied between Jenny and the girl through these images, but this relationship is never defined. In the stories that Clair tells about Mohamed, the girl is his daughter, who has been spirited away by his sister-in-law in a nurses outfit, by visual implication Jenny. In the dramatic action of the play itself, the girl is Clair and Chris's daughter and Jenny is their neighbour.

The play also draws links through coincidence, playing with Aristotle's dictate that everything contained within a play must be of relevance in terms of its single unified action. Crimp plays with this idea, making links through co-incidence. Everyone knows each other. The man Clair tries to help at the station turns out to be a writer who she is fascinated by: 'He asked if he could talk to me ... And I was glad, as it happened, because it turned out I knew him'.[229] A local supermarket becomes a vortex of co-incidental meetings for Chris. Jenny and he discover that they have met previously in the freezer section: 'We know each other, don't we. I've seen you somewhere – was it the opticians? Or I know what it is – looking in a freezer cabinet in the supermarket'.[230] The man behind the meat counter turns out to be an old school friend, 'I had to go to the meat counter and there was something very familiar about the man behind the meat counter and it turned out we'd been at school together. I know – yes – incredible'.[231] There is a sense, that as Aristotle dictates, nothing is random in the play's action. Everyone we meet in the play is somehow part of its story. When we try to put all these co-incidences together however,

---

[228] Crimp, p. 54.
[229] Crimp, p. 10.
[230] Crimp, p. 19.
[231] Crimp, p. 33.

connections between them can be made but they contradict each other and refuse to be reduced to a linear pattern of cause and effect.

The events of the play are plotted as if they should yield a coherent story. Many stories are started in the play but remain forever unfinished. Chris tries to tell Clair the story of being locked out of his building twice. Both times he is interrupted and in both cases it is implied that Claire hasn't been listening to him anyway:

Chris Have I already told you this?

Clair Go on.

Chris But I've already told you this.

Clair Told me what? Have you?[232]

The ability to communicate through story has been lost. The plot structures of the play are empty and broken like the crumbling buildings in Clair's city: 'I looked for the people still clinging onto life – what stories they could tell! – but even there – in the drains, the basements – in the underground railway - system there was nothing – nobody – just dust'. There is no longer any life in this city, the expected structures remain – houses, churches, playgrounds etc. – but they no longer function to support life as they once did. Neither do the plot structures in Crimp's play function to support 'the stories and characters of life' as they once did. Story is absent and any attempt to articulate a coherent story fails, as Clair states 'the stories fell apart even as I was telling them'. [233]

Crimp's play is a critique of our assumption that plot and story are interdependent structures. By presenting us with recognisable plot events, but denying us the ability to turn these events into a coherent story, Crimp suggests that

---

[232] Crimp, p. 15.
[233] Crimp, p. 62.

it may be possible for plot to exist without story. Within the context of the play, however, this is represented as a nihilistic move. The destruction of story becomes part of a post-modernist mistrust of narrative, that ultimately destroys narrative's ability to communicate experience meaningfully. In the final moment of Crimp's play, the girl playing the piano finds that she can go no further than, first, the fourth and then the third bar of the music. She is stuck and, like all the unfinished stories in the play, she cannot progress. The world without stories that Crimp paints is one that lacks creativity. Clair's city is empty. Jenny's piano playing is full technique but lacks emotional resonance, 'I can get all the notes right and understand how intensely the composer must've imagined it, there's no life to my playing'.[234] For all its structural bravado, Crimp's play betrays some anxiety about the absence of story at its heart.

Crimp's *The City* exhibits some anxiety about the result of the separation of plot and story that it enacts. The decoupling of this relationship, however, produces a gap in which there is the opportunity to radically rethink the structure of the dramatic narrative. As Richardson has noted, useful as the concepts of plot and story remain, by rethinking them we may be able to 'articulate new, more expansive concepts of story, plot, progression and temporality',[235] which may in turn free the playwright to create dramatic texts which capture more effectively the '[f]iction, fragmentation, collage and eclecticism' which, like the dislocated and compressed spatio-temporal structure described in the previous chapter, may express more meaningfully the

---

[234] Crimp, p. 21.
[235] Richardson, pp.55–67 (p. 66).

increasing complexity of our lived experience under post-Fordism, than the coherence of the dramatic narrative of serious drama can.[236]

The ethics of the disrupted story

Despite the anxiety expressed about an absence of story in Crimp's *The City*, I would argue that the disrupted story has an ethical dimension. As I observed in the discussion of serious drama in the first chapter, dramatic narratives are often positioned as having social value because they are a medium through which we can come to understand both other people and their actions. Therefore, they are employed as tool which society can utilise to judge the acceptability or unacceptability of people's actions, and in judging a character's actions, they have a tendency to attribute the reasons for them to socio-psychological causes. When the dramatic narrative is employed in this way it tends to make the actions of Others more rather than less acceptable to us.

Lyotard states that the shaping of experience into narrative can be seen as one of the ways in which a society determines legitimacy of certain actions. Narratives 'define what has a right to be said and done in the culture in question'.[237] Lyotard positions narrative as a form of knowledge. Knowledge, Lyotard argues, is not purely a set of denotative statements of what may be considered true or false. Knowledge also includes the notion of competence, of 'knowing how' – for example 'knowing how to live'. As such, the concept of knowledge is also prescriptive and evaluative. Narrative is a form of knowledge, not only because it contains denotative

---

[236] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 98.
[237] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 23.

statements of what is and what isn't, but more importantly because it defines a set of criteria of competence. Narrative can seen as transmitting the knowledge of 'how to live'. The hero of a narrative's actions represent a set of positive and negative models, which in turn bestow legitimacy upon social institutions: 'Thus narratives allow the society in which they are told, on one hand to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it'.[238] Narratives legitimate and delegitimate certain actions. They define which actions are acceptable within a particular society and which actions are not. What is transmitted through narratives therefore is 'the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond'.[239]

Dramatic narrative has come to be positioned as having social value because it helps us to understand the actions of others, actions which might otherwise appear unacceptable to us. The modern play often attempts to explain the actions of its characters in terms of psychological causation. The actions of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, could be reasoned to be the result of her unconventionally masculine upbringing. At other times, characters' actions are explained as the result of situational causation, the social and economic conditions of the society in which they live. Hedda's actions could also be explained as the result of her position as a woman in a society that offers women an unacceptably narrow range of roles. Often a particular character's actions are presented as being a combination of both these forms of causation. The dramatic narrative, it can then be argued, prevents the occurrence of harmful actions as it helps to identify the socio-psychological causes of these actions. The socio-psychological causes of these actions can then be addressed within society to prevent

---

[238] Lyotard, p. 20.
[239] Lyotard, p. 21.

these harmful actions happening in the future.

In the field of social psychology, the relationship between narrative and the acceptability of the actions it narrates is presented as highly problematic. In their exploration of this relationship, Arthur G. Miller, Anne K. Gordon and Amy M. Buddie note the large number of books, offering accounts of real incidents of harm doing, that begin with a preface in which the writer of the account expresses a concern that to narrate these harmful actions is to somehow make the actions of those involved more acceptable to us. For example, at the beginning of his account of how a battalion of German reserve policemen were transformed into mass murderers during the second world war, the historian Christopher Browning offers the following disclaimer for the possible effects of the narrativisation of their actions:

> The policemen in the battalion who carried out the massacres and deportations, like the much smaller number who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognise that in the same situation, I could have either been a killer or an evader – both were human – if I want to understand and explain the behaviour of both as best I can. This recognition does indeed mean an attempt to empathize. What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving.[240]

Miller *et al.* conducted a series of experiments in which they aimed to determine if Browning's concern, the idea that to explain is to condone, had any actual validity. In one experiment, the participants were asked to read one of a selection of descriptions of a harmful act, for example rape or domestic violence. The participants were then asked to respond to a series of judgment items, such as how forgivable or understandable the harmful act was. Half the participants responded

---

[240] Christopher R Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 11 and the Final Solution in Poland: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 18.

after writing a narrative explanation of the situation and half responded immediately. The participants who had written the narrative explanation first were significantly more likely to see the harmful act as justified or caused by the external situation. They were less likely to label the perpetrator as evil. They were more forgiving and more lenient on the issue of punishment. They concluded from these experiments that the act of narrativisation, either as a producer or receiver of the narrative, produced a more condoning attitude.

Millar *et al.* suggest that the act of narration tends to focus the subject on the socio-psychological conditions under which the perpetrator committed the harmful act. This creates a strong impression that '(a) that the perpetrators are, to an important degree, not personally responsible for their actions and (b) that the reader (of the explanation), were he or she in the same situation, might be highly susceptible to the same actions as the perpetrators'. The more complex and extended the act of narration, the more likely they found it was that a condoning attitude would be produced in the writer or the reader. When the act was presented without an accompanying narration, the tendency of the subject was to focus on a dispositional causal perspective, 'attributing harm doing to the perpetrator's personal character'.[241] Miller *et al.* point out that both types of causal perspective are highly problematic. One does not offer a better viewpoint on a harmful act than the other. The dispositional causal perspective distances the subject from acknowledging their own proclivity towards negative social behaviours, while the socio-psychological perspective is unacceptable as it could be seen as offering a way to condone any

---

[241] Arthur G. Miller, Anne K. Gordon and Amy M. Buddie, 'Accounting for Evil and Cruelty: Is to Explain to Condone?', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3 (1999), 254–268 (p. 226).

action, no matter how harmful. The dramatic narrative can be seen as problematic as it offers a highly socio-psychological causal perspective. When a harmful act is framed within this perspective the attitude produced is more likely to be condoning, even if the playwright's intention is otherwise. Dramatic narratives with clear ethical content that prevent the construction of a socio-psychological narrative from their plot structures can be read as arguing that some actions are beyond justification.

The Experiment

Ravenhill's recent monodrama *The Experiment* (Southwark Playhouse, 2009) can be read as an attempt to delegitimate a harmful action through narrative. This short monologue tells the story of someone or some people involved with some scientific experiments on a child or some children, which are being conducted in the hope of finding a cure for some incurable disease. At the beginning of the piece the speaker pleads 'Please god: help me to remember,' indicating that what follows is an attempt to put into narrative a set of crucially important events surrounding a harmful action in which the speaker was involved.[242] The narrative that the speaker produces for us, however, is extremely disrupted, past the point of comprehension. The speaker is unable to deliver a dramatic narrative, which meets the audience's expectation of being told a coherent story.

The Experiment, like *The City*, presents us with a series of plot elements, which both suggest the possibility of a coherent story while making it impossible to construct a coherent story from them. The plot elements feel as if they should be connected because they belong to the same dramatic world. The objects described

---

[242] Mark Ravenhill, 'The Experiment' (presented at the Terror Season 2009, Southwark Playhouse, 2009), p. 2.

within the narrative act as concrete referents. The presence of a 'bed,' a 'house,'[243] a 'garden,' and a 'fence' indicate a naturalistic frame to this story.[244] We are in a world that we recognise. The everyday nature of the objects indicates a familiar space. Like Crimp, Ravenhill offers us only the broadest description of these objects, using simple adjectives. The house in which the characters lived is 'big' and 'old'. The child's room is 'lovely'.[245] The lack of specificity allows the audience wide scope to imagine the objects as they choose. The object becomes a template onto which the audience can project images from their own experience. The house, for instance, could be a cottage in a Welsh village, a terrace in south London, a Barrett house on a suburban estate. At the same time, the lack of specificity allows the audiences to make connections between the sections of the text. The house, which is repeatedly mentioned, could be conceived of as being a single house, or the story could refer to many different houses. It is both one house and every house. The spectator is able to connect these mundane unspecific everyday objects into a concrete individualised image of the world in which the action is taking place.

Whilst the text allows us to make connections between the objects mentioned in it, at the same time it constantly contradicts itself. The sentences of the text themselves contain contradictory compound phrases. The neighbour's response to the experiments is 'sarcastic mocking teasing furious understanding'. The weather is 'hot rain'.[246] The time span is 'two three six months years'.[247] Where an object is described in specific terms, its description is frequently protean. The image of the

---

243 Ravenhill, p. 2.
244 Ravenhill, p. 3.
245 Ravenhill, p. 2.
246 Ravenhill, p. 5.
247 Ravenhill, p. 4.

house alters every time it is referred to. Its size expands and contracts continually. At the first the house is 'modest,' then it is a 'great big manor' house, next it is 'cramped,'[248] then 'big' again and so on.[249] It becomes difficult to maintain a constant picture of the house and so the social status of the speaker. The exact socio-economic conditions under which the speaker is making his decisions are unclear, so it becomes difficult to explain the speakers actions in terms of their situational causality. This sense of contradiction is also present in the description of the speaker's actions. At times we are presented with three possible actions in response to one event, as if several possible choices of action exist at the same point in time. For example, when asked about whether they will agree to the experiments, the speaker states that I:

> Was totally opposed
>
> I understood immediately
>
> I was dumbstruck, didn't know what to do[250]

All three actions exist as possibilities in the audiences mind, but there is no indication of which action represents the narrator's actual response. It is impossible to determine the narrator's actual actions in response to the situation he found himself in. Thus it is very difficult to judge the speaker in socio-psychological terms. We know neither the exact circumstances of the situation he found himself in, nor the exact way that he responded to it.

In *The Experiment*, Ravenhill disrupts the dramatic narrative by making it difficult for the spectator to successfully apply their usual strategies for constructing

---

[248] Ravenhill, p. 2.
[249] Ravenhill, p. 4.
[250] Ravenhill, p. 3.

the story of the play from its plot. In order to create any single coherent version of the story, the spectator is forced to make a tiny selection from a large set of possible events. There is a failure of narrative processes, both in the audience's reading of the monologue and in the narrator's own attempts to narrate their experience. This disruption of the dramatic narrative means that the speaker is denied the possibility of explaining the experiments on the children in socio-psychological terms, and the audience too is denied the possibility of understanding them in this way. This failure to explain the experiments in terms of socio-psychological causation suggests that this harmful act lies beyond the bounds of acceptability. There is an implication, through this disruption of story, that the events the narrator refers to lie outside Lyotard's criteria of competence, which define what it is right to do within our culture.

The plays in this chapter all mediate, negotiate and critique the linear mechanical plot structures of serious drama. They present us with experiments forms of causation and disrupt the relationship between plot and story. These experiments with structure can be read as political on two levels. Firstly, they suggest alternative casual models to mechanical plot structures of serious drama, whose connection to the increasing financialisation of life is exposed through an over-identification in Mike Bartlett's *Contractions*. debbie tucker green's *Generations* traces out an alternative model of plot structure based on iteration, so implying an expressive mode of causality. Finally Goold and Power's employment of Brechtian footnotes and the 'not … but' in their adaptation of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* suggests the possibility of a plot structure based on what Althusser terms structural as opposed to mechanical causality. This structural model of causality

attempts to mediate the increasing complexity of the causal structures of post-Fordism Secondly, the use of the disrupted story challenges the socio-psychological basis of the serious drama's dramatic narrative. Crimp's *The City* suggests through its structure that our lived experience under post-Fordism is fragmented, shifting and empty in comparison to the coherence and meaning implied in the dramatic narrative of serious drama. Ravenhill's *The Experiment* uses the disrupted story to challenge the use of socio-psychological causation in serious drama to condone harmful actions. Socio-psychological causation is at the heart of dramatic characterisation. Characters are seen as individual social subjects whose are shaped by their circumstances and their experiences. If socio-psychological causation is being challenged by contemporary dramatists in their plot structures, then this must produce a shift in the conception of the social subject within drama as a consequence.

4 – Character

If socio-psychological causation is under question in the work of playwrights who are experimenting with structures of dramatic narrative that lie beyond serious drama, then logically there must also be a corresponding shift away from socio-psychological characterisation. If characters are no longer positioned as shaped by their circumstances and their experiences, then how are they defined and what does this shift mean in terms of the way that the social subject is thought about under the pressures of post-Fordism?

I will start by examining the ways in which character is not simply, as it often thought to be, a simple reflection of 'how people are'. Character instead is as much of a construct as the spatio-temporal or plot and story structures of a play. Character's role in shaping dramatic structure will be examined through an exploration of the concept of character role and character function in the work of Propp, Souriau and Greimas. Character is shaped by social structures as is revealed by Aristotle's insistence that character should always be grounded in the 'necessary' and the 'probable'.[1] As our conception of what is necessary and probable alters as society alters, so do our notions of good characterisation. This idea will be explored by tracing the history of a set of interrelated ideals of good characterisation: goodness and empathy; appropriateness and individualisation; consistency, motivation and contradiction; and verisimilitude. The arguments that support the various interpretations of these ideals are frequently argued on the basis of

---

[1] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 25.

verisimilitude and so verisimilitude becomes an ultimate ground that defines good characterisation. This grounding in verisimilitude returns the analysis to the thesis that characterisation shifts as our conception of the social subject changes.

The second half of the chapter will explore the idea that in recent years there has been a crisis in the representation of dramatic character, as articulated in the work of Elinor Fuchs and Hans-Thies Lehman. I will argue that there has been a discernible shift away from socio-psychological characterisation in several recent British plays through an analysis of three such plays, in terms of four significant changes in their mode of characterisation: the idea of subjective characterisation in Anthony Neilson's *Realism*; the use of narrative characterisation and unassigned characters in Simon Stephens's *Pornography*; and the use of collective characterisation in the choral plays of Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*. These shifts in the mode of characterisation reflect a shift in our conception of ourselves as social subjects under the pressures of post-Fordism.

Character as a determinate of structure

The first question that needs to be addressed therefore in this chapter is how the concept of character is a matter of dramatic structure. Character shapes the structure of a play, because character places limitations on the kinds of actions that can be performed, so shaping the nature and course of events that make up the play's dramatic narrative. The Stanislavskian approach to plot structure, as outlined in the previous chapter, clearly articulates one way in which plot and story structure have their foundations in character actions, in that the action of the dramatic narrative is seen as generated through a character's active pursuit of an objective.

The dramatic narrative of most plays, whether its construction is rooted in Stanislavski's system or not, can be read as having a basis in character actions. Steve Gooch uses the image of a chess board to describe how character actions are a question of dramatic structure:

> a dramatic idea ultimately finds its expression in the physical interaction of apparently independent bodies in real time and space [...] [i]t is almost like a chess board on which the playwright places his pieces, complete with wills of their own, so that the game plays itself.[2]

If a play is thought of as being like a game of chess, then its characters are like the chess pieces. Each chess piece obeys a set of rules that restrict the ways in which it can act within the game. A knight can only move in an L-shape, it cannot suddenly change its pattern and move diagonally like bishop, even if to do so would result in winning the game. Each piece contributes to the overall shape of the game but each piece can only contribute within the limitations of own possible actions. Like chess pieces, different characters obey different sets of rules, which define the ways in which they can act within certain situations. These rules might be based on fixed ideas of character types or rooted in socio-psychological thinking. The action of a play generally consists of the sum of all the actions of its characters. The character actions can be seen as the building bricks that determine the structure of the play.

Vladimir Propp, Étienne Souriau and Algirdas Julien Greimas all describe narrative structures whose building blocks consist of character actions. In pursuit of clarity, I am going to apply the following blanket terms to describe the differences between their three approaches to the relationship between character and narrative structure. Firstly, I will use the term 'character' to define an individualised agent in a play, which is most frequently, though not always, a representation of an individual

---

[2] Steve Gooch, *Writing a Play* (London: A & C Black, 2004), p. 25.

human being. Secondly I will use the term 'character role' to describe a role within the narrative that a character might take on. A character role might be that of a hero or a villain, the scale or the sun, the sender or the receiver. Each character role has a specific set of character actions associated with it. Several characters can play the same character role and one character can play several different different character roles in the same narrative. Finally I will use the term 'character action' to refer to a specific action, that a specific character role can perform within the narrative. Greimas, summarising Propp and Souriau's work, defines the structuralist conception of character as a comprising a character role and a 'sphere of action', which is 'constituted by the bundles of functions attributed to them'.[3]

Propp, as outlined in the previous chapter, argued that all Russian fairy tales are based on a set sequence of thirty-one events, from which events can be excluded but the order of events cannot be altered. Propp defines these events as 'functions of the dramatis personae'[4] and each event describes a specific character action. For example, event six is described as 'THE VILLAIN ATTEMPTS TO DECEIVE HIS VICTIM IN ORDER TO TAKE POSSESSION OF HIM OR OF HIS BELONGINGS'.[5] Each character action describes actions that are related to a specific character role. Event six describes an action that performed by the villain, while event fourteen, 'THE HERO ACQUIRES THE USE OF A MAGICAL AGENT' describes an action performed by the hero.[6] There are seven different

---

[3] Algirdas Julius Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at Method*, trans. by Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer and Alan Velie (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 200.
[4] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Laurence Scott, 2nd edn (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 21.
[5] Propp, p. 29.
[6] Propp, p. 43.

character roles: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess and her father (sought for person and their protector), the dispatcher, the hero and the false-hero. Each role is, conversely, associated with a certain range of character actions: the villain performs 'villainy', 'a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero' and 'pursuit'; the princess and her father together perform 'the assignment of difficult tasks', 'branding', 'exposure', 'recognition', 'punishment of a second villain' and 'marriage'.[7] A character role and its related character actions can performed by different characters within the same narrative: 'The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change'.[8] Thus Bába Jagá, Morózko, the forest spirit and the mare's head are all different characters but they all play the same role of the donor when they test and reward the step-daughter. Conversely, one character may play different character roles. For example, at times, the same character can perform actions attributed to the character role of the villain and at other times perform character actions related to the character role of the helper. Propp argues that the ability of different characters to take on different combinations of character roles is one of the elements that accounts for the huge variety of narratives found in Russian folktales, despite their basis in a defined sequence of events.

