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(RE)DIRECTING THE TEXT

Politics & Perception in the Work of
Katie Mitchell & Thomas Ostermeier

BY

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my own work; no part of it has been submitted for a degree at another university. No part of the thesis has been published elsewhere.

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the practice of two contemporary theatre directors. Thomas Ostermeier in Germany, and Katie Mitchell in Britain, have forged careers that have brought them recognition across Europe, and Mitchell is now a regular guest director at Ostermeier's Schaubühne theatre in Berlin. Crossing cultural borders, their work affords the opportunity to investigate national discourses and compare critical trends. This thesis considers their trajectories over the last twenty years, from their training in a newly unified Europe through to prestigious invitations to bring their mature work to national and international festivals.

More importantly, it argues that these are directors whose creativity remains rooted in the literary and dramatic canon. At every turn their innovations have been stimulated by new textual sources, prompting them to develop work that investigates politics, gendered subjectivities and issues of form. Examining their uses of Chekhov and Ibsen to probe questions of perception and cognition, this thesis tracks their developing interest in consciousness. Whereas Ostermeier focused his exploration using early modern text (Shakespeare), Mitchell used the modernist literary novel (Virginia Woolf) as the basis of an intermedial reinvention of form. Through the close analysis of key productions, this thesis explores issues of production as well as reception. It investigates why their particular uses of text and technology have bemused or antagonised critics and scholars, and interrogates their commitment to drama, to realist praxis, and to modernist concerns in a cultural moment where postdrama and the postmodern predominate. Although these are practitioners committed to the investigation of interests that many regard as untimely, this thesis argues that the reactionary, in their hands, is the radical.

PREFACE

All translations of foreign material (scripts, reviews, journals and critical sources) cited in my text are my own; the original citations are given in the Bibliography.

A Select Chronology for each director is included at the end of this thesis, before the Bibliography. It includes details of all productions that serve as case studies. Original production titles are used throughout, and where necessary an English translation is provided in brackets only on a first appearance within a chapter.

I have attended at least one live performance of each of the productions that serve as my case studies. The only exceptions to this are Thomas Ostermeier's *Wunschkonzert* (2003) and his *Richard III* (2015). For these, as for the other productions discussed, I have consulted archive recordings. All production dialogue quoted in my analysis is sourced from rehearsal scripts sent to me by the theatres, and where there are discrepancies between a script and an archive recording I have followed the latter, providing my own translations in brackets. Where there is an English source text (i.e. Shakespeare), I have included the line being translated as a footnote.

Andrew Dickson (2011a; 2013a) kindly passed on unpublished transcripts of his interviews with Thomas Ostermeier, which I make considerable use of in Chapter 4. I'd also like to thank Irma Zwernemann (Schaubühne) and Michaela Predeick (Schauspiel Köln) for giving me access to archive recordings, and Tina Steinmueller (Schaubühne) for sending me scripts. Any references to (Ostermeier 2014) relate to his keynote at the symposium "Reinventing Directors' Theatre", held in honour of Ostermeier's work at the CSSD (September 2014), and in which I participated. (Ostermeier 2011b) and ("The Big Swap" 2013) refer to personal appearance events at the Goethe-Institut in London where I was in attendance.

I participated in a five day Directing Workshop led by Katie Mitchell at the Jerwood Space in London (June 2005), and draw on my own notes from that event in Chapter 1. As a student on the Theatre Directing MA at Birkbeck, I participated in a series of design workshops led by Vicki Mortimer in Autumn 2008, and include some references from my notes in Chapter 3. I also watched three days of Mitchell's rehearsals for *Die Gelbe Tapete* in Berlin (February 2013).

Any references to (Mitchell 2012) refer to my own conversation with the director on 4th September at the Jerwood Space, London. Any references to (Morahan 2014) refer to personal correspondence with the actor Hattie Morahan. I also conducted an interview with the actor Paul Ready (December 2011).