In his *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations Dramatiques*, Souriau also employs the concept of character roles and character actions. Souriau's aim is to articulate a structural model specifically for dramatic narratives. Souriau, like Propp, sees narrative as composed of different combinations of character actions, but whereas Propp, articulates his narrative model through a sequence of character actions,

---

[7] Propp, p. 79.
[8] Propp, p. 20.

Souriau articulates his through different combinations of character roles. Souriau defines six character roles to which he attributes different character actions. He summarises them as follows:

- ♌ - The Lion; or the thematic Force[9]

- ☉ - The Sun (or the Representative of Worth, of the Good that the Lion wishes for)[10]

- ○ - The Receiver of the Star (the Earth), or: the Obtainer (of the Sun) the wished for (of the Lion)[11]

- ♂ - Mars, or the Opponent[12]

- ♎ - The Scale, or the Arbiter of the Situation (the Arbiter of the Good)[13]

- ☾ - The Moon or the Mirror of Force (the Adjunct)[14]

The Lion is the play's protagonist who embodies the the thematic force of the drama. Unlike our contemporary conception of a play's theme, Souriau's concept of the thematic force does not relate to social or political issues. Instead, he defines the thematic Force as a strong emotive response towards or against something, ranging from love to hatred/jealousy, from desire/need to fear and including curiosity, patriotism and religious/political fanaticism. In Souriau's conception, the thematic Force relates more closely to our contemporary conception of character motivation. The Sun is the goal that the Lion seeks. The Earth is the person who will benefit by the Lion achieving her goal. Mars is the Lion's opponent. The Scale is the person

---

[9] Étienne Souriau, *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations Dramatiques* (Paris: Flammarion Editeur, 1950), p. 83.
[10] Souriau, p. 86.
[11] Souriau, p. 88.
[12] Souriau, p. 94.
[13] Souriau, p. 101.
[14] Souriau, p. 104.

who decides whether the Lion or Mars most deserves to win the goal represented by the Sun. The Moon is a helper, who can help any of the other character roles perform their actions.

Like Propp, Souriau says that a single character may embody several of these character roles and that one of these roles may be performed by more than one character in the same narrative. The events of the narrative are a combination of the character actions that Souriau designates to each of these character roles. Souriau describes each possible type of dramatic narrative as a combination of the character roles. For example, Souriau describes the normal overall situation of a romantic drama with the following combination of symbols: ' ♌ ○ ------ ♎ ☉ '. He states that this combination of character roles outlines a plot in which the male protagonist desires the female object of desire for himself; the Lion wants to be the Earth and so receive the Sun. The outcome of his desire will depend on the female object of desire's decision as to whether she wants to give herself to him or not, so she will be responsible for deciding whether he deserves to achieve his goal; the Sun will act as the Scales.[15]

Greimas draws on both the work of Propp and Souriau and presents us with his own simplified system of character roles and character actions. Greimas defines character roles as actants, as they are forces that do something within a narrative text. He derives his narrative actants from three oppositional pairs of linguistic actants. Thus the first pair of actants he defines are that of 'subject' versus 'object'.[16] The second pair of actants, 'sender' versus 'receiver', are linked by desire; the subject's,

---

[15] Souriau, p. 203.
[16] Greimas, p. 202.

or the protagonist's, desire for the object.[17] The sender is the character or force that propels the subject in their desire for the object. The receiver is the character to whom the object will be given, in many cases the subject themselves. Thus the roles of sender and receiver enable the communication of the object. The final actantial pair is that of 'helper' versus 'opponent'. The helper is any character that helps to facilitate the either the desire for or the communication of the object. The opponent creates 'obstacles by opposing either the realization of the desire or the communication of the object'.[18] All the actants revolve around the central actant of the object, 'it is entirely centred on the object of desire aimed at by the subject and situated, as object of communication, between the sender and the receiver - the desire of the subject being, in its part, modulated in projections from the helper and opponent'.[19] Greimas then applies this structure to various narratives in order to clarify how this system of actants work in practice. For example, the narrative of Marxism has man as the subject, a classless society as the object, history as the sender, mankind as the receiver, the bourgeois class as the opponent and the working class as the helper.[20] In the narrative of economic investment, in contrast, the subject is the investor, the object is the health and protection of the investment, the opponent is any scientific or technological progress that threatens the investment, the helper is a detailed preparatory study of economic conditions, the sender is the economic system and the receiver is the economic enterprise itself.[21]

In these three models of narrative structure we see three common factors.

---

[17] Greimas, p. 203.
[18] Greimas, p. 205.
[19] Greimas, p. 207.
[20] Greimas, p. 208.
[21] Greimas, p. 210.

Firstly the existence of individual characters, secondly the idea that these individual characters take on character roles and thirdly the idea that these character roles involve the performing of character actions which are specific to them. The taking on of character roles means that the character in question becomes limited in her actions to the character actions ascribed to those roles. Like a chess piece, the character is only permitted to act in the particular ways that are defined for that particular character role. From the structuralist viewpoint, however, the character has more freedom to change how it moves than the chess piece, as it can take on various different character roles through the play. A knight can change into a bishop. Therefore dramatic structure can be seen as consisting of a combination of different characters, performing various character functions as they take on different character roles. These elements combine to produce a vast number of possible narratives.

Characterisation and the changing nature of the social subject

While the structuralist approach usefully identifies the role that characterisation plays in the structure of the dramatic narrative, it is an approach that is rarely directly applied in the practice of playwriting. There have been, throughout the history of theatre, ideal principles of characterisation that shape both the way that the quality of a playwright's characterisation is judged and the way that playwrights think about characterisation. Serious drama inherits a complex history of dramatic characterisation from the practices that preceded it. It understands this inheritance in ways that support its own ideals of characterisation, in which characters are both individualised 'people' and at the same time embodiments of the different sides to a social or political issue. If serious drama's rules of characterisation are reread in

terms of the social structures that are related to the historical period that they were originally articulated in, then it is possible to interpret them ways that problematize the way that serious drama interprets them in contemporary playwriting manuals.

The first of these earlier ideals of characterisation appear in the *Poetics*. Aristotle states that characters should be good, that their behaviour must be appropriate to the kind of character they are, that they must possess the quality of likeness, that their behaviour must be consistent. In addition to Aristotle's strictures, more recent playwriting theorists have argued that characters should be motivated in their actions, be empathetic, possess contradictions in their characters and be individualised. Aristotle states that in characterisation, the poet 'ought always to look for what is necessary or probable'.[22] This statement reveals the social basis on which we define good characterisation. What is considered necessary or probable is defined by the prevailing hegemony, and so will change over time as the social and economic basis of society alters. Our concept of what is necessary or probable today shows marked differences from what people have considered necessary or probable in the past.

As Émile Zola states: 'Without believing that art progresses, we can still say that it is continuously in motion, among all civilisations, and that this motion reflects different phases of the human mind'.[23] As the social order shifts and our perceptions of ourselves as social subjects change, so too do the qualities of character that are considered good characterisation. As Elinor Fuchs argues:

> each epoch of character representation – that is, each substantial change
> in the way character is represented on the stage and major shift in the

---

[22] Aristotle, p. 25.
[23] Émile Zola, 'Naturalism in the Theatre', in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. by Eric Bentley, trans. by Albert Bermel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 354.

> relationship of character to other elements of dramatic construction or
> theatrical presentation – constitutes at the same time the manifestation of
> a change in the larger culture concerning the perception of the self and the
> relations of self and world.[24]

The concept of a changing self indicates the possibility of two different kinds of change: concrete change and changes in perception. Firstly, it could denote a concrete change in human behaviour or a concrete change in the position of the individual and their role within society under altered social and historical circumstances. From this view, these are actual changes in the object of examination, the self, which alters over time as the nature of society shifts. Secondly, this alteration could be located not in the object of examination, but in the gaze of the subject. Fuchs argues that Nietzsche implies in his account of cultural change that this change occurs not merely in the object of examination, 'what is known', but more significantly in the subject's perception of the object, 'shifts in the knower, in the very ground of knowing'.[25] In this case, it is the lens though which the subject views the object of examination that is altered, so appearing to alter the object in turn. In this view the human subject does not alter over time, rather the way that the social order views the social subject alters. Thus we are presented with a view of change as located in either the object itself or in the lens through which the subject views it.

This becomes clear, I will argue, through tracing the way that Aristotle's strictures and other related concepts of good characterisation are reinterpreted over time. The social basis of these re-interpretations and new conceptions, I will dispute, is revealed through the fact that the majority of the arguments for them are made on

---

[24] Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 8.
[25] Fuchs, p. 29.

the assumption of verisimilitude. Characters, it is frequently argued, should be like this or behave like that, because people outside the theatre doors are like this or behave like that. These changes in characterisation may represent actual change in the human subject, or more probably reflect changes in how the social subject and their role within the society are seen under the prevailing cultural hegemony.

Goodness and empathy

Aristotle's first rule of character is 'goodness' and a kind of goodness, which in his eyes, is intrinsically linked to gender and social class. Aristotle's concept of goodness is linked to the facility to make good choices, 'the character is good if the choice is good', leading to good actions.[26] It is not easy to perform a good action, as it involves knowing how to do a particular action 'to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way'. This means that goodness is not a facility that is possessed by everyone, 'goodness is both rare, laudable and noble'.[27] Men of the higher social classes are most likely possess it, as Aristotle sees them as naturally superior to women, children and the lower classes:

> all things rule and are ruled according to nature. But this kind of rule differs - the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.[28]

Aristotle does state that it is conceivable that any class of person might possess the

---

[26] Aristotle, p. 24.

[27] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by D.W. Ross (Minneapolis: Filiquarian, 2007), p. 48.

[28] Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. by Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 19.

facility of goodness, 'there is such a thing as a good woman and a good slave', but he qualifies this statement, however, with the suggestion that this is neither necessary or probable: 'even though one of these is perhaps deficient and the other generally speaking inferior'.[29]

It is in Renaissance commentaries on the *Poetics*, such as Bartolomeo Lombardi and Vincenzo Maggi's *Aristotelis librum de poetica communes explanationes* (1550), that Aristotle's statement that a character should be good, becomes explicitly linked to the concept of moral health. During the Renaissance theatre was seen as a practice that occupied both extremes of the moral spectrum. At one end it 'enlists its adherents in the ranks of the damned',[30] whilst at the other it is seen as a way of educating the audience to be 'sober citizens and godly parishioners'.[31] Goodness is now intrinsically linked, not to class or gender, but to the health of the Christian soul. Lombardi and Maggi view theatre from the positive extreme of the moral spectrum as a school of morality. Tragic poets are recast as teachers of moral conduct and their characters become repositioned as instructional models: 'when they present their behaviour they must make exemplars of it'[32] and 'teach proper conduct'.[33] Goodness as a quality of characterisation is given what Weinberg terms a 'pedagogic utility'.[34] López Pinciano develops this idea further in his *Philosophía antigua poética* (1596). Not only must the characters of tragedy 'instruct by their honest and serious speech and by their honest and upright actions',

---

[29] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.
[30] Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 81.
[31] Barish, p. 83.
[32] Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I, p. 414.
[33] Weinberg, I, p. 412.
[34] Weinberg, I, p. 408.

but their actions should be subject to, what is now termed, poetic justice. Good characters should be rewarded for their virtuous behaviour, while bad characters should be punished: 'the honest, virtuous, and laudable character [...] must be given a suitable reward and the evil one punished'.[35]

By the mid-seventeenth century, playwrights are voicing the idea that characters should possess a mixture of both good and bad qualities. In his *Discours* (1660), Corneille states that characters should be admirable, rather than good. Characters who are admirable have both virtues and vices, and Corneille credits his audience with the capability to tell the difference between the two. David Clarke defines Corneille's concept of admiration as 'closer to awed comprehension than simple moral approval'.[36] The spectator admires the character for their desirable virtues but remains critical of their actions: 'such an audience response is a double evaluation of heroic character in which the spectator appreciates both individual force of personality and also subjects the conduct displaying such heroic grandeur to a social and moral critique'.[37] The stage remains positioned as school of morality, but now the moral instruction comes through the stark contrast between the spectator's admiration of the character and their disgust at the actions that the character then proceeds to perform: 'L'amour qu'elle nous donne pour cette vertu que nous admirons, nous imprime de la haine pour le vice contraire'.[38]

By the late eighteenth century, the argument for characters with both good

---

[35] López Pinciano, *Philosophía Antigua Poética*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Inst. "Miguel de Cervantes," 1953), II, p. 360.
[36] David Clarke, *Pierre Corneille: Poetics and Political Drama Under Louis XIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 100.
[37] Clarke, pp. 100–101.
[38] Pierre Corneille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), II, p. 643.

and bad moral qualities becomes explicitly related to verisimilitude. Schiller believes that if a playwright wishes 'to portray men as they are' then he must endow each character with both good and bad qualities.[39] Even the most evil of men in Schiller states in preface to *The Robbers* (1781) 'bears in some degree the impress of the Almighty's image'[40] and therefore the playwright must 'include their good qualities, of which even the most vicious are never totally destitute'.[41] In a letter from 1838, Büchner states that characters need not be good at all, as the theatre needs to be neither '*more nor less moral* than *history itself*'. The task of the poet is 'to come as close as possible to history as it actually happened', and as historical figures are not necessarily morally upstanding people, the dramatic characters that represent them cannot necessarily be good: 'I can't make Danton and the bandits of the Revolution into virtuous heroes! To show their dissoluteness I had to let them be dissolute, to show their godlessness I had to let them speak like atheists'.[42] While traces of moral anxiety remain in these arguments, good characterisation is repositioned as needing to encompass both positive and negative qualities in the same character.

Aristotle's quality of goodness shifts from an assumed association with social class, to one with Christian morality, and finally appears to become redundant in the face of the modern conception of the individual subject as a natural mixture of both good and bad characteristics. I would argue that the idea that a character should be good has now been superseded by the idea that a character should be empathetic. When Corneille suggests that a character should be admirable, he notes that the

---

[39] Friedrich Schiller, *The Robbers, Fiesco, Love and Intrigue* (London: John C. Nimmo Ltd, 1903), p. x.
[40] Schiller, p. ix.
[41] Schiller, p. x.
[42] Georg Büchner, *Complete Works and Letters*, ed. by Walter Hinderer and Henry J. Schmidt, trans. by Henry J Schmidt (New York: Continuum, 1986), p. 276.

audience will love the character for their admirable virtues. This corresponds to the contemporary idea that a character should be likeable. Alan Ayckbourn's fifth obvious rule of playwriting states that the audience '*need to care about your characters. (So should you too.)*'[43] Steve Waters defines good characters as 'irresistible'.[44]

Again, Aristotle can be read as the source of the idea of empathy, as his third rule of character, 'likeness', is frequently taken to imply this. Likeness is commonly interpreted to mean 'like us' with reference to Aristotle's statement on the production of pity and fear that 'pity has to do with the undeserving sufferer, fear with the person like us'.[45] Aristotle makes this statement in relation to the way in which a tragic poet can effectively produce catharsis, a combination of pity and fear, in his audience. In order to inspire pity in the audience, the tragic hero must suffer but his suffering must be undeserved, therefore he cannot be a 'depraved person'[46] or a 'wicked person' as the audience would not feel pity for such a character.[47] Neither Aristotle states, can he be a wholly 'decent man' as then the character's change from good to bad fortune 'does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust'.[48] To see a wholly decent man suffer for no reason would seem unjust and thus the audience would find the narrative repugnant. In order to inspire fear, the audience must recognise the tragic hero as being one of them, 'someone who is like ourselves', not in social

---

[43] Alan Ayckbourn, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 14.
[44] Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), p. 100.
[45] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 21.
[46] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 20.
[47] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 21.
[48] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 20.

terms, but rather in that they are imperfect.[49] Therefore the tragic hero must be a good man, but he must also be flawed in some way. Ayckbourn echoes the qualities of Aristotle's tragic hero, when he defines the characteristics that make the audience care about a character: 'They can have flaws certainly – they'd be better – but they'll need a certain innocence, a trust, an openness that makes us really want things to go right for them in the end'.[50]

Empathy as an explicit concern enters dramatic theory at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Alain-René Lesage criticises his own play *Turcaret* for not containing sympathetic enough characters: 'Elle seroit parfaite, si l'auteur avoit su engager à aimer les personnages'.[51] William Hazlitt, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, attributes Shakespeare's brilliance as a dramatist to his ability to empathise with all aspects of humanity: 'his talent consisted in sympathy with human nature, in all its shapes, degrees, depressions, and elevations'. Unlike the moralists who sought the bad in everything, Shakespeare searched for goodness, even within evil. Through his plays Shakespeare teaches us to do the same, to empathise and so find a point of 'fellow-feeling' with all humanity.[52]

The production of empathy is connected, by theorists such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Sigmund Freud, to the spectator's ability to act. Hegel argues that empathy is produced by dramatic characters who are active and decisive, and in turn produces these qualities in the spectator. The energies that drive a human

---

[49] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 21.
[50] Ayckbourn, pp. 14–15.
[51] Alain-René Lesage, *Œuvres*, 12 vols. (Paris: Étienne Ledoux, 1828), XI, p. 510.
[52] William Hazlitt, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), I, p. 255.

individual to decision and action are realised in a character as '*affecting* pathos'.[53] Pathos, in Hegel's definition, refers to the 'universal powers' that are both 'alive in the human breast and move the human heart in its innermost being'. They are the human passions. To Hegel's mind, the passions are entirely positive in their nature, having 'an essential content of rationality and freedom of will'. Pathos produces empathy in the audience as pathos 'touches a chord that resounds in every human breast'.[54] Thus the production of empathy is achieved through decisive passionate action; a character who is driven by pathos 'to do and to will some actual thing'.[55] Pathos in the character has the potential to produce pathos in the spectator, and so to inspire them to decision and action.

For Freud, in contrast, empathy diminishes the spectator's ability to act. Empathy, he argues, is not produced through the qualities that a character possesses, but rather through a lack in the spectator. Freud states that the kind of person who enjoys watching theatre is the kind of person who lacks the will to do anything of importance in the world outside the theatre: 'a person who experiences too little'. The spectator has suppressed or displaced their own ambitions, but at the same time still longs 'to feel and to act and to arrange things' according to their desires, in other words they long to be the hero of their own drama. In the theatre, the spectator is allowed '*to identify himself* with a hero'. If the spectator acted on their own desires in the real world, they would run the risk of causing themselves suffering. Their fear of suffering would cancel out any real enjoyment. In the theatre, however, the spectator

---

[53] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 4 vols. (London: Bell, 1920), I, p. 313.

[54] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I, p. 232.

[55] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 323.

can live out their desire to be a 'great man' in safety because firstly someone other than themselves is doing the actual acting, and secondly because the whole thing is just a game and so has no lasting consequences. Empathy allows the spectator to live vicariously and 'blow off steam'.[56] In Freud's thinking, the production of empathy dissipates the spectator's ability to act.

In contemporary guides to playwriting the idea of empathy is positioned as both political and apolitical. Empathy is frequently presented purely as a way of simply engaging an audience in a narrative. Neipris says that '[t]he audience must care about the characters' because then the audience will have a 'vested interest' in what subsequently happens to the characters.[57] This hooks the audience into the narrative. Edgar is one of the few writers who relates empathy directly to the political. Edgar sees empathy as a tool that helps us understand the Other. Following Mary Midgley,[58] Edgar states that the capacity to do evil is related to a lack of empathy with others: 'people do evil to people when they fail to see the world through their victims' eyes'.[59] Through understanding the Other, we learn to live peacefully with them. The audience's ability to empathise with the characters onstage is a tool for enabling this to happen: 'By enabling us to imagine what it is like to see the world through other eyes [...] drama develops capacities without which we cannot live together in societies at all'.[60] Thus, drama's ability to generate empathy for Others in the spectator, means that it can be employed to promote social

---

[56] Sigmund Freud, *Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 88.

[57] Janet Neipris, *To Be a Playwright*, 1st edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 174.

[58] Mary Midgley, *Wickedness* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[59] David Edgar, *How Plays Work: A Practical Guide to Playwriting* (Nick Hern Books, 2009), p. 55.

[60] Edgar, pp. 203–204.

cohesion.

Conceptions of goodness alter with changes in the social order. In more recent thinking, goodness shifts from being a matter of class or Christian morality, and is rethought in terms of the positive elements that engage an audience empathetically with a character. As such, when viewed through theatre's empathetic lens, goodness shifts from being a quality that needs to be demonstrated to a quality that all human beings possess.

Appropriateness and individualisation

'[A]ppropriateness' is Aristotle's second aspect of character.[61] A character's qualities must be appropriate to their character type. As with the conception of goodness, appropriateness is very much determined by social and historical conditions. For example, as mentioned earlier, Aristotle believes that it would be inappropriate for a woman to display courage in the same way as a man: 'the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying'.[62] As society's conception of gender has altered over time, Aristotle's example of appropriateness seems highly inappropriate, when now viewed through the lens of British society's current conception of male and female roles.

Horace (68-5 B.C.) offers a more extensive discussion of appropriateness or, as he terms, it 'decorum' in *The Art of Poetry*. Horace states that the poet draws his knowledge of what behaviour is appropriate for a particular type of character from

---

[61] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.

[62] Aristotle, *The Politics*, p. 19.

life: 'a skilled imitator should look to human life and character for his models'.[63] A character's behaviour has a social basis as it is determined by the character's social station, their gender and their culture:

> It will make a great difference whether a god or a hero is speaking, a man of ripe years or a hot-headed youngster in the pride of youth, a woman of standing or an officious nurse, a roving merchant or a prosperous farmer, a Colchian or an Assyrian, a man from Thebes or one from Argos.[64]

A character's behaviour must also be appropriate to their age, 'the qualities that are appropriate to a particular time of life'.[65] A child 'will change every hour', 'loves playing' and 'will fly into a temper and with as little reason recover from it'. Young men have 'high aspirations and passionate desires' but are 'easily persuaded to vice' and 'lavish with money'.[66] An old man will be 'acquisitive', 'cantankerous', 'cautious', 'fearful of the future' and 'given to praising the days when he was a boy'.[67] Horace generalises, in that he sees people of the same type as exhibiting the same patterns of behaviour; all nurses are 'officious', all youngsters are 'hotheaded'.[68] A person's character is determined by their social role within society, and so characters will reflect recognisable social types with recognisable patterns of behaviour. The poet who is a good citizen and understands the nature of society correctly, will create good and appropriate characters and reproduce the structure of the social order accurately:

> The man who has learnt his his duty towards his country and his friends, the kind of love he should feel for a parent, a brother, and a

---

[63] Horace, 'The Art of Poetry', in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. by T. S. Dorsch and Penelope Murray, 2nd edn (Penguin, 2000), p. 107.
[64] Horace, p. 101.
[65] Horace, p. 103.
[66] Horace, p. 102.
[67] Horace, p. 103.
[68] Horace, p. 101.

guest, the obligations of a senator and of a judge, and the qualities required in a general sent out to lead his armies in the field – such a man will certainly know the qualities that are appropriate to any of his characters.[69]

Horace's concept of decorum does not persist unopposed in Classical theatre. Evanthius, in the fourth century AD, challenges the idea that playwrights should strictly adhere to traditional character types. He praises Terence for having the courage to turn some of these character types on their head, in particular his creation of 'prostitutes who were not evil'.[70] Evanthius notes that playing with the audience's expectations of a character type produces a 'certain pleasure'. He allows playwrights to experiment with character types as long they meet two conditions: firstly, there must be a 'reason given' for the character's possession of an unexpected quality; secondly, the alteration must be in accordance with 'verisimilitude' in that the playwright must reflect the ways in which people who take on these roles in the world outside the theatre differ from their established theatrical character type. Character types can, therefore, be altered to reflect alterations in the perception of various social types outside the theatre doors.

By the Renaissance, there is a significant shift in the relationship between appropriateness and the social structure of society. In their commentary on the *Poetics*, Lombardi and Maggi read Aristotle's concept of appropriateness through the lens of Horace. Like Horace, they define the behaviour of characters as needing to be appropriate to their social roles. Servants can think about nothing but food, their masters are obsessed by thoughts of honour and glory, men do not weep and women

---

[69] Horace, p. 107.

[70] Evanthius, 'On Drama', in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*, ed. by O. B Hardison, Kevin Kerrane and Alex Preminger (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1974), p. 305.

do not exhibit virility. Unlike both Aristotle and Horace, however, they do not argue that a character's behaviour is appropriate because it relates to the way that people behave outside of the theatre. Instead, the appropriate behaviour for a character corresponds only to the traditional pattern of behaviour expected of that particular character type within the theatre. If a poet 'introduces a king as saying or doing a given thing, what he says or does must belong to those things which are usually or necessarily attributed to kings'.[71] Things are probable not because they are probable in the world outside the theatre but rather because they conform to the rules of theatrical decorum. Theatre has developed its own social logic. Decorum makes a character's behaviour probable, as Rapin states in his commentary on Aristotle in 1674, 'Because it is only by the *decorum* that this *probability* gains its effect; all becomes *probable*, where the *decorum* is strictly preserv'd in all circumstances'.[72]

Rymer, writing on Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King* in 1678, links the issue of theatrical decorum to morality. Like Aristotle, Rymer links a character's position in the social order to their capacity for goodness. Therefore a character's behaviour must be appropriate in terms of the character's moral status. For example, a man would not be rewarded with the role of a King, if he were not a morally upstanding man: 'We are to presume the greatest vertues, where we find the highest of rewards; and though it is not necessary that all *Heroes* should be Kings, yet undoubtedly all crown'd heads by *Poetical right* are *Heroes*'.[73] Like Lombardi and Maggi, Rymer is invoking a theatrical social order as opposed to the social order

---

[71] Quoted in Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I, p.415.

[72] René Rapin, *Reflections on Aristotle's "Treatise of Poesie,"* trans. by Thomas Rymer, 1st edn (Amersham: Gregg, 1979), p. 65.

[73] Thomas Rymer, *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1972), p. 61.

beyond the theatre doors. Maintaining this moral structure of theatrical decorum is positioned as more important than verisimilitude. Kings may behave in unkingly ways outside the theatre, but this behaviour is inappropriate on the stage:

> And far from *decorum* is it, that we find the King *drolling* and quibbling [...] There are in nature many things which *Historians* are asham'd to mention, as below the dignity of an History [...] Might not a Poet as well describe to us how the King eats and drinks, or goes to *Stool*; for these actions are also *natural*[74]

Explicit opposition to appropriate character roles is strongly voiced by the proponents of naturalism in the nineteenth century. In his preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg sees the idea that characters should to exhibit behaviour appropriate to their social role as a kind of suppression. It suggests that each individual is moulded to fit their 'fixed role in life' and so makes men easier to 'catch, classify and keep tabs on'.[75] Such 'summary judgements', Strindberg feels, 'ought to be challenged by naturalists, who know how richly complex a human soul is'.[76] Earlier in the century, the Romantic's re-evaluation of Shakespeare's work, had brought into view the idea that dramatic characters should be individuals in their own right. In *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), Hazlitt admires Shakespeare's characterisation because '[h]is characters are real beings of flesh and blood'. Good characterisation becomes primarily defined, not on appropriateness, but on the degree to which the characters appear to be 'real people', that is unconstructed and individualised: 'Each of his characters is as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as well as of the author, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind'. Good characterisation produces characters that have a 'life of their own'. They 'speak like

---

[74] Rymer, pp. 64–65.
[75] August Strindberg, *Strindberg Plays: One*, trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 94.
[76] Strindberg, p. 95.

men, not like authors'.[77] Émile Deschamps also praises Shakespeare for the individualisation of his characters, 'la peinture individualisée des caractères'[78] but unlike Hazlitt, he recognises that this assessment of Shakespeare's characters has more to do with a shift in perspective in Deschamps' own time, rather than something intrinsic in Shakespseare's text. Realistic characterisation, he notes, is 'tout modern'.[79] George Henry Lewes sums up this change in attitude in 1875. Before a playwright or an actor would have thought in terms of appropriateness. For example, they would show how 'a warm-hearted man would behave on suddenly receiving the news of a dear friend's death'. Now the playwright or actor must think in terms of a unique individual rather than a character type: 'we ask *what* warm-hearted man? A hundred different men would behave in a hundred different ways on such an occasion, would say different things, would express their emotions with different looks and gestures'.[80] By the mid-twentieth century, descriptions of good characterisation see characters as more vital than the playwrights who created them. As George Steiner states, they have become 'endowed with the miracle of independent life ... When Brecht's name has passed into the burial of literary history, Mutter Courage shall continue to pull her wagon through the winter night'.[81]

In contemporary playwriting manuals, there is a strong tendency to consider characters as real people. Neipris uses the term 'person' interchangeably with the

---

[77] William Hazlitt, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), II, p. 211.

[78] Émile Deschamps, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. by Alexandre Cosnard and others, 6 vols. (Paris, 1872), II, pp. 285–286.

[79] Deschamps, II, p. 286.

[80] George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, 2nd edn (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875), p. 124.

[81] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 350.

term 'character';[82] characters are 'the people who inhabit the world I am creating'.[83] She talks about characters being 'born'. She attributes a high level of independent volition to her characters, as if they act independently of her and drive the action of the play themselves. She does not make their decisions for them, they make decisions for themselves: 'He was asking her to dinner. I hadn't anticipated he would do that. He had taken on his own life. His words were rushing out at such a speed I could hardly keep up with them on the typewriter'.[84] The character is thought of as controlling the playwright, rather than the playwright being in control of the character. Ayckbourn articulates a similar experience: 'I have started plays in my time fairly sure of where a character was going, and have been quite amazed at what they've blurted out'. On another level, however, both writers articulate a clear awareness that their characters are fictional constructs. Whatever his characters might decide to reveal about themselves, Ayckbourn is fully aware that he knew all his character's secrets, before the character decided to voice them: 'I knew it was there but I never expected them to say it out loud'.[85] Neipris acknowledges that there is a difference between a human being and the representation of a human being through character. Human behaviour has a tendency to be chaotic, mysterious and complex, whereas the behaviour of a dramatic character tends to be more logical, in that the action of the play usually reveals a set of clear explanations that justify the character's actions. The lives of characters have a sense of order, that human lives do not: 'the writer has the responsibility of making order of a life and all its

---

[82] Neipris, p. 33.
[83] Neipris, p. 34.
[84] Neipris, p. 33.
[85] Ayckbourn, p. 46.

uniqueness'.[86]

Despite this, the concept of appropriateness lives on in the idea of stereotypes. The creation of stereotypical characters is generally classed as bad characterisation. Greig states that the best characters are individualised characters 'who are absolutely unique, who are not stereotypes'[87]. Stereotypes are, however, seen as a useful basis from which to start the process of characterisation. Greig recommends that a playwright should start with a 'type', as this provides 'the dominant expression' of who the character is. It provides the audience with a recognisable starting point, which can then be subverted or built on by adding 'shades and variations'.[88] They are something that a playwright works with, but ultimately works to subvert. Edgar frames this process within a political context. In *How Plays Work*, Edgar discusses the idea of 'character roles'. These are not character roles in the structuralist sense, but rather a set of stereotypical character types with recognisable patterns of appropriate behaviour: 'the hero behaves entirely heroically, the prince royally, the servant obsequiously (or loyally), the villain villainously, and the victim only emerges from a deep swoon to thank her rescuer at the end'. Edgar sees such stereotypes as the 'tyranny of the preordained'. Good characterisation involves a moment where the character departs from the expected stereotype, or in political terms, where they challenge their social role: 'the most meaningful moment is when the character departs from and even challenges his or her role; when the old man is brave, the lackey eloquent, the page gives sage advice, and the cleaner behaves like a princess'. It is in this political act of challenging their social role that the

---

[86] Neipris, p. 36.

[87] Noel Greig, *Playwriting: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 75.

[88] Greig, p. 18.

stereotypical character is transformed into a 'real' person. They become 'three-dimensional', 'an individual', as opposed to a theatrical or social construct.[89]

The concept of appropriateness springs from the Classical idea that theatre should represent appropriate character types with recognisable patterns of behaviour in line with the social order of society beyond the theatre doors. In the Renaissance, the social order that these appropriate character types represent, becomes a theatrical social order with its own logic that no longer posits itself as a direct representation of the social order of society, but rather, a moral order that presents a idealised social model. Naturalist characterisation in the late nineteenth century moves towards a position that re-invokes character as a direct reflection of the social subject, but this is one in which to challenge the concept of appropriateness in characterisation is a political act that challenges the social order, through challenging the social roles within it.

Consistency, motivation and contradiction

Aristotle's fourth aspect of character is 'consistency'.[90] Once a character's behavioural patterns are established, they should remain consistent: 'it should be necessary or probable that this kind of person says or does this kind of thing'. Aristotle criticises Euripides for lacking consistency in his characterisation of Iphigeneia in *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, as 'when she pleads for her life to be spared she is not at all like her later self'.[91] Even if the poet creates a character whose main quality

---

[89] Edgar, p. 58.
[90] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.
[91] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 25.

is inconsistency, they 'should nevertheless be consistently inconsistent'.[92] Horace agrees with Aristotle that character should 'remain the same all the way through as it was at the beginning'.[93] This emphasis on consistency, in Horace, is applied not only to character, but to all aspects of playwriting. A poet should not to try to surprise his audience with 'something out of the ordinary'.[94]

By the seventeenth century, it is little surprise to find that consistency has been given a moral dimension. Corneille states that is important for characters to maintain the same habits or manner at the end of the play, that they were shown to have at the beginning: 'à conserver jusqu'à la fin à nos personnages les moeurs que nous leur avons données au commencement'.[95] The word 'moeurs', however, can also be translated as 'morals'. Corneille feels that if a playwright allows an essentially good character to suddenly behave badly or vice versa, she risks alienating her audience. This applies not only to the characters of a particular play, but to other representations of the same characters outside the play, in art and in history. Therefore, if a playwright chooses to write a play about Medea, she cannot choose to portray her as a virtuous character because history states that she was not so: 'Medea can only be shown as the cruel woman she was in legend'.[96]

Around the same time, consistency becomes related to motivation. A character's actions must be consistent with their aim in the play. The idea of motivation is first explicitly discussed in the second half of the seventeenth century. Dryden uses the word 'motive' to mean a character's 'clear account of their purpose

---

[92] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.
[93] Horace, p. 101.
[94] Horace, p. 99.
[95] Pierre Corneille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, trans. by Georges Couton, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), III, p. 132.
[96] Clarke, p. 98.

and design'.[97] He sees motive as something embedded in the text by the playwright, as well as something added to the text by the actor. It is the playwright's responsibility to find good motivations for each of his characters: 'the Poet is to be sure he convinces the Audience that the motive is strong enough'.[98] Rapin locates the idea of motivation inside the character's head, and notes that these actions are directed towards achieving a goal in the future. He states that 'Likewise there ought to appear no *Actor,* that carries not some design in his head, either to cross the designs of others, or to support his own'.[99] Both Dryden and Rapin suggest that there should be a consistent mechanistic causal logic driving a character's actions.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, opinions divide on the need for consistency in terms of both character behaviour and motivation. Tolstoy continues to advocate motivation in terms of a clear explanation of character actions. He criticises Shakespeare's version of *King Lear* because he feels that the characters in Shakespeare's play are more weakly motivated than the characters in the original legend. In the original legend, Tolstoy tells us, Lear wanted to keep Cordelia in Britain with him. He asks her to prove her love to him by marrying a local prince. When she refuses Lear is angry with her because his plans are thwarted. Tolstoy sees this as a clearer motivation for Lear's banishment of Cordelia than Shakespeare's idea that he banishes Cordelia because she refuses to flatter him with a lie. For Tolstoy a poorly-motivated or unmotivated character lacks any character at all. He says of Hamlet that: 'There is no possibility of finding any explanation whatever of Hamlet's actions or words, and therefore no possibility of attributing any character to

---

[97] John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesie, 1668* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1969), p. 36.
[98] Dryden, p. 35.
[99] Rapin, p. 115.

him'.[100] Shakespeare's failure to provide Hamlet with a clear motive for his actions results in a lack of consistency in Hamlet's characterisation. In the original legend 'Hamlet's personality is quite comprehensible' as his behaviour is consistent with what he is trying to achieve. In Shakespeare's version, however, 'Hamlet is doing not what he would really desire, but what is necessary for the author's plan. One moment he is awestruck at his father's ghost, another moment he begins to chaff it, calling it "old mole;" one moment he loves Ophelia, another moment he teases her and so forth'.[101] For Tolstoy, character consistency is a product of consistent motivation.

Strindberg articulates a very different concept of motivation. He talks about motivation in terms of psychology, as he believes that 'what most interests people today is the psychological process'.[102] He argues that it is not always possible to attribute a character's actions to a single clear motivation as a character may have a 'multiplicity of motives'.[103] Any one character action may be grounded in multiple motivations, and some of these motives may even be unknown to the character themselves. It is not the playwright's responsibility to provide consistent motivations for her character's actions. Instead, it is the spectator, who feels the need to read clear motivations into the character's actions, in order to understand them or congratulate themselves on their own intelligence:

> An incident in real life (and this is quite a new discovery!) is usually the outcome of a whole series of deep-buried motives, but the spectator commonly settles for the one that he finds easiest to understand, or that he finds most flattering to his powers of judgement.[104]

---

[100] Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy on Shakespeare,* trans. by V. Chertkoff (Christchurch, Hants: The Free Age Press, 1907), pp. 49–50.
[101] Tolstoy, p. 49.
[102] Strindberg, p. 99.
[103] Strindberg, p. 94.
[104] Strindberg, p. 93.

Strindberg also challenges the idea of consistency in terms of character behaviour and gives it a political colouring. Character consistency is 'a *bourgeois* conception of the immutability of the human soul'. A consistent character is a 'man fixed in a mould'[105] and the idea of consistency, 'these summary judgements that authors pronounce upon people – "He is stupid, he is brutal, he is jealous, he is mean"' deny the idea that the individual is an entity that develops and progresses. The representation of consistent character behaviour on stage, like the representation of appropriate character types, is a kind of suppression, hence Strindberg prefers to draw his characters as 'split and vacillating'. For Strindberg, characters are a collage of contradictory elements: 'agglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of humanity, torn shreds of once-fine clothing that has become rags, in just the way that a human soul is patched together'.[106] A simple and consistent definition of a character becomes impossible to pin down. They are 'dual', 'wavering' and 'uncrystallized'.[107] Character is always inconsistent. A character's actions will always be contradictory because psychologically a character's thoughts are always contradictory. The playwright should therefore allow his character's minds to 'work irregularly, as people's do in real life'.[108]

Strindberg is not the first to argue that dramatic character has a basis in contradiction, as much as in consistency. Character, for Hegel, is a whole that is comprised of elements of both contradiction and consistency. Character is consistent in that it is a 'concentrated unity' and possesses the 'concreteness of a *whole* and a

---

[105] Strindberg, p. 94.
[106] Strindberg, p. 95.
[107] Strindberg, p. 97.
[108] Strindberg, p. 99.

single whole.[109] A character is not a representation of a single quality, an 'allegorical abstract of some one particular trait'.[110] Rather an 'efficient' character is a multi-faceted prism with many aspects: 'the living focus of a whole congeries of qualities and traits'.[111] We are able to empathise with characters because of their multi-faceted nature: 'this wealth of content ... creates the interest we feel in a character'.[112] The character is both universal and particular at the same time. We can recognise elements of ourselves in the character, but at the same time the character is separate from us, a 'rounded and subjective unity' in itself.[113] Character is a 'paradox'[114] in that it is full of contradictions but Hegel states that the poet must not be led into 'grafting upon his characters qualities so essentially diverse that they are incapable of all homogeneous relation'.[115] Character contradictions are unified through an expressive causality: 'character must fuse together its particularity in the element of its spiritual substance'. Hegel identifies the factor that produces this unity as the 'infinite or the Divine'. Without its presence the contradictions within character 'lose all relative meaning or significance and fall away from each other'.[116]

Hegel observes the development of a contradiction at the heart of the Romantic hero, when he suggests in *The Philosophy of Fine Art* (1835) that dramatic conflict in a modern tragedy 'essentially abides within the *character* itself'.[117] In the mid-

---

[109] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 314.
[110] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 317.
[111] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 316.
[112] Peter Singer, *Hegel : a Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford : Oxford University Press, c1983 (2001 [printing]), 2001), p. 315.
[113] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 316.
[114] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 320.
[115] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 324.
[116] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 320.
[117] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 4 vols. (London: Bell, 1920), IV, p. 335.

eighteenth century, the German playwright Otto Ludwig echoes and expands this observation. Ludwig suggests that dramatic conflict originates not between man and man or between man and society, but rather from an internal conflict within the hero's character: 'an absolute contradiction in his own nature, so that the conflict is, so to speak, latent in the beginning and is awakened and laid open to view by the situation'.[118] The situation the hero finds himself in ignites the conflict within him and that inner conflict is reflected through the hero's interactions with other characters and the world around him: 'The external reality is only a symbol of this necessary internal struggle'.[119] A dramatic character's internal conflict is the engine of the external dramatic conflicts of the wider dramatic narrative itself.