INTRODUCTION

Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier are dedicated to text as the essential foundation of their work. As a statement regarding directors who are frequently labelled “auteurs”, their work viewed as a continuous projection of self, this perhaps sounds surprising. It also appears to be out of step with contemporary theoretical performance trends, of which Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006 [1999]) is a prominent example. In privileging work that facilitates the reflexivity of the spectator, Lehmann’s theory devalued narrative and realism in avant-garde theatre, preferring to locate its politics at the junction between formal disruption and spectatorial difficulty. Celebrating “the future of theatre after drama” (2006 [1999]: 56), he cornered the market in theatrical innovation with a form of practice defined by its ability to shatter “a comprehensible narrative and/or mental *totality*” (ibid: 21), a totality he associated with the dramatic text.¹ An analysis of Mitchell and Ostermeier – directors whose work is grounded in a studied engagement with text – affords the opportunity to consider what a dramatic theatre looks like in the twenty-first century, raising important questions as to why the *postdramatic* is the current paradigm for political performance.

Picking up on this interest in the postdramatic and its uses, Stephen Bottoms edited a special 2010 issue of *Performance Research* dealing with the subject of “Performing

¹ Lehmann argued that the “dramatic” paradigm had required that “what we perceive in the theatre can be referred to a ‘world’, i.e. to a totality” (2006 [1999]: 22), often linked to the primacy of a dramatic text. In contrast, what Lehmann called “radical staging practice” (i.e. postdramatic theatre) “problematizes its status of illusory reality” (ibid: 17). For the “politics” of this form of perception, see Lehmann’s concluding remarks in the epilogue, (ibid: 184-7), which are discussed on p. 102 of this thesis.

Literatures”. He argued: “In UK theatre and performance studies at least, our attempts to emphasize the centrality of the live performance event in our research have resulted in a situation whereby a largely reflexive disinterest in dramatic literature and theatre history has become the new orthodoxy” (2010: 2). In Germany, where the postdramatic developments articulated by Lehmann reflect mainstream practice as well as academic enterprise, the situation is more extreme; although playfully overstating his outsider status, Thomas Ostermeier registered a genuine sense of alienation when he quipped that his was “the only dramatic theatre [left] in Berlin. The rest is post-dramatic” (Florin & Meidal 2012).

Indeed, this thesis argues that the ostensible untimeliness of Mitchell and Ostermeier’s interest in drama, in variants of realism, and in text more widely is in fact what makes them timely. Through their sustained investigations of Chekhov and Ibsen respectively, they have reclaimed and reinvested the avant-garde impulses that energised realism and naturalism as those theatrical forms emerged in the late nineteenth century. The innovations of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, informed by contemporary scientific and technological advances, defied aesthetic norms by connecting with social and political realities. Investigating these impulses – especially when using experimental approaches responsive to their own era – Mitchell and Ostermeier have challenged the inherited vocabularies and received wisdom with which today’s critics and theorists approach naturalist text and praxis. In rejecting “external naturalism” and reinventing psychological approaches to acting, both directors use the term “realism” to describe their work. In this thesis I avoid capitalising realism or naturalism as fixed points of reference – to a historical period or an ahistorical formalism – as I investigate the assumptions and expectations that accrue around these contested words; as the following chapters aim to show, those playwrights associated with naturalism as a historical movement exhibit characteristics that confound categorisation, which, in part, constitutes their generative appeal for these practitioners. Whereas Chekhov’s theatrical impressionism gave Mitchell’s creativity an electric jolt, Ostermeier developed

techniques responsive to the sociological inflection of Ibsen's plays, describing them in terms synonymous with Brecht's realism. Indeed, these directors have found these naturalists to be modernist precursors, forging connections between their work and early twentieth-century experimenters such as Meyerhold and Woolf. As a result, modernism also plays a part in the new definitions these practitioners are making, often helping them position themselves in defiance of postmodern and postdramatic abstractions.