Freud identifies two types of drama that are produced as a result of contradictions within the human mind. The first he terms *psychological drama* in which the conflict is a conflict in the hero's mind between contradictory conscious impulses, in which one impulse must be annihilated in order to reach a resolution: 'a struggle between different impulses, and one which must have its end in extinction, not of the hero, but of one of his impulses'. Like Ludwig, Freud suggests that this inner conflict can be projected into the wider world. Therefore an internal conflict between love and duty, might be outwardly expressed as a conflict between love and the conventions of society. Freud's second type is 'psychopathological drama'. This remains a conflict of the mind, but here the conflict is not between two conscious impulses but rather 'between a conscious impulse and a repressed one'.[120] Freud states that the hero of this kind of drama could only be a neurotic. In normal people

---

[118] Otto Ludwig, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 vols. (Leipzig: Grunow, 1891), v, p. 429.
[119] Otto Ludwig, v, p. 163.
[120] Freud, p. 91.

repressed impulses are held in check, but in the neurotic this repression is in the process of failing. Freud identifies Hamlet as the hero of a psychopathic drama, however he warns that such a hero will normally produce aversion in an audience, as only a neurotic spectator could derive pleasure from observing this kind of conflict.

Contemporary thinking on playwriting encompasses the notion of consistency but challenges it at the same time. Gooch states that 'consistency is important', as consistent behaviour in a character is 'a mark of identification' that helps the audience to orientate themselves within the world of the play. Gooch sees consistency as the foundation on which character development can take place. The audience need to first have the character's behaviour established in a consistent way, before they can understand the changes that are taking place within the character as the play progresses. For example, if 'a particular character turns apoplectic at the mention of fish, this has to be firmly established before turning apoplectic at the mention of lamb chops can become significant as a development'. In order to understand that a character is behaving differently from normal, '[t]here has to be a kernel of consistency towards which the differences relate'.[121] Consistent behaviour may constitute the basis of characterisation, but contradiction is what changes a dramatic character into a 'real' person. Fountain sees inner conflict as the contradictory element that transforms a character into a living breathing being: 'When your characters have inner conflict ... then they become three-dimensional creations'.[122] Greig feels that it is this 'sense of people with *contradictions*' that makes the difference between two-dimensional characters and characters who are

---

[121] Gooch, p. 35.
[122] Tim Fountain, *So You Want to Be a Playwright?* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007), p. 14.

'unique and complex individuals'.[123] Contradiction produces a character who is whole in the Hegelian sense: 'fully rounded'.[124] Neipris talks of characters as needing to be 'realistic and unique', '[u]npredictable, but still reasonable' in order to achieve such a 'full shape'.[125]

Consistent motivations remain strongly at the heart of both character and the structure of the dramatic narrative. Character motivation is positioned as the force that produces the play's action. Val Taylor suggests that motivation can be defined as 'the engine that drives the action to produce movement'[126] or 'the operating mechanism by which action occurs, and [which] also dictates how it will unfold'.[127] Fountain states that 'action can only occur when a character has a goal'.[128] Greig positions motivation as the force within characters that will '*fully* set them in motion'. Motivation is framed in terms of what character 'wants, needs, and desires'.[129] Fountain articulates this in terms of a character 'goal' and every event in a play boils down to the idea of a character pursing a goal in the face of an obstacle.[130] For the characters, Taylor suggests like Strindberg, that these goals can be conscious or unconscious. Sometimes they are known to the character, 'the fulfilment of a particular desire'.[131] At other times, the goals are subconscious, related to the 'basic instinctual drives' for food, shelter, sex, self-preservation and

---

[123] Greig, p. 63.
[124] Greig, p. 60.
[125] Neipris, p. 36.
[126] Val Taylor, *Stage Writing: A Practical Guide* (Malborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2002), p. 61.
[127] Taylor, p. 56.
[128] Fountain, p. 18.
[129] Greig, p. 78.
[130] Fountain, p. 12.
[131] Taylor, p. 61.

territory.[132] It is the audience's role to search out the characters motivation and create acceptable explanations for their behaviour. By doing so, Taylor suggests, the audience create a sense of security for themselves. Motivations logically explain why people do things, and so by extension why things happen. If the world inside the theatre is something that can be explained logically through mechanical causal structures, then world outside the theatre, by inference, also works in a logical way. If it is possible to understand the reasons why things happens, it is possible to predict what is going to happen and so, to some extent, be able to control our lives: 'We want to identify causes, to understand reasons: we want explanations because we believe this will give us control of situations through an ability to predict their occurrence, control of our lives and their circumstances'.[133]

Consistency, as Aristotle originally defines it, relates purely to character behaviour. As with goodness and appropriateness, the idea of consistency becomes coloured with moral implications in the Renaissance. In the seventeenth century, the concept of character motivation comes into dramatic theory, with both its own sense of a need for consistency and the idea that consistent motivation produces consistent characterisation. Around the end of the eighteenth century, the idea of contradiction or inner conflict comes into play, alongside the notion of character consistency. 'Realistic' characterisation becomes seen as a combination of consistent and contradictory behaviour, where character contradictions transform two-dimensional characters into three-dimensional whole ones. At the same time, the idea of consistent motivation becomes positioned as a fundamental driving force in the progress of the dramatic narrative.

---

[132] Taylor, p. 62.
[133] Taylor, p. 60.

Verisimilitude

Aristotle's third aspect of character is 'likeness', and this term is frequently read as implying verisimilitude. Aristotle does not define this term explicitly and instead cryptically states that 'this it is not the same as making character good and appropriate, as has already been stated'.[134] Aristotle give us no clear definition of likeness and so the term remains obscure. Likeness is frequently read to mean that the characters must be lifelike and recognisably similar to the people in the audience. The audience needs to recognise the character as being like them, in order for the tragedy to have a cathartic effect on them. Elsewhere in the *Poetics*, Aristotle indicates that characters in tragedy should be like us but 'better than we are'. Poets 'should imitate good portrait-painters' in that 'they paint people as they are, but make them better looking'. In other words characters should be like their audience, but also superior to them. This does not mean that characters are without faults such as irascibility or laziness, however the playwright should 'portray them as having these characteristics, but also as decent people'.[135] Characterisation becomes a mixture of verisimilitude and idealisation.

There is however one more possible definition of the term likeness. The concept of likeness could refer to a process of becoming like, a process of transformation, as opposed to a fixed assessment of the similar properties of two different things. In *De Anima* Aristotle discusses the process of sensual perception. At the beginning of the process of perception, the object and the subject are unlike, but through the perception of the object by the subject, the two become like. He

---

[134] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.
[135] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 25.

states:

> what has the power of sensation is potentially like what the perceived
> object is actually; that is, while at the beginning of the process of its
> being acted upon the two interacting factors are dissimilar, at the end the
> one acted upon is assimilated to the other and is identical in quality with
> it.[136]

Thus character is not like the spectator in a fixed sense, but rather there is a potential

for likeness between the two, and a process of transformation that occurs when the

spectator views the character.

Verisimilitude is less a defined character trait, and more a ground on which

various dramatic theorists have justified their perspective on characterisation. Horace

justifies his concept of decorum through referring by arguing that decorum is an

aspect of the natural order of the world. Nature did not choose to place a 'dolphin

into his woods' nor 'a boar among his waves'.[137] Characters' emotions should be

expressed in an appropriate ways, which follow the ways that those emotions are

expressed naturally:

> Sad words suit a mournful face, violent words the face of anger; sportive
> words become the playful face, and serious words the grave. For nature
> has so formed us that we first feel inwardly any change in our fortunes; it
> is she that cheers us or rouses us to anger, she that torments us and bows
> us to the ground with a heavy burden of sorrow, and it is only afterwards
> that she expresses these feelings in us by means of the tongue.[138]

When Evanthius argues for alterations to such strict character types of Roman

comedy, he still acknowledges that these character types are 'true to life in

characterisation'.[139] In challenging the idea that all prostitutes are evil, he states that

Terence justly alters this character type because 'verisimilitude is required in

---

[136] Aristotle, 'De Anima', in *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, ed. by
W. D. Ross, trans. by J. A. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931), p. 122.
[137] Horace, p. 99.
[138] Horace, p. 101.
[139] Evanthius, p. 303.

fiction'.[140] He is not arguing for a contemporary individualised character who breaks the mould of the stereotype, rather he is arguing for a new character type. If there are good prostitutes in the world outside the theatre, then the character type of the good prostitute should be presented on stage, alongside the character type of the evil prostitute.

Lombardi and Maggi, in the Renaissance, also frame their arguments on the basis of verisimilitude, but there is now a tension developing between verisimilitude and moral instruction. The audience must find the action of the play credible in terms of both probability and verisimilitude, but the primary purpose of both is to enable effective moral instruction. Tragedy's aim is 'to teach proper conduct whether this be introduced into men's souls by false narratives or by true narratives, his desire is fulfilled. But since a poet cannot accomplish this purpose unless he obtains the belief of his audience, he follows common opinion in this respect'.[141] For Lombardi and Maggi the character types function primarily as moral exemplars: 'the characters must conform to traditional types, and the needs of instruction must be constantly kept in mind'.[142] Characters must be real enough to be accepted by the audience, but this acceptability is achieved through an adherence to familiar character types: 'Most clearly and most convincingly, acceptability by the audience will result from the presentation of type characters according to the requirements of decorum'.[143] Verisimilitude can be sacrificed for morality's sake.

With the advent of Romanticism, there is a shift away from a focus on morality towards a focus on 'tracing out the innermost workings of the soul' and

---

[140] Evanthius, p. 304.
[141] Weinberg, I, p. 412.
[142] Weinberg, I, p. 415.
[143] Weinberg, I, p. 414.

arguments for certain types of characterisation become more founded on the basis of verisimilitude again.[144] Hegel's argument that dramatic characters should consist of a unified set of contradictions is justified with observation that 'humanity is just this very paradox'.[145] Naturalism too grounds its arguments on the foundation of verisimilitude. When Zola calls for 'psychological and physiological study'[146] of dramatic characters in his essay on 'Naturalism in the Theatre', he argues that such a scientific analysis will produce 'a character whose muscles and brain function as in nature'.[147] In the twentieth century, verisimilitude in characterisation becomes connected with psychological truths. Ayckbourn states that 'if a play's worth its salt it'll survive through the psychological truth of its characters'.[148] Characterisation takes on a socio-psychological basis, as its ground of verisimilitude.

Grounding arguments in verisimilitude, as discussed in the first chapter, indicates a mirroring of social structures without a negotiation of them. In the case of characterisation, this indicates a mirroring of the dominant conception of the social subject, rather than its critique. Jameson argues that 'the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, that of the hegemonic class'[149] and inscribed within them are the 'irreconcilable demands and positions of antagonistic classes'.[150] If the dominant type of characterisation in drama reflects the dominant social class's perspective of the social subject, then reading the texts that define these characterisations reveals

---

[144] Schiller, p. vii.
[145] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 320.
[146] Zola, p. 366.
[147] Zola, p. 363.
[148] Ayckbourn, p. 43.
[149] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 71.
[150] Jameson, p. 70.

the class dynamics of various social orders and the anxieties that surround them. The Classical theatre positions the social subject as playing a defined and fixed role within society. There is a sense in which the social order is founded on the idea that people are their roles and are naturally made for them. As a society there is some anxiety evident about the transgression of these social roles. During the Renaissance, there is a shift in emphasis towards thinking about the social subject in terms of their moral nature. Characters become exemplars of moral attitudes and the theatre rather than reflecting the world outside the theatre. Anxiety centres around the fear of moral transgression. In the nineteenth century there is a shift towards a socio-psychological image of the social subject and anxieties are refocused around the need for clear motivations to explain actions. Character can be seen as representative, not of universal human nature, but rather of the dominant mode of thinking about the nature of the social subject and the anxieties that surround it under the prevailing cultural hegemony.

Postmodern/Postdramatic Character

Over time, the representation of character undergoes concrete changes. Serious drama presents socio-psychological characterisation as the 'end of character'. Critics, such as Fuchs and Lehmann, have argued that socio-psychological character is in the process being superseded by what is interchangeably termed postmodern or postdramatic character. Like a proponent of serious drama, Fuchs takes a teleological approach to the history of character but her narrative suggests that, rather than reaching an end point in terms of its development, we are now in the middle of a 'modernist' break that began in late seventies. She

positions socio-psychological character as an end point, which can only be followed by the death of character from which a postmodern constellation of new constructions of character are now in the process of emerging. Lehmann also argues that theatre did not enter the modernist period along with other art forms at the turn of the twentieth century, and like Fuchs, he presents us with a teleological narrative leading to a seismic break in theatre practice. Both critics present us with a model of the linear narrative of theatrical change breaking into a new constellation of practices. Lehmann argues that while theatrical revolutionaries at the advent of the twentieth century question the various constituents of drama, what they do not question is the relationship between theatre and drama. With the arrival on the scene of first film and then television, drama moves from the theatre into other mediums and it becomes clear that theatre and drama are not interchangeable terms. If there can be drama without theatre, then there must be theatre without drama. From the 1970s onwards, Lehmann argues that a new theatrical discourse appears, that of the 'postdramatic'. This is theatre without drama. While much British contemporary playwriting remains firmly within the realms of the dramatic, a few writers are experimenting with elements recognisable as corresponding to elements of Lehmann's postdramatic theatre. The postdramatic is most commonly imagined to be located within 'non-textual' or devised practices of theatre making. Lehmann argues that postdramatic theatre is not necessarily a non-textual theatre, even though one of the defining features of dramatic theatre is 'the primacy of the text'.[151] He clearly states that 'text theatre' is 'a genuine and authentic variant of postdramatic theatre, rather than referring to something that has supposedly been overcome'. In

---

[151] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 21.

postdramatic theatre, however, the position of the text is altered within the production process. The text is no longer the source of authority; it is considered 'as one element, one layer, or as a 'material' of the scenic creation, not as its master'.[152]

So far we have seen the way that playwrights are challenging elements of the dramatic such linearity or the concept of plot/story, however, I would argue, along with Fuchs, that character is the site where we see the most disruption of naturalistic concepts taking place. Since the seventies, critics such as Abirached have argued the main characterising feature of the transitional period that they see theatre as in, is a crisis of character. Susan Blattès sees Fuchs and others as arguing that the concept of character is invalid in postmodern theatre. Blattès argues against this perceived critical position and attempts to demonstrate that '"character" as a concept can survive even when many other traditional elements of drama have been thrown out of the window'.[153] She offers us four definitions of how the postmodern/postdramatic character differs from the dramatic character. Firstly, there is a 'lack of information available' about them in terms of their background or personal details, such as name or age etc. Secondly, if there is any information given about them, it 'can be questioned and is frequently contradicted'. Thirdly, they lack rational motivations; '[i]t is often quite difficult or even impossible to decide on characters' motivations'. Finally the character's actions and their dialogue lack 'coherence'.[154] There are several problems with the model of postmodern/postdramatic characterisation that Blattès describes. Firstly the model is articulated mainly as a lack of character content. The postdramatic/postmodern text fails to provide us with character

---

[152] Lehmann, p. 17.

[153] Susan Blattès, 'Is the Concept of "Character" Still Relevant in Contemporary Drama?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 14 (2007), 69-81 (p. 70).

[154] Blattès, 69-81 (p. 71).

information, or if character information is given it is unreliable. Secondly, the models provided are articulated through ideas of how postmodern/postdramatic characters are not like socio-psychological characters. They are not individualised. They lack motivation. They lack consistency. They are not whole.

The question this raises, is that if contemporary theatre is in the process of re-imagining character then what new types of characterisation are emerging, and whether these new types of characterisation reflect a shift in the nature of the social subject? In this section, I will consider character by examining the new models of characterisation that are emerging in the work of contemporary British dramatists. I will argue that postmodern/postdramatic character differs from naturalistic socio-psychological character in terms of a shift in focalization, from objective to the subjective characterisation and in terms of a shift in the representation of the social bond that defines the relationship between the individual and the collective. Instead of Blattès's four definitions of postmodern/postdramatic character, I propose four different modes of characterisation that have postmodern/postdramatic features: subjective characterisation; narrative characterisation; unassigned character; and finally collective characterisation. These modes of characterisation are drawn from three recent British plays: Anthony Neilson's *Realism*, Simon Stephens's *Pornography*, and Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*. The characterisation in all three plays challenges features of good characterisation in socio-psychological terms. By looking at the mode through which character is expressed, as opposed to the ways that character can be seen as lacking in socio-psychological terms, I will argue that, not only is the representation of character in

the contemporary theatre undergoing a significant change, but that the lens through which we view and construct character is also altering.

Realism

Three of Anthony Neilson's recent plays have been set not in the external world but in the internal landscape of his protagonist's mind. *Relocated* (Royal Court, 2008) is an 'entirely subjective piece, taking place in the mind of the central character' who is suffering from 'guilt, and mis-placed guilt at that'.[155] In *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (Tron/Edinburgh International Festival, 2004) Neilson states he tried to represent the 'internal landscape of someone who was mentally ill'. *Realism* (National Theatre of Scotland/Edinburgh International Festival, 2006) is an 'attempt to do the same for someone healthy'.[156] Neilson has indicated that his vision of the world is one in which 'there are no permanent truths'.[157] It is no surprise then, that he has recently shifted his mode of characterisation from an objective viewpoint, with its implication that what is being viewed is itself an objective representation of reality, towards a subjective mode by moving inside the character's head. In the subjective mode there are no permanent truths, there is only truth as the character sees it in that moment.

Realism presents a day in the life of Stuart, from the inside of Stuart's head. The particular Saturday that the play concerns, is one in which Stuart has decided to

---

[155] Michael Billington, 'Follow the Banned', *Whatsonstage.com*, 2008 <http://blogs.whatsonstage.com/2008/07/04/follow-the-banned/#more-370> [accessed 6 October 2008].

[156] Anthony Neilson, 'Forward', in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism* (London: Methuen, 2007).

[157] Anthony Neilson, 'Last Word: Anthony Neilson on Relocated', *Guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/theatre/drama/story/0,,2287274,00.html> [accessed 24 April 2009].

'do nothing' and spends the day regretting his decision to split up with his girlfriend Angie.[158] In terms of real action, '[f]uck all' happens.[159] In contrast, however, the inside of Stuart's head turns out to a colourful whirl of action drawn from dreams, memories and fantasies. The fact that the play is set inside Stuart's mind was subtly indicated in the original production by Miram Buether's set, on which the entire contents of a flat appeared to have been washed up and semi-submerged on a white sandy beach or dropped into the middle of the desert. As a member of the audience, I had no real conception of where the action of the play was taking place until the final few minutes of the production. The experience of watching the play was baffling and disorientating, as critics noted it's a 'wild delirious trip'[160] during which 'you are never quite sure whether you are in a dream world or waking reality',[161] as the play gives exactly the same weight in representational terms to the four different levels of reality that are going on inside Stuart's head: dreams, memories, fantasies and reality. The audience is constantly working to determine the focal viewpoint of the action. As Trish Reid argues, *Realism* 'blurs the boundaries between reality, memory, dream and fantasy in such a way as to confuse audience members thus bringing them into consciousness of themselves as interpreting subjects'.[162]

The condition of the contemporary white Scottish male is explored within the

---

[158] Anthony Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism* (London: Methuen, 2007), p. 97.

[159] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 156.

[160] Lyn Gardner, 'Realism', *Guardian.co.uk*, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/aug/17/theatre.edinburgh2006> [accessed 24 April 2009].

[161] Charles Spencer, 'What Men Are Really Like', *The Telegraph*, 2006 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/3654592/What-men-are-really-like.html> [accessed 17 September 2011].

[162] Trish Reid, '"Deformities of the Frame": The Theatre of Anthony Neilson', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17 (2007), 487-498 (pp. 489–490).

internal landscape of Stuart's head. On the one hand, the inside of Stuart's head is a 'distinctive all-singing, all-dancing show'.[163] On the other, however, his dreams, memories and fantasies reveal it to be a place of deep anxiety, guilt, insecurity and loneliness. Stuart's state of anxiety is revealed through his hypochondria. He frequently checks a birthmark on his shoulder that is '*itching*'.[164] His childhood alter-ego Mullet assures him that it could definitely be cancer: 'Fucking Kylie's got cancer – look how young she is! If someone with all that money and an arse like that can get cancer, you think you can't?' Mullet also translates Stuart's 'funny' left eye, constant 'cramps' and feeling 'thirsty a lot of the time' into a definitive diagnosis of diabetes.[165] In his dreams, Stuart feels constantly under threat. In one fragment, the sky is full of Israeli bombers (the play was written and produced during the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon).[166] In another, a squirrel that Stuart squashed is angrily demanding that Stuart pay to put his guts back in.[167]

The women inside Stuart's head make him feel guilty. The memory of his mother appears whenever Stuart is doing something he knows is wrong. Her voice emanates from the washing machine, berating him for not checking the pockets of his trousers before putting them in.[168] After he imagines taking revenge on a salesman who rings him on a Saturday and then hangs up, his mother arrives in his head with the salesman in question, who Stuart's guilty mind imagines as disabled and suffering from seizures: '*He's in a wheelchair, attached to an IV drip.* **Mother**

---

[163] Gardner.
[164] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 95.
[165] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 103.
[166] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 99.
[167] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 100.
[168] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 123.

helps bring him on stage. One of **Simon***'s arms is tiny and malformed'.*[169] She prevents Stuart from looking at pornography[170] and appears in a masturbatory fantasy in which he imagines his two ex-girlfriends having sex, disrupting it by infecting it with questions about Christmas presents and concerns about the size of her bottom:

> **Mother** What do you want for your Christmas?
>
> **Laura** Oh God, that's good – rub my little cunt!
>
> **Mother** I've got a bum like a baby elephant's.
>
> **Mother** *slaps her bottom. The rhythm falls into time with* **Stuart***'s spanking of* Angie.
>
> **Angie** Spank my big elephant bum!
>
> **Laura** What do you want for your Christmas?
>
> **Mother** What do you want for your Christmas?
>
> **Angie** What do you want for your Christmas, then?
>
> *Furious,* **Stuart** *gives up.*[171]

Stuart's mother takes on a prohibitive role in Stuart's psyche. This role is also extended in his memories and fantasies to the other women in this life. He accuses Laura of trying to turn him into a 'leaf-eating, non-smoking, rice-eating wank', when she tells him off for choosing a microwave prawn curry for his dinner.[172] Angie scolds him for scraping toast into the sink,[173] spoiling the cat, and behaving in racist and homophobic ways.[174] The problems that Stuart is currently having in his

---

[169] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 131.

[170] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 137.

[171] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 118.

[172] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 142.

[173] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 102.

[174] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, pp. 133–135.

relationship with Angie seem unsurprising in the context of the way the women in his head suppress his desires and undermine him.

While the women in Stuart's head make him feel guilty, the men in Stuart's head make him feel insecure. His alter-ego Mullet constantly hurls insults at him, calling him 'fucking knob',[175] 'a fat fucking shite',[176] 'stupid face',[177] 'a *poof*', 'a *weakling*',[178] 'an old wank', 'boring and fat and emotionally stunted',[179] 'one totally pathetic loser' and 'a fucking tit'.[180] He bullies Stuart, making him hop like a rabbit, chasing him with shit on a stick and forcing him to eat crayons.[181] Stuart's sense of self-worth is further lowered by the dismissive behaviour of his cat Galloway, which Stuart interprets as disdain. At Stuart's imaginary funeral, Galloway gives the last speech and undermines all the positive things that the other characters in Stuart's head have said about him with his single sentence response: 'He was a prick'.[182] Even Stuart's best friend Paul, who cares enough about Stuart to ring him to check that he's not feeling 'depressed', is imagined as a source of insecurity.[183] Stuart imagines Paul coming round to watch TV with beer and chips, as a pretext to murder him. The insecurities that crowd Stuart's internal landscape are positioned as the motivations behind some of Stuart's more ridiculous actions in both his fantasy world and the real one. It is Mullet who bullies Stuart into fantasizing about abusing the telesales man. When the toast gets stuck in the toaster, Mullet persuades Stuart to

---

[175] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 101.
[176] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 102.
[177] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 104.
[178] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 105.
[179] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 119.
[180] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 126.
[181] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, pp. 105–107.
[182] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 151.
[183] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 97.

stick a knife in it to get the toast out. As a result Stuart is electrocuted: '*He plunges the knife into the toaster and is immediately thrown on to his back by the resulting shock'.*[184]

Stuart's anxieties, guilt and insecurities are further heightened by his inability to keep his thoughts with the bounds of what society considers acceptable. Stuart's thoughts are full of sexual imagery and swearwords, but they perform their greatest transgression, when in response to an outrageous gas bill, they conjure up the Black and White Minstrels:

> What a bunch of cunts, what a bunch of cunts …
> What a bunch of cunts, what a bunch of cunts …
>
> *Music begins. He sings along, the orchestration becoming more elaborate.*
>
> *Behind him, female dancers appear.*
>
> *He becomes involved in a song-and-dance routine. The lyrics consist only of the words 'What a bunch of cunts' and sometimes 'What a bunch of fucking cunts' for variety's sake.*
>
> *Male dancers join in – they are blacked up, like Al Jolson.*[185]

Neilson makes in clear in the stage directions that Stuart does not become fully aware of the blacked up dancers until after the end of the song: '*The song reaches a finale, then ends. Only then does* Stuart *see the blacked up male dancers'*. He challenges the blacked up dancers for being a 'bit fucking racist'. They blame him for thinking of them in the first place: 'It was your idea'. Stuart shifts the blame logically to 'whoever thought up *The Black and White Minstrels*'. The blacked up dancers then shift the blame back onto him, by accusing him of having 'liked' the

---

[184] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 101.
[185] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 120.

programme when he was a child.[186] Stuart suddenly finds himself labelled as a racist within his own imaginative world. A similar situation arises later in a memory of a conversation with Angie. Angie defines Stuart's attitudes towards a local Asian shopkeeper as racist, 'every time you tell me what Mr Rajah's said you put on that stupid accent'.[187] She also accuses him of being a homophobe because 'being *gay* revolts you'. In trying to prove that he's 'in favour'[188] of homosexuality and that 'I go out of my way to not be racist', Stuart again finds himself proving that he is both those things rather than that he isn't.[189] He reveals that he finds the idea of gay male sex repulsive, 'I say that if you're a heterosexual man – regardless of how enlightened you are – you find the thought of, you know –'.[190] He then tries to explain how he is not a racist but discovers that he can only do so in terms that make him sound like a racist:

> **Stuart** Well – if an Asian shopkeeper –
>
> **Angie** 'An Asian shopkeeper – '
>
> **Stuart** Yes – if an Asian shopkeeper gives me change, I always make a point of just making slight contact with his hand.
>
> **Angie** What's that supposed to prove?
>
> **Stuart** Well. You know – just to make sure he knows I don't think I'll get the Paki touch or something. And – if I get on a bus, and there's an Asian person sitting there –
>
> **Angie** Don't tell me – you sit beside them.
>
> **Stuart** Yes! Even if there are other seats![191]

---

[186] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 121.
[187] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 134.
[188] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 133.
[189] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 135.
[190] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 134.
[191] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 135.

Stuart is in a conundrum in his head, where he doesn't feel like that he is a racist or a homophobe, but yet he is fully aware that society would read his thoughts and behaviour as racist. While Gardner reads the play as suggesting that 'the thought police can't control what goes on inside our heads',[192] I would argue the that the thought police are very much inside Stuart's head. Though he may be able to have as transgressive a thought as the Black and White Minstrels, he punishes himself for it. His mind is peopled with characters, such as Angie, who are on hand to punish him for his socially unacceptable actions, if he doesn't do it in person.

Alongside the anxiety, the guilt and the insecurity, Stuart's dreams, memories and fantasies reveal him to be lonely. In reality, he actively pushes the people who care about him away. He dumps Angie and rejects Paul's offers of company. Holed up in his flat, he is like the castle that his mother sees in the tea leaves, surrounded by a moat 'to keep the folk from getting in'.[193] The women in his life may be drawn two dimensionally as prohibitive figures or the objects of his sexual desire, but they are also the figures whose company he most longs for. He says of his ex-girlfriends that he felt 'the loss of every one of them, like a little death'.[194] He spends a page of dialogue trying to work out what he could say in a phone message to persuade Angie to call him.[195] As well as remembering his dead mother as prohibitive figure, he needs her and remembers her fondly. He calls out for her when he needs to know whether to do a 'pre-wash'[196] and asks for her heavenly intercession to help him win

---

[192] Gardner.
[193] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 100.
[194] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 122.
[195] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, pp. 113–114.
[196] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 124.

Angie back.[197] He shares a '*conspiratorial laugh*' with her over his father's behaviour.[198] Some cheap aftershave, she once gave him is the first thing he'd save in a fire, 'if there was a fire, I wouldn't save my CDs first or my iPod or anything; the first thing I'd save would be that aftershave'.[199] After her death, he imagines her as an angel. Stuart has a fantasy about his own death that allows him to gather all the people he misses at his funeral. The tender memories that he imagines these people recounting express both his loneliness and his desire for their company. They are images of separation but togetherness. Laura remembers how once, after they had fallen out, it snowed and how 'it was all untouched; except outside my door and on all the cars, and everywhere, someone had written "I love you Laura". Everywhere you could see'.[200] Angie remembers how if 'he had to leave before me in the morning, he'd always put one of my teddy bears in bed beside me, with its little arm over me'.[201] In the final moments of the play, Stuart dreams the phone call that he longs to get from Angie. His longing for her company is expressed through his request for her to 'talk to me for a while. Talk to me like we'll be seeing each other tomorrow'.[202]

Stuart's fears and dreams are clearly revealed through the interactions he has with the imagery figures inside his head. By taking the play inside the landscape of the mind, Neilson presents a situation from a single character's subjective viewpoint without the need to switch from the dramatic mode, where events are shown through present tense action, to the narrative one, where past events are narrated and dramatic

---

[197] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 119.
[198] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 137.
[199] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 118.
[200] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 150.
[201] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 151.
[202] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 155.

action is seen as dangerously lacking. There may be no dramatic action outside of Stuart's mind, but there is plenty inside.

Neilson states that he is interested in subjective characterisation because it is a way of challenging serious drama's tendency to represent people as being driven by consistent motivations that then lead to consistent actions:

> A long held maxim has always been that drama differs from life because, in drama, you know what everyone wants. But that constant contradiction – the ability to want and both not want the same thing – is a fundamental part of the human character. In a regular narrative we embody these contradictions as opposing forces to the protagonist. It's the root of drama but it's also reductive. The greatest oppositional forces facing normal people come from within[203]

Stuart has a goal in *Realism*, which is to get Angie to call him. He only succeeds in this goal by dreaming the phone call as he falls asleep at the end of the day. During the day he does nothing to make this happen in the real world. In dramatizing the inside of Stuart's head, Neilson shows us the contradictions in him that prevent him from following through on his desire. He longs for Angie, but at the same time, he feels that women undermine him. He is racked by insecurities about his physical appearance and his moral character. He still harbours feelings for Laura, his first love. He has also inherited the idea from his mother that love should be unachievably perfect, 'Don't you settle for less than love, than true love, do you hear me? Don't you settle for less!'[204] From the view inside Stuart's head, it is easy to understand his inability to act on his primary desire.

I would argue that *Realism* articulates three main, and related, points about the nature of the social subject through its use of subjective characterisation. The first point is that our actions do not resemble the coherent motivated dramatic actions

---

[203] Neilson, 'Forward', *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*.
[204] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 140.

that are represented in serious drama. Stuart's real actions are random, disconnected and difficult to read coherent meaning into. He turns down Paul's offer of company. He feeds the cat. He has a doze. He makes a cup of tea and hums a song about making it. He electrocutes himself with the toaster. He throws the toast away. He checks his birthmark and then his whole body in the mirror. He puffs up and deflates his belly. He does some press ups. He pretends to be a rabbit. He watches the news and gets a bowl of cereal. He shouts at *Any Questions* on the radio. He rehearses what he might say to Angie. He masturbates. He hears an ice-cream van. He opens the post. He sings a song. He goes to the toilet. He has a shower. He washes his clothes. He throws a sock away. He answers a telesales call. The cat rejects the food he's put out for it and refuses to be stroked. He makes and eats a prawn curry. He watches TV. He goes to bed. From the outside, these action appear either mundane or random. As a set of actions, they fail to outline a coherent motivated dramatic narrative. Viewing Stuart's actions from the inside of his head, however it is evident that though his thoughts are random and chaotic, the actions that spring from them are clearly related to them. Mullet's bullying impels Stuart to electrocute himself and to jump up and down like a rabbit. Stuart throws the toast in the bin because Angie tells him off for scraping it into the sink. The randomness of Stuart's outer actions, in comparison to their sense in the context of what is going on in Stuart's head can be clearly seen at the beginning of act three. In the real action, Stuart takes a prawn curry ready meal out of the fridge and puts it in the microwave. He watches it cook, says, 'You can't put a price on a dream house …' and then the microwave pings. The dialogue seems random and unrelated to the action. From inside Stuart's head, the action makes complete sense. Laura scolds him for eating such bad food, which leads

to a conversation about what would happen to the animals they are planning to have if Stuart died. Stuart points out that if they're going to have that many animals then they'll need buy a house on the scale of 'Blofeld's fucking secret complex'. At which point Laura points out that, 'You can't put a price on a dream house!', which Stuart repeats out loud in response to the memory.[205] *Realism* argues that because our actions in real life seem random and unmotivated because they are the logical result of random and contradictory thought processes.

Secondly, *Realism* argues that under post-Fordism, the most interesting and exciting things that happen to us, happen not in the real world, but inside our heads. At the end of *Realism*, the audience are given a glimpse of Stuart's life from the outside:

> *A box is flown in.*
>
> *When the lights, come up it is revealed as a kitchen. The furniture – the washing machine, the cooker, the fridge, etc – is exactly the same as that which was dotted around the set, but it is now in its proper place. It looks very real.*
>
> *A door opens and* Stuart *enters. He then proceeds to make himself, in real time and with little fuss, a cup of tea. This done, he sits at the kitchen table.*[206]

The blandness of actual life in comparison to Stuart's internal landscape was clearly apparent in the scenography of the original production. The sandy landscape of Stuart's mind was full of colour and its sand flowed freely off and out into the wings of the stage. There was a sense of his mind as an expansive and open space. The kitchen set was flown in as a small box within a grey safety curtain. The box set was small and letterbox shaped. The kitchen was grey in tone. The box was sealed on all

---

[205] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 143.
[206] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 156.

sides, giving the impression that the kitchen was shut inside a tank. The space was one of separation and confinement. *Realism* can be clearly read as suggesting that there is something wrong with a society where individuals lead such bland external existences, when their internal landscapes are so full and bright.

Thirdly and lastly, *Realism* raises questions about the passivity of the individual under post-Fordism. Mullet has a go at Stuart for losing his ambition and his will to achieve his dreams:

> What's happened to you, man? You were going to be a choo-choo driver. You were going to be an astronaut. What's happened to that guy? What's happened to the guy who was going to build a rocket and fly to fucking Mars? I mean look at yourself. What do you see?[207]

The dreams that Mullet invokes are childish ones, but they imply a drive and a capacity for action that the middle aged Stuart has seems to have lost. He can't even pick up the phone to tell Angie that he made a mistake. He's too 'knackered' to play football with his friends or to even go for a pint.[208] That Stuart has the capacity for action is clear from his internal landscape. In his imagination, he has the capacity and the intelligence to win political debates and resolve society's problems. In his imagination, his 'stunningly lucid intervention' in the debate on the Scottish smoking ban on *Any Questions* not only brings some sense to the issue, it actually starts a political riot.[209] In the external world though, all Stuart does is heckle at the radio and knock the cat's food over. This triumph, with the frame of his internal landscape, gives Stuart a sense of fulfilment. It fills him with a enough confidence to start to think about what he might say to Angie. In this sense, it provides him with an impetus to action. Stuart, however, never translates this impetus into real world

---

[207] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 103.
[208] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 97.
[209] Neilson, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism*, p. 112.

action. He never makes the phone call. *Realism* raises questions about the passivity of the individual. If the difference between our experience of ourselves in our internal and external landscapes is so great, then it seems little wonder that there is a retreat towards the internal world. This tendency, however, to live within our lives in the sphere of our dreams, memories and fantasies seriously diminishes our capacity to make real change happen in the external world.

Pornography

Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg, 2007; Traverse/Birmingham Rep, 2008) tells the stories of the lives of five Londoners and three visitors to London over the days leading up to the bombings. The play is constructed from a set of four monologues, two duologues and a final verbatim section consisting of personal details about the 52 victims of the London bombings in 2005. The monologues that dominate the play reflect what Lehmann sees as an increasing tendency in contemporary theatre to move away from the dramatic towards the narrative. At the the same time, the use of unassigned character in the duologues challenges the idea that dialogue needs to be specifically allocated to a particular speaker. In these duologues, speech exists without character.

Drama is intrinsically linked with the idea of action. The word drama itself means 'action' and is derived from the ancient Greek verb *dran*, meaning "to do". Dramatic character is rooted in the idea of action. Aristotle states that character is primarily expressed through action. While he links character to the possession of certain qualities, 'that in respect of which we say that the agent is of a certain kind', he states categorically that the imitation of these qualities is not something that the

writer should specifically aim to achieve. By concentrating primarily on the imitation of action, the writer or indeed the actor will also achieve the imitation of character as 'character is included along with and on account of the actions'.[210] A character is the sum of their actions. Hegel agrees with Aristotle that good characterisation has its basis in action: 'the strength to do and to will some actual thing'.[211] What makes character engaging is its ability to make choices and to act. Hegel criticises the characters of Romantic drama for their inactivity and insularity. He sees Goethe's Werther as 'a thoroughly morbid type of character, without any vestige of real manliness such as might carry him beyond the egotism of his love-passion'.[212] All such characters who 'are for ever revolving round themselves' can only induce in us 'an empty interest'.[213] Thus a character must be active in order to engage the audience's genuine interest. In contemporary playwriting, the idea that genuine character is only revealed through action is frequently stressed: 'character demonstrates its honesty and reliability through something it *does*'.[214] Whatever is said about a character or by the character is deemed as an untrustworthy source. Tim Fountain defines character as '*decision under pressure*'.[215] A character is the sum of the choices that they make, and the more pressured the situation in which the character has to make these choices, the more the choices reflect the character's genuine nature. The quality of a character's choices reveal the character's internal qualities. Intelligent characters will make intelligent choices, practical characters practical choices, naive characters will make naive choices and so on. The nature of

---

[210] Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 11.
[211] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 323.
[212] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 321.
[213] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 323.
[214] Gooch, p. 23.
[215] Fountain, p. 13.

character's choices are demonstrated through the nature of the actions that result from them.

Pornography challenges the idea that character can essentially be expressed through action. Like *Realism*, *Pornography* suggests a subjective viewpoint. Whereas Neilson suggests that a character's actions are only truly understood from the inside of a character's head, Stephens challenges the very idea of character itself as an objective entity. In *Pornography*, four of the characters tell their stories through narrative monologues as opposed to dramatic action. The events that they are involved in are described rather than directly represented. The dramatic action happened elsewhere, in the past. Like the characters in Tim Crouch's *The Author*, they provide 'a narration of the play presented'. The interest here is less located in the question of what will happen next, than in the character's relationship to the events that happened, as Lehmann terms it 'the peculiar act of the *personal* memory/narration'.[216] Character in this mode is separated from action. It is narrated rather than demonstrated. The narrative mode shapes the relationship between the audience and the onstage characters in three ways: it produces a sense of both distance and empathy; from a subjective viewpoint; and it presents character as something that is written by the character themselves, rather than a concrete entity.