Rather than a retrograde manoeuvre, their commitment to new forms of realism is a politically charged act. Their theatres reject the fashionable notion that art's only function is to illustrate the implausibility of registering our reality in a complex globalised world. In contrast, the worlds they depict onstage are defiantly concrete. In this respect, although these directors pursue variant "realisms", which I shall go on to denote as neo- and neuro-, their approaches are ideologically compatible. Indeed, as of 2015, Ostermeier has invited Mitchell to create work with his Schaubühne ensemble on four separate occasions, the first of many links that this thesis sets out to explore. What makes their realist commitment significant to the contemporary moment is that it re-opens debates Fukuyama famously deemed to have closed with *The End of History* (1992) – that is, a "coherent and directional history of mankind that will eventually lead the greater part of humanity to liberal democracy" (xii). Mitchell and Ostermeier, in contrast, have refused to accept that history and drama have reached their endpoints. Nor do they settle for realisms that reinforce, rather than question, the status quo. This thesis thus builds on the insights of scholars including Roberta Barker, Peter M. Boenisch, Dan Rebellato, and Kim Solga, all of whom have registered, with reference to these practitioners individually, a commitment to reinvesting realist praxis.² It also seeks to show that as Mitchell and Ostermeier have experimented with form to test the

² See Barker (2007: 168) on Mitchell's 1993 *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and the political force of her "simultaneous engagement with and disruption of naturalistic modes"; Boenisch (2010a) on Ostermeier's "neo-realism"; Rebellato (2010: 319) on Mitchell's "intense realism" that avoids outmoded theatrical clichés and conventions; Solga (2008: 146) on the "radical naturalism" of Mitchell's *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

possibilities of politically committed realisms in the twenty-first century, the ways in which they investigate their concrete dramatic worlds continue to develop.

As a result, their innovations have appeared to some as illustrations of auteurism. It is certainly true that both directors create work that carries on its surface a highly legible directorial signature, and it will be the aim of this thesis to make sense of the idiosyncratic choices made by these practitioners – even when they themselves claim to be objective. Nevertheless, assessments of their use of text as the pretext for arrogant directorial statements reveal the extent to which their practice challenges expectations regarding what naturalism looks like. In contrast, certain scholars have cited works by Mitchell and Ostermeier as examples of the postmodern, postdramatic, and posthuman movements they in fact subvert. Although both directors employ deconstructive approaches in pursuing new ways of empowering their spectators, they put them to constructive work. In picking up the pieces of a totality that postmodern and postdramatic processes sought to shatter, their theatres appropriate contemporary techniques to reinvest realism as a representational method, exploring and extending promises of the past, and asserting the need to work through tensions and paradoxes that invigorated *fin de siècle* experimentation in a neoliberal hegemony that purports to have left such concerns behind.

A comparison of the work of these directors, and the variety of readings it has elicited, thus affords an opportunity to reassess competing arguments regarding the political efficacy of dramatic and postdramatic approaches, the viability of realist praxis as a relevant and critical tool in a neoliberal western democracy, and critical constructions of the relationship between a director and a text. This introduction paves the way for such a reassessment by first exploring the ways in which their use of text translates into questions of reception. This can be discussed on two levels – the level of the audience and the level of theory. Theatre critics in Britain and in Germany frequently assess their work by evaluating its relationship to the playwright. They praise productions, or find them wanting, with reference to their proximity to authorial

intention. This approach has resulted in considerable confusion. In the case of Mitchell, critics have frequently disagreed about which productions do and don't cross the threshold between textual fidelity and directorial disobedience; regarding Ostermeier, there is little consensus on whether he submits to or dominates the writers whom he stages. Contemporary performance theorists, on the other hand, focus on the status of text with regard to wider theoretical debates about contemporary aesthetics and their politics – most crucially, the ethics of realism as a representational strategy. An analysis of these directors – moving as they do between languages and cultural domains – allows some of the assumptions underpinning local modes of evaluation to be tested.