A heavy use of monologue within a play is often read, as Pfister does, as implying 'the disruption of communication and the isolation and alienation of the individual'.[217] *Pornography* could be read as implying the increasing isolation and passivity of the social subject under late capitalism, through its use of monologue. In

---

[216] Lehmann, p. 109.
[217] Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. by John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 134.

the British production of the play, the characters spoke directly to the audience, rather than addressing the other characters, who stood around them onstage. The play abounds with images of isolated individuals: '[l]one drivers with no passengers';[218] '[t]he tube is full of people and nearly all of them nowadays have iPods'.[219] Stephens links this isolation explicitly to increasing mechanisation. The cars and the iPods act as barriers between people. They shield us from 'the fucking horror' of other people.[220] Machines now service us in the place of other human beings: 'You never get bus conductors any more. On some tube lines now you don't even get drivers. The machines have started to run themselves'.[221] The most intimate human relationship becomes devoid of human connection, as sexual fulfilment is delivered online twenty four hours a day. One character passes two days in a porn-filled haze.

The narrative mode invokes isolation through the way that it allows Stephens to play with complex ideas of absence and presence. It enables the character speaking to convey both the presence of characters who are absent, and the absence of characters who are present. A sense of loss is forged through the presence of absent characters in the speaker's thoughts. The older woman glimpses her dead husband in other men in the street: 'I see one man. He does look like my husband. Just for a second I was thrown'.[222] At the same time, a sense of loneliness is built through the absence of characters who are physically present. The mother can only describe her husband in terms of his external appearance: 'He's windswept when he

---

[218] Simon Stephens, *Pornography* (London: Methuen, 2008), p. 38.
[219] Stephens, p. 6.
[220] Stephens, p. 57.
[221] Stephens, p. 56.
[222] Stephens, p. 61.

comes back'.;[223] 'His hair is clean. And his skin. He's had a shave'.[224] She no longer feels that she knows him as a person, as she has no access to his thoughts any more. Her mind is full of unasked and unanswered questions: 'Where were you? Which shops? What were you doing?'[225] Both the presence of absent characters and the absence of present characters express a longing for a concrete connection to others.

The characters speak in negative terms, giving a sense of not only isolation, but also of an absence of identity, restriction, passivity and disappointment. The school boy is unable to communicate a clear sense of himself. He does not know who he is, he is only aware that he is not like other people: 'I don't act like them'.[226] In addition to this, he is hemmed in by what he terms 'the rules of the insane'. His actions are defined by prohibitions: 'Don't chew gum./Don't drink water in the corridor./Don't go to the toilet'.[227] He lives in a world where he is compelled not to act. His passivity is bred by the social restrictions placed upon him. The mother articulates a sense of passivity and disappointment though her accounts of the things that fail to happen. She is full of unfulfilled desires, particularly in relation to her husband: 'Jonathan doesn't ring';[228] 'Jonathan doesn't notice I've gone'.[229] There is a Brechtian 'not ... but'. The speaker conveys what the other character was doing but the negative phrasing communicates a clear sense of what the speaker wanted them to do instead.

Release from isolation and passivity becomes placed as something that can

---

[223] Stephens, p. 5.
[224] Stephens, p. 7.
[225] Stephens, p. 5.
[226] Stephens, p. 10.
[227] Stephens, p. 11.
[228] Stephens, p. 6.
[229] Stephens, p. 7.

only be achieved through violence, a violence that has overt or implicit sexual overtones. When his sexual advances are rejected, the schoolboy expresses his desire for a connection with his teacher: 'I would cut out her cunt with a fork. I would scrape off her tits. I would force a chairleg up her arse until her rectum bled'.[230] For the bomber, the bomb is a way of ripping through the dehumanisation that Western society imposes on its subjects. A way of ridding the world of the 'bewigged, myopic, prurient, sexless, dead'.[231] A way of releasing people from a state of passivity back into action, 'from now on you can do, you have it in you to do whatever it is that you want to do'.[232] The schoolboy finds the violence of the bombs arousing. Watching the CCTV footage of the incident is like watching pornography: 'The way the images move, I think the word is tantalising'.[233] The schoolboy senses the potential for human connection in the violence, its climatic nature, and his response to it is equated with sexual release. The bomber feels a moment of elation in the seconds before he detonates the bomb: 'Suddenly I feel lighter than I have ever felt in my whole life'.[234] Stephens does not, however, posit violence as the solution to the ills of Western society. The connections created through violence are not reciprocal. They are pornographic. One person satisfying their desire without the active participation of the other. The individuals are still isolated from one another without a real connection.

The narrative mode of the play can be seen as reflecting the isolation and passivity but at the same time, the act of narration itself reflects a desire to

---

[230] Stephens, p. 17.
[231] Stephens, p. 40.
[232] Stephens, p. 38.
[233] Stephens, p. 18.
[234] Stephens, p. 43.

communicate. The character's appeal to the audience represents a longing for socialisation. In the German production (Deutschen Schauspielhauses, Hamberg, 2007) this was reflected in the characters' attempts to piece together a seemingly impossible jigsaw of Brueghel's *The Tower of Babel*. In both productions, the presence of all characters onstage at all times reflected a kind of community. In the German production, the characters commented on each other's experiences and actively listened to each other's stories. In the British production, the characters delivering the soliloquies were physically separate and never invaded each other's personal space. The monologues, however, were cross cut with each other to produce a sense, not of a conversation, but rather of a community of voices speaking together asking to be heard. This desire for communication in the play's narrative mode is reflected in the characters' desire for communion with another person. Stephens again pictures this need through the lens of sexual desire, but here the need is not for the character to impose their desire onto another character, but rather for them to be the object of another absent character's desire. The older woman masturbates in her dead husband's robe as if this somehow makes him present in the act. Another character longs for her distant husband to touch her: 'I want Jonathan to touch me. If he were to reach out and touch me. Just rest his hand on my neck and stroke the back of my hair'.[235]

The act of narration positions the character as both an isolated subject and expresses their need for communication through the character's desire to be the object of the audience's attention. If we follow Fuch's suggestion that the shift in the mode of characterisation reflects a shift in our experience of ourselves as social

---

[235] Stephens, p. 6.

subjects in contemporary society, then the shift in characterisation from the dramatic to the narrative mode presents us with a bleak image of the contemporary subject as isolated and frustrated by an inability to communicate meaningfully with others. Lehmann, however, suggests that this shift towards the narrative mode can be seen as implying connection between individuals in society rather than separation: 'a speech that has the audience as its addressee intensifies communication – namely the communication taking place in the here and now'.[236] Lehmann argues that the narrative in contemporary theatre, rather than creating a Brechtian distance between the audience and the characters of the drama, creates instead a 'closeness within distance'. Post-Brechtian modes of narration are about 'the foregrounding of the *personal*'.[237] The act of narration allows us to experience the character's innermost thoughts, so bringing us closer to them. We no longer have to decipher their thoughts from their actions, as in the dramatic mode, but rather we are given direct and intimate access to them. Where our personal experience reflects that of the characters we feel a connection to them. The bombers in the play feel this sense of connection to each other. They are separate isolated figures, but their shared experience unites them. They are ever present to each other. Stephens conveys a sense of this connection in the image of the four bombers standing on the station platform: 'we wait at four different points, staring in four different directions'.[238] Though isolated they constitute a community: 'We don't need to check that each other are here. We trust one another. We're here'.[239] The other characters in the play are also connected. Together, their voices articulate a shared experience of the bombings and represent

---

[236] Lehmann, p. 128.
[237] Lehmann, p. 110.
[238] Stephens, p. 41.
[239] Stephens, p. 39.

the people of London. The characters appear isolated, but there is a strong sense of an underlying community. The bombs brings this sense of community to the surface. Stephens represents this through the sharing of food. One character knocks on a stranger's door and asks for some of the chicken that she can smell cooking. The stranger gives her a piece of the chicken. Community is represented through this act of sharing food as something that nourishes us. Though the characters speak individually, the narrative mode with its foregrounding of personal experience creates a sense of a closeness between the speaking characters, despite the seeming distance between them.

The narrative mode disrupts serious drama's positioning of the theatre as a life-like model of the world beyond the theatre. It denies the audience any illusion of an objective or unmediated viewpoint on the characters and events of the play. The narrative mode presents both the characters and their experience of events as subjective. We can only see the world of the play through the narrator's eyes. Characters are not longer whole and consistent, but only glimpsed as fragments through another's eyes. Events are seen only in terms of one individual's experience of them, rather than in their entirety. The world is presented through the narrative mode as unsurveyable, too great in its magnitude to reduced to a simple dramatic model. An experience of the world can only be presented to us through the narrowing frame of a narrating subject's experience. Through the subject's communication of their experience of the world, we become aware of the process of writing, in that we are aware of the narrating subject's double position as both the subject and the object in their retelling of their story. We see them construct the story of their own experience. Character becomes both the protagonist and the author.

The characters of the play are all presented through the mediating gaze of the narrator. Our opinions of their actions are informed by the narrator's view of them. The bomber expresses both disgust and pity for the people he meets on his journey to London, through the characteristics he attributes to them. The handsome businessman on the train becomes repulsive in our eyes as the bomber conveys his feelings of disgust towards the man though his narrow focus on the man's habit of picking his nose: 'He burrows around in his nose, removes something from it surreptitiously, imagining that nobody can see him, slips it into his mouth. Toys with it between his teeth'. He fills the woman opposite full of misery for the state of her existence, a misery that she does not actually feel: 'I think for a second that she's been crying. She hasn't. It's my imagination'.[240] On one hand, we are distanced from the characters around the bomber because we can only see them through his eyes. On the other hand, we gain an intimate knowledge of how the bomber sees the world through his characterisation of the people he describes. The narrative mode again gives us an impression of both closeness and distance from the characters.

The narrative mode of characterisation highlights the process of writing. We witness the characters in two simultaneous moments of time. We see them involved in the moment of the past event that they are recounting and at the same time we see them in the present moment constructing their version of the events. This double representation of time highlights the process of writing that is taking place in front of us. We witness the characters writing both themselves and others. Fuchs explores the idea of theatre as writing in *The Death of Character*. While many twentieth century practitioners have followed Artaud's call for a theatre of absolute presence, Fuchs

---

[240] Stephens, p. 40.

argues that much contemporary theatre practice has abandoned this search for 'the 'aura' of theatrical presence'[241] as 'the proliferation of reproducible culture has made the attribution of "presence" suspect'.[242] To put it in its rightful Benjaminian terms, in an age of mechanical reproduction, rather than searching to produce the "aura" of presence onstage, theatre practitioners have shifted their focus onto exploring the process of reproduction itself. In this shift, we see a shift from a concentration on the spoken to the written. Whereas speech is associated with the idea of presence, writing is associated with a gap between presence and representation. As Chris Norris states: 'In speaking one is able to experience (supposedly) an intimate link between sound and sense, an inward and immediate realization of meaning which yields itself up without reserve to perfect, transparent understanding. Writing on the contrary destroys this ideal of pure self-presence. It obtrudes an alien, depersonalized medium, a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning, between utterance and understanding'.[243] Dramatic writing aims to create the illusion of spontaneous speech. Writing here has infiltrated speech. When Brecht calls for a theatre of 'complex seeing', he is asking for a theatre that can be read and re-read.[244] At the same time, however, he is asking us to see theatre as something that is written and re-written. Theatre must break the illusion that it is occurring in a spontaneous present and declare its written-ness onstage. The narrative mode exposes the this written-ness. The character's write as they speak. They tell us stories that they will tell many times again. Events become something that we can only experience

---

[241] Fuchs, p. 72.
[242] Fuchs, p. 90.
[243] Fuchs, p. 73.
[244] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 44.

through words. The world itself becomes something that is not ontologically present to us, but can only be experienced as language. We are presented with 'the world-as-text'.[245] The individual is presented as trapped within a post-structuralist prison of language. They are only able to express their experience of events through the medium of words and so are restricted by the range of expression their language system permits. Character is no longer expressed through action. The individual is separated from their actions and can only narrate them. Character becomes something that can only be described through words and through the way each character chooses to use those words to write their own experience.

In *Pornography*, the schoolboy constructs the character of his teacher for us. We experience her in fragmented pieces. At first she is a 'grey skirt', then a name 'Lisa' and a 'smile',[246] next a brand of cigarettes 'Marlboro Lights'. She is an 'address' and a 'house'.[247] These details create an outline of character, an individualised human being. They remind us of Greig's instruction that to the budding playwright: 'If we are going to create characters who are absolutely unique, who are not stereotypes, then we need to know them in all their detail'.[248] The character speaks, but we hear their words only through the speaker's interpretation of them. Speech is something that is reported. It is not spontaneous. We have to question whether the speaker meant their words to mean what the reporting character interprets them as meaning. Jason takes Lisa's words 'I have no idea Jason, you tell me' as indicating an expression of interest in him, rather than as a teacher's dismissal

---

[245] Fuchs, p. 81.
[246] Stephens, p. 12.
[247] Stephens, p. 14.
[248] Greig, p. 75.

of a disruptive student.[249] Actions are also presented to us with an ascribed meaning. Jason interprets Lisa's conversation with a male teacher as a sexual advance: 'she starts talking to the head of maths. It makes me want to cut his throat open'.[250] The speaker presents the audience with what we might term 'reported character'. There is no other representation of the character available to us to compare this report of character against. The actual nature of the character is unknowable. There is an impression of wholeness and individualisation through the use of detail, but there is no central core to the character. The narrative mode exposes dramatic character as a shell of details. The author, in this case the speaker, constructs the character to suit his own subjective vision of the world. Any sense of character consistency is suspect because it is clearly imposed by the speaker.

In the narrative mode, there is a sense of the speaker not only as the author of the events, but also as a character within them themselves. The speaker writes themselves. They are both the subject and the object. They are the 'I' who narrates and a character that they create within their story. Stephens's play is full of images of the self as both subject and object. This double sense of self is presented as something uncanny. The mother's work colleague has a picture of himself on his desk. She finds this 'surprising'.[251] The widow warns that: 'If you stare long enough into a mirror, of course, you begin to hallucinate'.[252] The double sense creates a gap within the self. Characters are dislocated from themselves. There is a gap between the character and their actions. The mother describes the actions that she takes to leak a confidential report: 'I go to the fax machine. I find the number of Catigar

---

[249] Stephens, p. 12.
[250] Stephens, p. 15.
[251] Stephens, p. 8.
[252] Stephens, p. 57.

Jones. Fax/Start. Set'. There is no emotional engagement with the actions. There is no explanation of them. There is an abdication of responsibility. The mother does not relate the consequences of these actions to us. We are simply told that the company don't want her to go in on Thursday because she 'was the only person in the office on Tuesday night'.[253] The character does not own her actions. She only knows that these were her actions because no-one else could have performed them. It is not just their actions that characters feel themselves to be dislocated from. Characters are dislocated from their voices. Jason reports his own words within conversations:

> Are you worried about losing your job?
> Am I what?
> Because teachers and students aren't really meant to fall in love with each other. I'd look after you though. If you did?
> Jason, what on earth are you talking about?[254]

Characters are dislocated from their own bodies. The widow lacks a sense of her body's own physical needs. She has no awareness of hunger or satiety: 'Sometimes I forget if I've eaten or not. It is as likely that this will lead to me eating two meals of an evening as it is that I'll end up eating none'.[255] Characters are detached from their emotions. Tears become something that happens to you, rather than something related to how you feel. The mother states: 'I find, to my surprise, that there are tears pouring down my face'.[256] The widow says: 'I can't understand why there are tears pouring down the sides of my face. This makes absolutely no sense to me at all'.[257]

This dislocation from the body is also expressed in the two duologues in *Pornography*, which present us with examples of unassigned character. The voices

---

[253] Stephens, p. 9.
[254] Stephens, p. 16.
[255] Stephens, p. 57.
[256] Stephens, p. 4.
[257] Stephens, p. 63.

of the dialogue are not attributed to any particular character in the text. The lines of dialogue are not preceded by character names but rather float in sequence on the page instead. There are no stage directions. Moments of non-verbal communication are replaced by dashes instead. As Fuchs states, '[c]haracter-identified speech' can be thought of as a central component of dramatic theatre. In Stephens's text speech exists without character. The writer is still producing dialogue that mimics the illusion of spontaneous speech, but we no longer know who is speaking.

The range of characters to whom these voices could belong is large but not undefined. Through the details in the dialogue, Stephens enables us to identify that both sections of text are dialogues, that both involve a sexual encounter between a man and a woman. The first records an act of incest between a brother and sister. The second records a flirtation between a teacher and his former student. We are given few visual details about the characters. We know that the brother smells of '[k]iwi fruit, a bit' and the sister of 'like freshly cut grass'.[258] We know, at times, how the characters look to each other, but these records of their appearance are subjective and change with the character's changing feelings towards each other. The brother tells the sister that she looks 'about fifteen. In a good way'.[259] Once he begins to feel guilty about their affair, the sister's appearance is no longer attractive to him; she now has a 'stupid fucking horrible fucking face'.[260] There is no attempt to provide an objective picture of each character. The characters remain individualised, but the range of individuals that each character could be is wide. The writing tries to avoid being too prescriptive. Others are left to decide how each character will be embodied

---

[258] Stephens, p. 27.
[259] Stephens, p. 28.
[260] Stephens, p. 35.

onstage.

On the page, the text presents with un-embodied characters. There is no sense of their physical presence. The characters are what they say as opposed to what they do. As in the narrative monologues, character here is again not defined through action. Lehmann states that in some types of postdramatic theatre '*de-dramatization*' occurs. Stephen's approach to the duologues in *Pornography* produces a de-dramatisation of them in the text. Definitive action is absent from the text. At times the character's actions can be inferred from what the characters say, but in general 'action is relegated to the background'.[261] We do not know exactly what the characters do. The teacher makes unwelcome sexual advances towards the student. She says that he physically hurts her, but we are left to decide the level of sexual violence involved. Character cannot therefore be defined by action, or by the gap between actions and words because we have only the characters' words to work with in the text. The moment of speaking becomes all. As Lehmann states: 'the *moment of speaking* is everything. Not the timeline of action; not the drama but the moment when the human voice is raised'.[262] This lack of action produces a suspension of time. The events of a story are presented to us, but they float in time and space. We hear about events - Live 8, London getting the Olympics, the bombs - but the characters in the duologue do not locate these in time. In the monologues, these events are linked to days of the week. In the duologues, they float unattributed. There is no sense of action driving the story forward through time. There is no indication of space, beyond a character's definition of it. Space seems to move around the characters as opposed to the characters progressing through space. The lecturer and

---

[261] Lehmann, p. 74.
[262] Lehmann, p. 76.

the former student start the evening in bar or a pub. The space is defined purely as one in which the characters can buy wine by the glass. Later they might be in a restaurant, as there is a previous suggestion that they might eat supper together, but they could be elsewhere. Later they are definitely in the lecturer's flat, but the location within the flat of the different scenes is open to question. In the text, the words of that the characters speak are the only definitive aspect that the writer gives us. We are presented with a theatre of voice.

The floating voices of the duologues in the text speak in the present tense, but these dislocated voices reverberate like an echo of past events. They are remembered voices. The dialogue detached from the accompanying action loses its present tense-ness and seems like echoed memories. As Lehmann states, in a theatre of voice, the voice becomes 'a reverberation of past events'.[263] While the characters of the monologues can recount the events of the week of the bombing as past events, the characters of the duologues seem like ghosts. The brother describes London to his sister as a haunted city, full of the traces of past events: 'The whole city's haunted ... The street map is a web of contradiction and complication and between each one there's a ghost'.[264] The voices of the duologues are the memories of that week, forever repeating over and over again in the characters' heads. Like the ghost of room ten in the St. Pancras Hotel, who 'lurks around the back of one of the rooms ... If you approach him he runs away,' the experiences of the characters of the duologue represent the experiences of Londoners at that moment in time, which are now forever fixed by the event of the bombs.[265]

---

[263] Lehmann, p. 76.
[264] Stephens, p. 23.
[265] Stephens, p. 22.

Though the text of the duologues presents us with un-embodied characters, the text in the both the German and British productions of the play came across as straightforwardly dramatic. The sense in the text of the voices as 'a reverberation of past events' is lost in the staging.[266] The characters are embodied, and their absent actions are filled in. Watching the play, you would assume that the writer had defined the characters and their actions in the text in a dramatic manner. The innovative features of the text may not be evident in performance, however, even when the text is dramatised, it is still innovative in that it encourages others to make such choices about its staging, rather than prescribing a manner of staging or performance style within the text. The text here is not authoritative, rather it aims to encourage collaboration. It is an "open" text in that it leaves space within it for the vision of other creative artists. The definition of space is left to the scenographer, the creation of character to the actor and the staging of the text to the director. This represents a shift from the idea that all other theatre artists work to serve the vision of the playwright. The text is no longer analysed to find the playwright's intention. The interest lies in the interpretation of the text by others, as opposed to a search for some definitive performance that is prescribed by the text. As Lehmann argues that the position of the text within theatre is shifting, 'the new theatre *text* [...] is to a large extent a "no longer dramatic" theatre text [...] the text therefore is considered only as one element, one layer, or as a 'material' of scenic creation, not as its master'.[267]

---

[266] Lehmann, p. 76.
[267] Lehmann, p. 17.

Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat

Mark Ravenhill's cycle of short plays *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (Traverse, 2007; National Theatre/Royal Court/Paines Plough/Gate, 2008) charts a range of events that take place during a war on terror. The cycle includes several choral pieces. Like the speakers in the duologues in *Pornography*, these speakers are not identified by any kind of character name. The lines of speech are unassigned. Unlike the duologues in *Pornography*, it is difficult to identify the number of characters involved in each piece from the dialogue. The mode of the choral pieces is more narrative than dramatic. The characters voice a collective monologue. They address the audience directly. Their words taken together constitute a chorus.

Lehman notes that 'the chorus is making a resurgence in postdramatic theatre'.[268] In her examination of the 'death of the subject' in modern drama, Fuchs views the contemporary conceptions of the chorus through a Nietzschian framework.[269] She sees the chorus as offering us the possibly of a collective character, in contrast to the idea of character as a 'separated, self-conscious individual'.[270] For Nietzsche tragedy reaches a perfect peak in the work of Aeschylus, as in his tragedies a balance is achieved between what Nietzsche terms the Apolline and the Dionysiac. The Apolline represents the individual separated from the chaos of life. Nietzsche equates the Apolline with Schopenhauer's *principium individuationis*, the principle by which the individual recognises themselves as an individual separate from the rest of creation. Nietzsche illustrates the concept of the Apolline with Schopenhauer's image of a boatman sitting on a

---

[268] Lehmann, p. 129.
[269] Fuchs, p. 29.
[270] Fuchs, p. 28.

stormy sea: 'Just as the boatman sits in his small boat, trusting his frail craft in a stormy sea that is boundless in every direction, rising and falling with the howling, mountainous waves, so in the midst of a world full of suffering and misery the individual man calmly sits, supported by and trusting the *principium individuationis*'.[271] In contrast the Dionysiac represents a breakdown of the *principium individuationis*, 'a complete forgetting of the self'. It represents a reconciliation with all of creation. Man is no longer a being of individual will but dissolved into the greater force of the collective will to exist that flows through all of nature: 'each man feels himself not only united, reconciled, and at one with his neighbour, but *one* with him, as if the veil of Maya had been rent and now hung in tatters before the mysterious primal Oneness'.[272] In aesthetic terms, the Apolline is represented by the work of the sculptor and the epic poet. Of the latter Nietzsche states that the characters that they create are nothing but reflections of their own self: 'the lyric poet's images are nothing but the poet himself, and only different of himself, which is why, as the moving centre of that world, he is able to say "I"'. The Dionysiac is represented by music, and the musician creates not from the perspective of the individual but as part of the primal Oneness: 'the Dionysiac musician is himself nothing but primal suffering and its primal resonance'.[273] In the work of Aeschylus, Nietzsche sees the presence of both aesthetics, 'the expression of two interwoven artistic impulses, *the Apolline and the Dionysiac*'.[274] The individual will represented by the tragic hero is contrasted with the collective will through the

---

[271] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, II vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 352–353.
[272] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. by Michael Tanner, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 17.
[273] Nietzsche, p. 30.
[274] Nietzsche, p. 59.

presence of the chorus.

After Aeschylus, this balance within drama is thrown out of kilter and tragedy enters a period of decline. Nietzsche sees Euripides as pursuing a quest to remove the Dionysiac element from tragedy by diminishing the role of the chorus and increasing the number of individual characters onstage. In doing so he destroys tragedy, transforming it into little more than a dramatised epic poem and reducing it to 'inartistic naturalism'.[275] Character becomes more individualised and begins to deteriorate towards psychology. There is an 'increased stress on *character portrayal* and psychological refinement'.[276] Whereas the characters of Aeschylus retain a mythic symbolism and 'broaden out into an eternal archetype', the characters of Euripides have an everyday quality to them, 'with artificial characteristics and nuances, each trait most precisely determined, so that the spectator is no longer alive to the myth and instead focuses on the verisimilitude of characterisation'.[277] The chorus as 'a reflection of Dionysiac man' is excised step by step from the stage, until it disappears completely in New Comedy.[278]

Fuchs uses Nietzsche to read the reappearance of the chorus in modern drama as representative of a longing for communion with others in a society where the individual is becoming increasingly isolated. For Nietzsche, Dionysus is the first tragic hero and the archetypal figure on which all tragic heroes are modelled. Dionysus is a dismembered God, having been ripped to pieces by the Titians. He is split into many parts, undergoing 'the suffering of individuation'. In this divided state, he longs to be reformed, and waits to be reborn whole again. Thus there are

---

[275] Nietzsche, p. 62.
[276] Nietzsche, pp. 83–84.
[277] Nietzsche, p. 84.
[278] Nietzsche, p. 70.

three Dionysoi: the first whole, the second fragmented; and the third whole again. He represents mankind who having once existed in a primal Oneness, have been 'torn and fragmented into individuals' and art is positioned as expressing 'the joyful hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, as a presentiment of a restored oneness'.[279] Fuchs builds upon this, suggesting a connection between Nietzsche's thinking and 'the proliferation of postmodern theories of the discontinuous, even arbitrary, nature of the "subject"'. She then further proposes a link between these and contemporary 'de-ontologized presentations of character in postmodern theater'.[280] The quotes that she chooses from Nietzsche, as quoted in this paragraph all suggest that the state of the individual is one of suffering, while the state of communion with others is one of joy. Throughout the book, this Nietzschian reading of the chorus underlies the way she reads uses of the chorus in modern theatre. Collective character is positioned positively, individualism is seen as negative. In Brecht's *The Baden Play for Learning*, the Fallen One's 'individualism damns him to death and oblivion'.[281] The use of chorus in landscape theatre is one of the elements that moves it 'sharply away from the ethos of competitive individualism toward a vision of the whole'.[282] This vision of the whole linked to an ecological vision of the world as interlinked system, a vision of man as a part of the whole of nature as opposed to separate from it. Within in this we hear echoes of the idea of the contemporary individual, isolated by technology, longing for a return to nature and community.

I would argue that the use of the chorus in contemporary theatre is more complex than this. Rooting this explanation in ideas of the isolation of the individual

---

[279] Nietzsche, p. 52.
[280] Fuchs, p. 29.
[281] Fuchs, p. 46.
[282] Fuchs, p. 107.

in contemporary society ignores a level of both theatrical and social complexity in the configuration of the modern chorus. Nietzsche does not position the opposition between the collective and the individual in such simple terms. The Dionysiac is not purely linked to joy. Nietzsche sees the Dionysiac as a source of intense suffering as well as joy; there is 'primal suffering within the primal Oneness'.[283] Neither is the individual purely seen as a state of suffering and isolation from the universal. The Apolline state can through an individual contemplation of 'our innermost being' reveal 'our common foundation', producing 'profound pleasure'.[284] Nietzsche calls not for one or the other state but for a balance between the two. He praises Aeschylus because his art is 'as Dionysiac as it is Apolline'.[285] The Dionysiac may be the origin of creativity but we can only experience it through the Apolline: 'the Dionysiac substratum of the world, no more can enter the consciousness of the human individual than can be overcome more by that Apolline power of transfiguration, so that both these artistic impulses are forced to unfold in strict proportion to one another'.[286] The collective is not superior, but rather the collective and the individual stand in a symbiotic relationship to each other.

The speakers within the choral plays in Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* speak both with a collective and an individualised voice. The chorus may speak as a body raising a collective voice in its vocal plurality, but the individual voice remains distinct amongst the crowd. The speaker speaks in the chorus, at the same time as the chorus speaks through the speaker. As Lehmann puts it when he talks about the use of the chorus in postdramatic theatre: 'the individual

---

[283] Nietzsche, p. 35.
[284] Nietzsche, p. 16.
[285] Nietzsche, p. 14.
[286] Nietzsche, p. 117.

voice does not disappear entirely but it also no longer participates in its unadulterated peculiarity, instead becoming a sonic element in a new choral voice that has uncannily taken on a life of its own, neither individual nor abstractly collective'.[287] The individual is not dissolved into the collective in a Dionysiac obliteration of the self. The individual remains distinct within the crowd. What can no longer be denied however, is that the individual cannot be detached from the collective. No man is an island. We represent both ourselves and the community to which we belong.

The chorus in *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* speaks both with a collective voice and as a group of individuals. This can be traced through different personal pronouns that the speakers use to describe their situation. In 'Women of Troy', four women plead with the terrorists who bomb their city and ask them to stop. When the women speak for their community as a whole and the subject of their sentences becomes 'we': 'We want to ask you this';[288] 'We tolerate, we accept, we celebrate'.[289] At other times, characters want to speak out as individuals within the group: they want 'to talk about me'.[290] At this point 'I' dominates: 'I work for the good of our society';[291] 'I am moved by that. I care'. At times they define themselves collectively as 'good people',[292] whilst at other times an individual will define themselves within the crowd as 'a good person'.[293] The chorus is made up of individuals each of whom is a 'good person' and so collectively they are 'good people'. This collective voice can speak for other individuals who belong to the community who are not present or

---

[287] Lehmann, p. 130.
[288] Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (London: Methuen, 2008), p. 7.
[289] Ravenhill, p. 10.
[290] Ravenhill, p. 7.
[291] Ravenhill, p. 8.
[292] Ravenhill, p. 7.
[293] Ravenhill, p. 14.

cannot speak. In 'War of the Worlds' the chorus express firstly their sympathy for the inhabitants of a bombed city and then the revulsion they also feel towards them. A woman in the chorus speaks on behalf of her lover: 'My lover feels the grief that I feel'.[294] So the chorus becomes representative not just of the group of individuals onstage, but voices the opinion of wider community that extends beyond the stage and who we hear about through their words.

The idea of the individual is present within what the chorus say and in the way the chorus is constructed. They refer to individuals by name: 'Thomas', 'Zachary', 'Marion',[295] 'Alex'.[296] They build pictures of these individuals: 'I call him three-shot Thomas because ... well, because';[297] 'Zac - your paintings on the fridge that I'm so proud of'.[298] At the same time they build pictures of themselves as individuals: 'I have a buzz job amongst the buzz people and on the way to my bzzz bzzz bzzz office I pop in for a buzzy coffee';[299] 'Every morning I wake up, I take fruit and I put it in the blender and I make smoothies for my family'.[300] Some of the speakers in the chorus seem to match up with characters in the other plays. One of the speakers is the wife of Thomas and the mother of Zachary and has a juicing obsession just like the character of Helen in 'Intolerance'. Another speaker has a son called Alex and lives in a gated community just like Olivia in 'Fear and Misery'. The individual speakers contribute their own thoughts in their own single voice, but together these voices become one voice as they voice similar opinions. Lehmann

[294] Ravenhill, p. 121.
[295] Ravenhill, p. 7.
[296] Ravenhill, p. 14.
[297] Ravenhill, p. 121.
[298] Ravenhill, p. 14.
[299] Ravenhill, p. 125.
[300] Ravenhill, p. 7.

notes the tendency for the modern chorus to be composed of individual voices rather than voices speaking in unison: 'the individual speakers contribute only stanzas, so to speak, to a collective chorus'. The characters speak separately but they speak 'in the same direction'.[301] As such, the chorus do not speak in dialogue as they express an '*excessive consensus*'.[302] Rather than being in conflict with each other, the speakers are in agreement and this prevents the expression of dialogue. The speakers contribute instead to a collective monologue. The chorus is composed of a group of individuals in agreement with each other expressing a 'collective longing for harmony'.[303] The woman is physically prevented from expressing her views through the removal of her tongue, and then when she does express herself the chorus read her actions as supporting their project as opposed to challenging it.

Ravenhill positions this longing for harmony as problematic. This is not a longing for reconciliation through mutual understanding, but rather a longing for an end to conflict by imposing a single world view on every person. The chorus believe that their 'core values are everything because they are humanity's core values'.[304] Their mission is to bring 'freedom and democracy' to the whole world and they will use military force to impose it.[305] Their 'flaming sword will roam the globe until everywhere is filled with the goodness of good people'.[306] They claim to offer freedom of choice, but only in the terms of post-Fordism, where freedom is the choice to choose what to buy: 'We have so much choice. Who will provide my

---

[301] Lehmann, p. 129.
[302] Lehmann, p. 129.
[303] Lehmann, p. 132.
[304] Ravenhill, p. 180.
[305] Ravenhill, p. 8.
[306] Ravenhill, p. 17.

electricity? Who will deliver my groceries? Which cinema shall I go to?'[307] There is no space for dialogue with those who disagree. The excessive consensus of the chorus blocks out any expression of an alternative viewpoint. The voices who are allowed to speak are those who match the consensus of the chorus. In the 'Odyssey', the former dictator of the invaded country is allowed some space to speak, but only because his words now support those of the chorus: 'My evil was great. I did not believe in democracy. I did not believe in freedom. I did not believe in choice'. A boy from the invaded country is also permitted to speak as his voice adds to the consensus: 'I am happy. I am learning the core - freedom and democracy. I think they are very good'.[308] The repetition and simple sentence construction in the language of both the dictator and the boy convey a sense that they are repeating phrases that they have learnt by rote, rather than speaking their own words. They have been taught how to speak in chorus. They express the views of the chorus, but a question remains as to whether they hold these views as their own. At the end of 'Birth of a Nation', in which a chorus of artists encourage the people of a shattered city to heal through art, a blind woman is brought on stage. When she opens her mouth it is revealed that she has no tongue. Again the voice of opposition is silenced. The artists encourage her to express her feelings through painting, writing, dance and performance art. They hand her a paintbrush and a pen. They move her body for her as if she is dancing. The woman can only express her horror and suffering through a scream. Her body is thrown into convulsions, that the artists translate as being a dance. They see her as successful beneficiary of their healing through art programme, rather than a woman trying to communicate the level of suffering that

---

[307] Ravenhill, p. 180.
[308] Ravenhill, p. 187.

has been inflicted on her.

The excessive consensus onstage alters the nature of dramatic conflict in the choral pieces. Conflict is absent from the stage and instead the conflict is shifted from the intra-scenic axis to the theatron axis. The conflict is now located as between the chorus and the audience. The audience are directly addressed as the 'you' to whom the chorus appeal. They positioned as the Other; they are 'strange', 'so different' and 'the opposite' of the chorus.[309] The chorus are 'the good people', while the audience to whom they are speaking are 'the bad people'.[310] The audience threaten to break the chorus's consensus on the core values. This configuration parodies the concept of conflict resolution through dialogue. This is a theatre that provides no space for dialogue. The excessive consensus of the chorus blocks any space for discussion. The audience are addressed but are given no space to respond. There is only thesis. Antithesis is banished from the stage and with it the hope of any synthesis. The chorus demand that the audience join their consensus. They offer the audience the hope of rebirth, but only on their terms: 'As we want you to be reborn'.[311]

The use of the chorus in *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* undermines the idea that the resurgence of the chorus in contemporary theatre symbolises a desire for community in the face of the isolation of the individual in postmodern society. Ravenhill uses the chorus instead to examine the validity of the core values of 'freedom and democracy'.[312] He exposes our assumption in the West that the values that we hold are the right values and criticises the almost evangelical zeal with which

---

[309] Ravenhill, p. 11.
[310] Ravenhill, p. 15.
[311] Ravenhill, p. 197.
[312] Ravenhill, p. 8.

we impose those values on other societies through violence. Democracy is positioned as the illusion of choice; the choice of what to buy. Freedom becomes the freedom to shop. Ravenhill's freedoms are economic and the exercise of these freedoms feed the expansion of post-Fordism. True freedom and democracy are unknown quantities. Other ways of living are unvoiced. The excessive consensus of the chorus block all other voices out. There is no dialogue as all is monologue. The chorus may be composed of individuals but they speak with one voice. There is no choice but to accept their values. As the silent partner in this stalled dialogue, the audience become aware that there is no freedom to speak, unless you are prepared to join the consensus. Those who do not join the consensus are 'evil'.[313] Post-Fordism is represented as drifting towards a monologic politics.

At the same time, however, the audience is challenged to construct a silent response to chorus. The other side of the argument is not represented onstage, instead the audience must actively build their own anti-thesis to the thesis presented onstage. In doing so, Ravenhill acts in the manner of Jacotot's 'ignorant master', who Rancière defines in 'The Emancipated Spectator' as a teacher who does not teach his pupils but rather 'commands them to venture forth in the forest, to report what they see, what they think of what they have seen, to verify it, and so on'.[314] The audience are shown a picture of post-Fordism that positions it as offering them no freedom of choice, whilst at the same time they are given the freedom to conjecture how else society might function for them. The chorus here is not an image of a return to some primal collective Oneness, but rather an image of the worrying lack of genuine

---

[313] Ravenhill, p. 15.
[314] Jacques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Art Forum*, 2007, pp. 270-281 (p. 270).

political dialogue within post-Fordism.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the shifts in dramatic structure that have been identified in the experimental dramaturgies of contemporary British plays in this thesis, can be positioned as mediating, negotiating and critiquing the effects that recent changes in the social, political and economic structures of British society have had on the social subject. As Hall notes, '"new times" are both "out there", changing our conditions of life, and "in here" working on us. In part, it is us who are being "re-made"'.[1]

The social subject as imagined by the structures of serious drama is a very different creature to the social subject as re-configured through the experimental dramaturgies of the plays analysed in this thesis. The social subject of serious drama is active and driven by consistent socio-psychological motivations, which reflect her desires. She inhabits a world in which events develop through the logic of mechanical causation and so can predict the probable consequences of her actions. She has a sense of an individualised stable identity, which is the predictable result of the combination her psychological traits and social circumstances. She inhabits a world that is thought as having a stable objective reality. She is politically engaged and can effect change through a combination of discussion, debate and action.

The social subject produced by the pressures of post-Fordism is significantly different. She is passive and her actions are less predictable. She inhabits a world in which the structures of mechanical and socio-psychological causation no longer

---

[1] Stuart Hall, 'Brave New World', *Marxism Today*, 1988, pp. 24–29 (p. 24).

produce trustworthy predictions. Each of her actions now produces a web of possible consequences and planning involves the imagining of a plurality of outcomes. She has no sense of a stable invariant identity and instead rewrites her identity to suit different contexts. She is both subject and object simultaneously and actively monitors her own thoughts and behaviour. The world appears to her as a constantly shifting ground. She is aware of many different points in space simultaneously. Though her spatial awareness has widened, her sense of time is compressed into a perpetual present, which makes it difficult for her to project herself into the future or draw on past experience. Despite a strong urge to communicate, she is isolated from others and suffers from high levels of anxiety, which at times expresses itself tangibly in symptoms of mental and physical distress. It is difficult for her to effect change, because power relations can no longer be challenged through dialectical debate. They are monologic. It is difficult for her to discern 'an overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances'.[2] Consequently, she lacks a sense of her own political agency.

The social subject produced by post-Fordism, as imagined symbolically through dramatic structure, appears to be politically disempowered. There are two ways, however, in which this concept of the social subject can be thought of as having agency. Firstly, there is a gap between the empowered characters of serious drama and our contemporary experience of politics, where mass demonstrations and informed argument does little to effect concrete political change. Politics itself has shifted from a dialogic system of socialism versus conservatism, to a monologic neo-liberal democracy in which the positions of different political parties are difficult to

---

[2] Hall, pp. 24–29 (p. 27).

distinguish from one another. When drama works to accentuate this dialectic of assumed agency versus actual passivity, it exposes a productive gap between neo-liberalism's promise of increased freedom and personal affluence and its lived experience. Secondly, a sense of shifting selves inhabiting shifting worlds is articulated through the experimental dramaturgies of the plays. This sense of changeability is productive as it opens up spaces of intervention. Social structure are re-ordered in theatre's imaginings. The mental map of our experience moves away from a linear form to a constellation of points in time and space through which multiple connections can be drawn. Structures of thinking broaden out through new, less determinist forms of causation. The self is reconfigured as alterable and our sense of community is expanded and new ways of drawing connections between individuals become possible.