After teasing out crucial issues from the critical and scholarly reception of Mitchell and Ostermeier, this introduction turns to a comparative analysis of their separate productions of a play without words: Franz Xaver Kroetz's *Wunschkonzert* (*Request Concert*). Using this analysis as a touchstone, I raise points of comparison that will be explored throughout the thesis. This section of the introduction also models the “thick description” methodology that returns in each chapter. Through close analysis of selected case studies, I aim to connect the theatrical signs of these stagings with the directors' genealogies of training and learning, cultural contexts of creation and reception, and the political instincts that inform their methods.

Audience Reception

Jane Lapotaire, whom Mitchell cast as the lead in Ibsen's *Ghosts* in 1993, called her a “theatre nun, ruthlessly dedicated to text” (Christon 1994), and yet twelve years later, the critic Michael Billington (2006) cited her production of *The Seagull* as “director's theatre at its most indulgent,” because of its lack of interest in the text “as Chekhov wrote it”.³ Mark Espiner's argument that Mitchell ended up liberating her own creativity

³ *The Seagull* was a flashpoint in terms of hostile reactions to Mitchell's work, and not just from critics. An audience member scrawled “Rubbish” in red pen on the production's programme and posted it to the director (see Allfree 2011). See also Martin Kettle (2006), who used Mitchell to

“by walking away from a writer’s theatre into newer territories” (2009) ostensibly explains this discrepancy between attitudes towards earlier and later Mitchell, but fails to acknowledge the director’s continuous interest in authors and the critics’ continuing unease. In Britain, since her 2007 production of *Women of Troy*, the epithet attached to her work with the highest frequency has been “polarising”.⁴

Opinions concerning Thomas Ostermeier’s relationship to the texts he stages have been equally and significantly variable. In response to his five visits to London’s Barbican theatre, those British critics who chose to tell their readers about these short-run, foreign-language events welcomed his productions as inspiring revisionist takes on classic texts. Daisy Bowie-Sell (2011) found his *Hamlet* “supremely truthful [...] a raw embodiment of the visceral internal struggle of Shakespeare’s words,” and Billington (2014) even claimed that Ostermeier’s *Ein Volksfeind* (*An Enemy of the People*) “enhanced the original”. Yet German perspectives have been more critical. While Manuel Brug (2008) warned theatregoers that “anyone looking for the author Shakespeare” in Ostermeier’s *Hamlet* would “find instead the director’s bag of popular tricks,” a contrasting criticism levelled at Ostermeier in Germany is that his directorial imprint isn’t legible enough. Katrin Pauly (2010) described his staging of *Othello* as “cumbersome, because ultimately lacking in a convincing overall concept,” and for Eberhard Spreng (2012), the (planned) public democracy experiment that erupted in the auditorium towards the end of *Ein Volksfeind* was the only point of interest in an otherwise “conceptually boring staging”. The enthusiasm with which Katie Mitchell has been received in Germany – *Der Spiegel* recorded that her experimental multimedia staging of *Wunschkonzert* was celebrated as an “intellectually brilliant and touching event” (Höbel 2010) – illustrates stark contrasts in reception as these directors move between countries, as well as media.

In part this reflects economic and institutional factors. David Barnett (2010) has shown how state subsidy and a decentralised network of venues cultivates an appetite in

illustrate his thesis that playwrights had become “hostages in the hands of over-indulged meddlers”.

⁴ See Edwardes (2007); Jones (2008); Taylor (2008); Allfree (2011); Brown (2014).

Germany for intellectually challenging and formally innovative work. Insulated from the determining influence of poor box office returns, theatre makers have both the resources and the time to develop artistic experimentation alongside their local audience, which goes some way to explaining the German enthusiasm for Mitchell's formal innovations. As we will see, however, Ostermeier has proved his ability to empty his theatre, needing to adapt his repertoire in response, and Mitchell's experiments enjoyed a popular following in Britain even if their critical reception was more muted – Aleks Sierz records that a public platform discussion for Mitchell's multimedia production of *Waves* (2006) had to move spaces because of the “huge demand for tickets” (2009: 51-2). These practitioners uncover a more complicated picture. It seems that institutional factors do not go far enough in deciphering the intensity with which some seek to quell Mitchell's aesthetic rebellion: the critic Ian Shuttleworth described her multimedia work, so celebrated in Germany, as indicative of a director who had “harden[ed] into a pattern of practice which suggests a disdain for the core elements of theatre” (2013: 387).⁵

Indeed, if critics in Germany accuse Ostermeier of being conceptually deficient, in Britain they attack Mitchell for the opposite. Michael Billington, in his history of post-war British theatre, labelled Mitchell a “controlling figure and ultimate auteur” (2007: 405), aligning her with a “continental European tradition” (ibid: 405) in which directorial authorship substitutes for that of the playwright. Interestingly, however, when discussing the “auteur”, British critics situate the concept in relation to Ostermeier as well as Mitchell.⁶ Lyn Gardner (2007) is unusual in celebrating rather than deriding “auteurs” as vital and necessary figures in prolonging the life of classic texts, and she has endorsed their work in wholly positive terms; however, her claim that they exemplify directors for whom plays are “simply a suggestion for a performance” (Gardner 2014) contradicts the perspective of the directors themselves. Despite their reputations, both

⁵ Shuttleworth's comments come from his introduction to the edition of *Theatre Record* in which were collated British reviews for Mitchell's *Fräulein Julie*, following its 2013 visit to the Barbican.

⁶ In relation to Katie Mitchell, a representative sample is Kettle (2006); Jones (2008); Tripney (2008). In relation to Ostermeier and Mitchell see Espiner (2009). In relation to Ostermeier see McGinn (2011).

are adamant that they do not promote the director's version over the writer's vision. Although Mitchell's direction is often, in her words, "misunderstood as an aggressive sabotaging act," she sees herself as a "secondary artist not a primary artist" (2012) whose meticulous research into an author's milieu is driven by a desire to communicate his or her work accurately and clearly to a contemporary audience. Ostermeier similarly insists that his role is "not one of a comprehensive artist so much as an artist dedicated to plays and their interpretation. For me, the most important part of my job is to find the best way to bring out the core of the playwright's work" (2005a). Both Mitchell and Ostermeier see themselves as digging deep into the texts that form the basis of their theatre, rather than using them as pretexts for investigating personal concerns – a position that this thesis will aim to test as well as document.

There is much to recommend the "auteur" thesis in relation to these directors, not least in the conversion of some of their productions into printed texts. The published book that followed Mitchell's 2006 *Waves*, for instance, combined her performance edit of text sourced from Virginia Woolf's writings with stills taken from the video output captured live by actor-technicians during a performance. Similarly, Ostermeier's 2011 adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* made changes radical enough that it became a performance text in its own right. Richard Rose, artistic director of The Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, so admired Ostermeier's *Ein Volksfeind* on seeing it in Berlin that he sought to franchise the production, requesting permission to reproduce it in every scrupulous detail other than its language. Ostermeier allowed Tarragon to use an English version of the same translation (prepared by dramaturg Florian Borchmayer) that formed the basis of his German language adaptation, including a speech for Stockmann in Act 4 that incorporated elements of the French anarchist manifesto *The Coming Insurrection*. Images of the Tarragon version nevertheless reveal its close visual proximity to the *mise en scène* of Ostermeier's production. In Rose's words, with its 2014

An Enemy of the People Tarragon staged for its audience “a version of [Ostermeier’s] compelling production” (Rose 2014) – rather than of Ibsen’s play.⁷

The suggestion, however, that both directors harbour a personal creative vision so distinctive that they produce works independent of the texts on which they are based obscures their major significance in relation to more radically idiosyncratic theatre artists like René Pollesch, Frank Castorf, or Robert Wilson; Mitchell’s and Ostermeier’s creativity remains rooted in the literary and dramatic canon. They do not displace authorship with auteurship. Rather, they create theatre that exposes the flawed logic of assertions that productions should offer a transparent window onto a writer’s vision. Their theatres reveal the fact that any attempt to convert printed text into live performance necessitates adaptation and interpretation, and thus turns directors into collaborators with texts and authors. This thesis will analyse their relationships with different authors (Chekhov, Ibsen, Woolf, Shakespeare), and aims to demonstrate how both directors have created new ways for theatregoers to think about how text might generate performance. As words spoken by the actor, text is merely one among many of the strands that braid together in their theatres to create live performance. As the dynamic material that prompts the creative team to realise choreographic, musical, and visceral methods of live, three-dimensional storytelling, it is of crucial significance.