All of the plays analysed in this thesis have a sense of written-ness in common. Unlike the realist dramaturgy of serious drama, they openly declare their structures as constructs and through their re-ordering of normative representations of social structures, they offer a symbolic re-ordering of social structures within their form. These re-orderings highlight a gap between rational representations of contemporary social reality and our lived experience of it. Adorno argues that works of art cannot effectively challenge the problems of social reality by commenting on them in their content. Art stands in relation to the social and political through its form, not its content. It is the form of an artwork that produces 'a determining attitude to empirical reality by stepping outside of the constraining spell it casts, not

once and for all, but ever and again, concretely, unconsciously polemical towards this spell at each historical moment'.[3]

---

[3] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 6.

Bibliography

Abirached, Robert, *La Crise du Personnage dans le Théâtre Moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994)

Adorno, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004)

Adorno, Theodor W. and others, Gretel Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

Allen, R. E., ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 8th edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)

Althusser, Louis, and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009)

Amin, Ash, 'Post-Fordism: Models, Fantasies and Phantoms of Transtition', in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. by Ash Amin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 1–40

Archer, Charles, *William Archer: Life, Work, and Friendships* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931)

Archer, William, *About the Theatre* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1886)

---, *English Dramatists of Today* (London: Low, Marston, Serle and Revington, 1882)

---, *The Old Drama and the New* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1929)

Aristotle, *Aristotle's Physics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961)

---, 'De Anima', in *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, ed. by W. D. Ross, trans. by J. A. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931)

---, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996)

---, *Poetics*, trans. by Kenneth McLeish (London: Nick Hern, 1999)

---, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by D.W. Ross (Minneapolis: Filiquarian, 2007)

---, *The Politics*, ed. by Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Ayckbourn, Alan, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

Barish, Jonas A., *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981)

Barthes, Roland, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977)

Bartlett, Mike, *Contractions* (London: Methuen, 2008)

Bassett, Kate, 'Generations', *The Independent*, 2007 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/equus-gielgud-londonbrgenerations-young-vic-londonbrthe-eleventh-capital-royal-court-upstairs-london-438823.html> [accessed 7 August 2011]

---, 'Six Characters in Search of an Author', *The Independent*, 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/six-characters-in-search-of-an-author-minerva-chichesterbr-free-outgoing-royal-court-downstairs-londonbr-the-frontline-shakespeares-globe-london-866238.html> [accessed 15 October 2009]

Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin Caron de, *Œuvres Complètes*, 6 vols. (Paris: Chez Étienne Ledoux, 1821), I

Berkowitz, Gerald, 'Generations', *The Stage*, 2007 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/16087/generations> [accessed 7 August 2011]

---, 'Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness', *The Stage*, 2005 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/7850/incomplete-and-random-acts-of-kindness> [accessed 26 May 2011]

Billingham, Peter, *At the Sharp End : Uncovering the Work of Five Contemporary Dramatists* (London: Methuen Drama, 2007)

Billington, Michael, '2000 Feet Away', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jun/17/theatre.reviews2> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, '"A Five-course Meal After a Diet of Candyfloss" - Hare Hits Manhattan', *guardian.co.uk*, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/dec/01/theatre.art> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, 'Acts of Faith', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/may/06/theatre.religion> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, 'Be Near Me', *guardian.co.uk*, 2009
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jan/20/theatre> [accessed 21 January 2009]

---, 'Blasted', *guardian.co.uk*, 2001
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2001/apr/05/theatre.artsfeatures?INTCMP=SRCH > [accessed 10 September 2011]

---, 'Bloody Sunday', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/apr/12/theatre> [accessed 11 October 2008]

---, 'Drama Out of a Crisis', *guardian.co.uk*, 2003
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2003/apr/10/theatre.artsfeatures> [accessed 24 April 2009]

---, 'Follow the Banned', *whatsonstage.com*, 2008
<http://blogs.whatsonstage.com/2008/07/04/follow-the-banned/#more-370> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, 'God in Ruins', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/dec/06/theatre.pantoseason2> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, 'Let the Battle for Shakespeare's Crown Commence', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/jul/02/thebattleforshakespearescr > [accessed 12 October 2008]

---, 'Look Back in Anger', *guardian.co.uk*, 2004
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/dec/04/theatre1> [accessed 12 October 2008]

---, 'Lorilei', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/feb/22/theatre> [accessed 11 October 2008]

---, 'Mark Thomas', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/jun/16/theatre2> [accessed 11 October 2008]

---, 'My Name Is Rachel Corrie', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/apr/14/theatre.politicaltheatre> [accessed 21 September 2009]

---, 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', *guardian.co.uk*, 2000
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2000/jul/31/theatre.artsfeatures> [accessed 12 October 2008]

---, *One Night Stands: A Critic's View of Modern British Theatre* (London: Nick Hern, 2002)

---, 'Relocated', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jun/18/theatre.reviews> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, *State of the Nation : British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber, 2007)

---, 'Stuff Happens', *guardian.co.uk*, 2004 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/sep/11/theatre.politicaltheatre> [accessed 6 October 2006]

---, 'The Burial at Thebes', *guardian.co.uk*, 2004 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/apr/07/theatre> [accessed 10 October 2008]

---, 'The City', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/apr/30/theatre2> [accessed 28 October 2009]

---, 'The Female of the Species', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/jul/17/theatre.reviews2> [accessed 12 October 2008]

---, 'The Good Fairies Desert the Court's Theatre of the Absurd', *The Guardian*, 20 January 1995

---, 'The Mother/Birth of a Nation', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/apr/15/theatre2> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, 'Top Marx: Why It's Time to Stage Non-Fiction', *guardian.co.uk*, 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2006/nov/10/topmarxwhyitstimetostage> [accessed 6 October 2008]

---, 'Who Needs Reviews?', *www.guardian.co.uk*, 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/sep/17/whoneedsreviews> [accessed 12 October 2008]

---, 'Why Drama Is Now Driven by Public Events', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/aug/13/theatresmovefromtheprivate> [accessed 6 October 2008]

Blattès, Susan, 'Is the Concept of "Character" Still Relevant in Contemporary Drama?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 14 (2007), 69–81

Bottoms, Stephen, 'Authorizing the Audience', *Performance Research*, 14 (2009), 65–76

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

Bowers, Jane Palatini, 'The Composition That All the World Can See: Gertrude Stein's Theater Landscapes', in *Land/Scape/Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. pp.121–144

Brantley, Ben, 'Battle Zones in Hare Country', *NY Times*, 2006 <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/12/01/theater/reviews/01hour.html> [accessed 24 April 2009]

Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964)

Browning, Christopher R, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 11 and the Final Solution in Poland: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin, 2001)

Büchner, Georg, *Complete Works and Letters*, ed. by Walter Hinderer and Henry J. Schmidt, trans. by Henry J Schmidt (New York: Continuum, 1986)

Calhoun, C., *The Question of Class Struggle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982)

Carlson, Marvin, 'After Stein: Traveling the American Theatrical "Lang-scape"', in *Land/Scape/Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 145–158

---, *Theories of the Theatre : a Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 1993)

Carney, Sean, *Brecht and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Castelvetro, Lodovico, *Castelvetro on the Art of Poetry*, trans. by Andrew Bongiorno (Binghampton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1984)

Caughie, John, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Chamberlin, Graeme, 'Recent Developments in the UK Housing Market', *Economic & Labour Market Review*, 3 (2009), 29–38

Churchill, Caryl, *Plays: Four* (London: Nick Hern, 2008)

Clarke, David, *Pierre Corneille: Poetics and Political Drama Under Louis XIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

'Clause IV', *Labour Counts* <http://www.labourcounts.com/clause4.htm> [accessed 10 October 2012]

Coffey, Dan, and Carole Thornley, *Globalization and Varieties of Capitalism: New Labour, Economic Policy and the Abject State* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

Cohn, Ruby, *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

Corneille, Pierre, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), II

---, *Œuvres Complètes*, trans. by Georges Couton, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), III

Crimp, Martin, *The City* (London: Faber, 2008)

Crouch, Tim, *The Author* (London: Oberon, 2009)

Culler, Jonathan, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981)

Derrida, Jacques, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988)

Deschamps, Émile, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. by Alexandre Cosnard, Théophile Gautier, Labbé and Achille Taphanel, 6 vols. (Paris, 1872), II

Diderot, Denis, *Œuvres Completes*, 15 vols. (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre, 1970), III

Dryden, John, *Of Dramatic Poesie, 1668* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1969)

Dunne, J. W., *An Experiment with Time* (London: A & C Black, 1927)

Edgar, David, 'Attack', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/may/18/theatre1> [accessed 24 April 2009]

---, 'Doc and Dram', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/sep/27/theatre.davidedgar> [accessed 28 September 2008]

---, *How Plays Work: A Practical Guide to Playwriting* (Nick Hern Books, 2009)

---, 'In Defence of Evil', *The Observer*, 2000
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2000/apr/30/featuresreview.review2> [accessed 21 September 2009]

---, 'Making Drama Out of Crisis', *guardian.co.uk*, 2001
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/jul/07/socialsciences.highereducation>
[accessed 24 April 2009]

---, 'My Fight with the Front', *www.guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/sep/14/theatre.politicsandthearts> [accessed
4 November 2008]

---, 'Rules of Engagement', *guardian.co.uk*, 2005
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/oct/22/theatre.fiction> [accessed 24 April
2009]

---, 'Secret Lives', *guardian.co.uk*, 2003
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2003/apr/19/theatre.artsfeatures> [accessed 24
April 2009]

---, *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Faber, 1999)

---, 'With Friends Like These ...', *www.guardian.co.uk*, 2008
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/19/theatre.davidmamet> [accessed 4
November 2009]

---, 'You Can't Use the O-Word', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<ttp://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/oct/08/comment.olympics2012>
[accessed 24 April 2009]

Elam, Keir, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge,
2002)

Eldridge, David, *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* (London: Methuen, 2005)

Engels, Friedrich, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin,
1987)

Evanthius, 'On Drama', in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations
and Interpretations*, ed. by O. B Hardison, Kevin Kerrane and Alex Preminger (New
York: Frederick Ungar, 1974)

Forster, E. M., *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2005)

Foucault, Michel, 'Of Other Spaces', *www.foucault.info*, 2011
<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>
[accessed 23 May 2011]

Fountain, Tim, *So You Want to Be a Playwright?* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007)

Freud, Sigmund, *Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David
E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997)

Fuchs, Elinor, 'EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play', *Theater*, 34:2 (2004), 4–9

---, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996)

Gardner, Lyn, 'Generations', *guardian.co.uk*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/mar/01/theatre2> [accessed 7 August 2011]

---, 'Realism', *guardian.co.uk*, 2006
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/aug/17/theatre.edinburgh2006> [accessed 24 April 2009]

---, 'The Author', *guardian.co.uk*, 2009
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/sep/30/the-author-review> [accessed 14 September 2011]

Gibson, Melissa Dana, '1979 and All That: Periodization in Postwar British Theatre History', *Theatre Survey*, 47 (2006), 33–50

Gooch, Steve, *Writing a Play* (London: A & C Black, 2004)

Gramsci, Antonio, *Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)

green, debbie tucker, *Trade and Generations* (London: Nick Hern, 2005)

Greig, David, 'Edinburgh Preview: David Greig', *The Observer*, 2003
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2003/jul/27/edinburghfestival2003.features4> [accessed 20 August 2011]

---, 'Physical Poetry: David Greig in Conversation with Caridad Svich', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 29 (2007), 51–58

---, *Selected Plays 1999-2009* (London: Faber, 2010)

Greig, Noel, *Playwriting: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 2005)

Greimas, Algirdas Julius, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at Method*, trans. by Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer and Alan Velie (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983)

Hall, Edward T., *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966)

Hall, Stuart, 'Brave New World', *Marxism Today*, 1988, pp. 24–29

Handke, Peter, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1997)

Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990)
---, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Profile Books, 2011)

Hazlitt, William, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), I

---, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), II

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Aesthetics*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I

---, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 4 vols. (London: Bell, 1920), I

---, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 4 vols. (London: Bell, 1920), IV

Henri Pirenne, *Les Périodes De l'Histoire Sociale Du Capitalisme* (Bruxelles: Librairie du Peuple, 1922)

Hewison, Robert, 'The City', *Times Online*, 2008
<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article3850262.ece> [accessed 28 October 2009]

Holderness, Graham, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of theatre and drama*, Insights (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 1–17

Horace, 'The Art of Poetry', in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. by T. S. Dorsch and Penelope Murray, 2nd Ed (Penguin, 2000)

Hume, Robert D., *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976)

Ibsen, Henrik, *Hedda Gabler*, trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 2002)

Innes, Christopher, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Jameson, Frederic, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971)

Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983)

Johnston, Brian, *The Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania Press, 1992)

Keynes, John Maynard, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (New York: Classic House, 2008)

Kritzer, Amelia Howe, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain : New Writing : 1995-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992)

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985)

Lash, Scott, and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987)

Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006)

Lesage, Alain-René, *Œuvres*, 12 vols. (Paris: Étienne Ledoux, 1828), XI

Lessing, G. E., *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1962)

Lewes, George Henry, *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, 2nd ed (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875)

Lucas, F. L., *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957)

Luckhurst, Mary, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 9 (2002), 73–84

Ludwig, Otto, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 vols. (Leipzig: Grunow, 1891), V

Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

Marlowe, Christopher, 'Dr Faustus', in *The Complete Plays* (London: Penguin, 1986)

Marlowe, Sam, 'Contractions', *Times Online*, 2008 <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article4067597.ece> [accessed 6 October 2009]

Martin, Randy, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002)

Marx, Karl, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. by David McLellan, Abridged ed (Oxford Paperbacks, 2008)

---, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Politcal Economy (Rough Notes)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Allen Lane, 1973)

Meyer, Michael, *Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry 1864-1882* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971)

Midgley, Mary, *Wickedness* (London: Routledge, 2001)

Miller, Arthur G., Anne K. Gordon, and Amy M. Buddie, 'Accounting for Evil and Cruelty: Is to Explain to Condone?', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3 (1999), 254–268

Moi, Toril, *Henrik Ibsen: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Motte, Antoine Houdar de la, *Oeuvres*, 10 vols. (Paris, 1754), IV

Neilson, Anthony, 'Forward', in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism* (London: Methuen, 2007)

---, 'Last Word: Anthony Neilson on Relocated', *guardian.co.uk*, 2008 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/theatre/drama/story/0,,2287274,00.html> [accessed 24 April 2009]

---, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia and Realism* (London: Methuen, 2007)

Neipris, Janet, *To Be a Playwright* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005)

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. by Michael Tanner, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993)

'Nightwaves' (BBC Radio Three, 2000)

Pfister, Manfred, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. by John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Pinciano, López, *Philosophía Antigua Poética*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Inst. "Miguel de Cervantes," 1953), II

Pirandello, Luigi, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. by Rupert Goold and Ben Power (London: Nick Hern, 2008)

Priestley, J. B., *An Inspector Calls and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 2000)

Propp, Vladimir, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1958)

---, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Laurence Scott, 2nd edn (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968)

Quirke, Kieron, 'Tempest in a Tiny Flat', *www.thisislondon.co.uk*, 2007 <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/theatre/review-23391323-tempest-in-a-tiny-flat.do> [accessed 5 January 2011]

Rancière, Jacques, 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Art Forum*, 2007, pp. 270–281

Rapin, René, *Reflections on Aristotle's "Treatise of Poesie,"* trans. by Thomas Rymer, 1st ed. reprinted (Amersham: Gregg, 1979)

Ravenhill, Mark, *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (London: Methuen, 2008)

---, 'The Experiment' (presented at the Terror Season 2009, Southwark Playhouse, 2009)

Rebellato, Dan, 'State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945 by Michael Billington', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18 (2008), 528–530

Reid, Trish, '"Deformities of the Frame": The Theatre of Anthony Neilson', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17 (2007), 487–498

Richardson, Brian, 'Plot After Postmodernism', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 14 (2007), pp.55–67

Robertson, Roland, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992)

Rooney, David, 'The Vertical Hour', *Variety*, 2006 <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117932227.html?categoryid=33&cs=1> [accessed 24 April 2009]

Rymer, Thomas, *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1972)

Schiller, Friedrich, *The Robbers, Fiesco, Love and Intrigue* (London: John C. Nimmo Ltd, 1903)

Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), I

Shakespeare, William, *The Merchant of Venice* (London: Routledge, 1988)

Shaw, George Bernard, *A Manifesto* (London: Geo. Standring, 1884)

---, *Major Critical Essays* (London: Penguin, 1986)

---, *Plays Unpleasant* (London: Penguin, 1946)

---, *The Complete Prefaces: Volume 1 1889-1913*, ed. by Dan H. Lawrence and Daniel J. Leary, 3 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1993), I

---, *The True Radical Programme* (London: Geo. Standring, 1887)

Shepherd, Simon, and Peter Womack, *English Drama: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

Shklovskii, Viktor, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990)

Shuttleworth, Ian, 'The City', *FT.com*, 2008 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/72e59eaa-1b87-11dd-9e58-0000779fd2ac.html> [accessed 29 October 2009]

Sierz, Aleks, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011)

Singer, Peter, *Hegel : A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford : Oxford University Press, c1983 (2001 [printing]), 2001)

Sombart, Werner, *Economic Life in the Modern Age*, ed. by Nico Stehr and Reiner Grundmann (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001)

Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by Don Taylor (London: Methuen, 1986)

Souriau, Étienne, *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations Dramatiques* (Paris: Flammarion Editeur, 1950)

Spencer, Charles, 'What Men Are Really Like', *The Telegraph*, 2006 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/3654592/What-men-are-really-like.html> [accessed 17 September 2011]

Stafford-Clark, Max, *Letters to George: The Account of a Rehearsal* (London: Nick Hern, 1997)

Stanislavski, Konstantín, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Methuen, 1988)

Stein, Gertrude, *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writing and Lectures, 1909-45*, New edn (Peter Owen Ltd, 2004)

Stein, Gerturde, *Last Operas and Plays* (New York: Rinehart & Co, 1949)

Steiner, George, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961)

Stephens, Simon, *Pornography* (London: Methuen, 2008)

Strindberg, August, *Strindberg Plays: One*, trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Methuen, 1976)

Szondi, Peter, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, trans. by Michael Hays (Cambridge: Polity, 1987)

Taylor, John Russell, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1969)

Taylor, Paul, 'First Night: The Vertical Hour, Music Box Theatre, New York', *The Independent*, 2006 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/first-night-the-vertical-hour-music-box-theatre-new-york-426563.html> [accessed 24 April 2009]

---, 'Incomplete And Random Acts Of Kindness', *The Independent*, 2005 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/incomplete-and-random-acts-of-kindness-royal-court-491922.html> [accessed 26 May 2011]

---, 'The City', *The Independent*, 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/the-city-royal-court-london-818719.html> [accessed 28 October 2009]

Taylor, Val, *Stage Writing: A Practical Guide* (Malborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2002)

Toffler, Alvin, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970)

Tolstoy, Leo, *Tolstoy on Shakespeare*, trans. by V. Chertkoff (Christchurch, Hants: The Free Age Press, 1907)

Turner, Cathy, and Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Vizetelly, Ernest Alfred, *Émile Zola: Novelist and Reformer* (London and New York: John Lane, 1904)

Wade, Laura, *Breathing Corpses* (London: Oberon, 2005)

Waters, Steve, 'Aristotle Didn't Know Anything About Theatre', *guardian.co.uk*, 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2010/oct/04/aristotle-poetics-theatre-sophocles-euripides?INTCMP=SRCH> [accessed 26 April 2011]

---, *The Secret Life of Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010)

Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Weinberg, Bernard, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I

Whitman, Robert F., *Shaw and the Play of Ideas* (London: Cornell University Press, 1977)

Wilder, Thornton, *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*, ed. by Jackson R. Bryer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992)

Williams, Raymond, *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

Worthen, William B., *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)

Wu, Duncan, *Making Plays: Interviews with Contemporary British Dramatists and Their Directors* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000)

Žižek, Slavoj, 'Why Are Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst Not Fascists?', in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings Volume Two*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006)

Zola, Émile, 'Naturalism in the Theatre', in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. by Eric Bentley, trans. by Albert Bermel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968)

---, *Œuvres Completes*, 15 vols. (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1968), XI