This thesis, then, uses Mitchell’s and Ostermeier’s interest in scripts of various kinds – including literature never intended for fashioning performance – to position text as the generative, rather than limiting, foundation of their practice. These directors do not devise. Even when crafting non-verbal performance, these directors rely on a writer and a text in which to root their explorations. In putting these two different yet similar practitioners together, and by looking to their relationships with individual writers and

⁷ In May 2015 Rose declined a Dora Mavor Moore Award nomination for Best Director for *An Enemy of the People*, explaining that he had staged an already existing production. See: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/richard-rose-declines-dora-nomination-for-an-enemy-of-the-people/article24725753/>

literary forms, this thesis will investigate how seminal text has been in generating some of the most distinctive and discussed “directors’ theatre” of the twenty-first century.

Scholarly Reception

This argument helps to clarify criticisms of their work levelled by the scholarly community, particularly those mediated through the lens of postdramatic theory. Lehmann’s central thesis stated that important gestures in contemporary art and theatre since the 1970s had been distinguished by their renunciation of the “dramatic” – taken to signify the unity of a staged fictive cosmos, rooted in a dramatic script, in which the director situates the playwright’s characters. A postdramatic theatre is one in which directors find performative strategies that rebel against the cohesion of dramatic representation. Texts may still feature in this theatre, but the centre of dramaturgical (and political) interest has moved from an investigation of realism, character and narrative towards an exploration of spectatorship and the live performance situation:

A basic reality of postdramatic theatre is obviously the shift of attention and emphasis away from representation, or “Darstellung” of a work or process, to the creation/presentation as part of a “Situation” where the relation between all participants of the event becomes a major object of the artistic concept and research. (Lehmann 2011: 45)

Peter M. Boenisch’s critique of Katie Mitchell’s experimental multimedia adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* (titled *...some trace of her*, 2007) helps to clarify the precise contours of Lehman’s “postdramatic dramaturgy of the spectator” (ibid: 35). It does so by demonstrating how Mitchell’s production falls short of achieving such a dramaturgy. Boenisch found Mitchell’s fusion of technology and a Stanislavskian investment in character to be a “peculiar approach” (2010b: 166). The language with which he described her dramaturgy – “solvable,” “reconcilable,” “closed and coherent” (ibid: 167)

– revealed his judgement that the radical and reflexive potential of her technological tools was denied by her “surprisingly traditional directorial ethos” (ibid: 166). He granted that Mitchell had upset the “conventional dramatic transparency” (ibid: 167) of the art of spectating by condensing and fragmenting Dostoyevsky’s novel – her actors created “suggestive and somewhat poetic visual associations” to accompany Dostoyevsky’s text on the projection screen that hung above the stage, as opposed to “realist illustration” (ibid: 167). But Boenisch argued that the production nevertheless reasserted cohesion and closure at a supplementary level. Mitchell had asked her actors to play characters (inventing intricate biographies in the process) who were engaged in constructing images in a film studio, thus adding “another dramatic layer on top of Dostoevsky’s narrative” (ibid: 167). Boenisch therefore showed how Mitchell’s production was found wanting according to the standards of a postdramatic theatre which, in refusing to offer a conclusive way of synthesising events, foregrounds and thematises a spectator’s reflexive perception. Mitchell’s production instead reinforced the “traditional [spectatorial] position of watching a perfectly timed and choreographed theatrical spectacle” (ibid: 167), a failing heightened in the comparison Boenisch drew with Frank Castorf’s radical deconstruction of the same novel at the Berlin Volksbühne.⁸ Located at the centre of an immersive event, Castorf’s spectators weren’t anchored in a fictional reality, but instead were confronted with too many possibilities. They could look at any of the many screens relaying events simultaneously, or the live action itself, and in occupying the centre of the space they were continuously made aware of their own presence, and that of their fellow spectators, whilst being denied a vista from which to enjoy a conclusive synthesis of proceedings.

Ostermeier’s theatre has been similarly positioned as a conservative throwback in contrast to progressive movements in contemporary theatre. Reviewing the status of postdramatic theatre ten years after the publication of his monograph, Lehmann wrote of a revival of interest in realist and socially critical theatre in Germany in the early

⁸ *Der Idiot* (2002), dir. Frank Castorf.

twenty-first century. His conclusion, however, was that “notwithstanding the international renown of Thomas Ostermeier [...] I do not have the impression that many people expect interesting new revelations of the theatre in this direction” (2011: 36). Ostermeier himself is quick to point out that his work is often deemed old fashioned by German critics, and juries who adjudicate events like the Berlin Theatertreffen,⁹ because he is “still interested in plays and storytelling” (“The Big Swap” 2013).

As signalled by the enthusiastic reception of Ostermeier in London and America, English language scholarship tends to perceive more radicalism in his work than is acknowledged by German perspectives.¹⁰ Marvin Carlson’s path-breaking research on contemporary German theatre directors resulted in what was, at the time, the only scholarly literature in English to devote significant attention to Ostermeier’s work. He allocated a chapter of his monograph, subtitled *German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century*, to Ostermeier, and repeatedly defined his aesthetic as “Capitalist realism,” citing the director’s own definition of this term as “Anything Goes [...] where every reading and interpretation is allowed . . . where the self-determination of an essential kernel within a subjective individual no longer exists, when all can be deconstructed” (Carlson 2009: 166).

Carlson’s translation of Ostermeier’s exegesis of “Capitalist realism” is sound, although he misconstrues its significance. In the context of the interview from which this quotation is drawn, Ostermeier used the term to define (and criticise) contemporary experimental trends in Germany, namely the vogue for the postdramatic. Comparing this movement with the Socialist Realism of the Eastern Bloc, Ostermeier characterised it as politically inert because it provides an “affirmation of a particular existing social organisation” (Burckhardt, Merschmeier & Wille 1999: 76), capitulating to the

⁹ The Theatertreffen is a highly prestigious annual showcase of the ten best German-language theatre productions, as selected by a jury of critics, which are invited to perform at a festival in Berlin every May.

¹⁰ Notable exceptions are Peter M. Boenisch (2010a), who has acknowledged Ostermeier’s reception in Germany and his realist proclivities, and Frode Helland (2015), whose new study on Ibsen features a chapter on Ostermeier titled “Against Capitalist Realism”. Their scrutiny of German-language sources has added considerable contextual nuance to English-language assessments of his work.

impenetrable political operations and flood of information that leaves contemporary citizens feeling powerless and depressed. The obscure and self-reflexive dramaturgy of today's avant-garde, in Ostermeier's view, serves those in power very well, in that it is incapable of posing any real threat to the ruling neoliberal hegemony.¹¹ Ostermeier, in contrast, described his own approach as grounded in the "sociological observation of human behaviour in daily life" (2010a: 72), attentive to the realities that remain obfuscated by postdramatic praxis.

Carlson's account of Ostermeier's aesthetic is no mere mistranslation; it signals the degree to which commentators outside of Germany view his work as a radical gesture. Significantly, other scholars who have written in English about Ostermeier have recruited Carlson's authority to argue the director's interest in post-subjectivity, labelling his theatre one of deconstruction, and propagating a Capitalist Realist reading of Ostermeier on whose stage "Anything Goes" (see Mancewicz 104; Boyle 83). The speed with which Carlson's appraisal was re-circulated illustrates some scholars' desire to read Ostermeier's theatre in association with a term that he was in fact defining himself in opposition to.

Similarly, scholars working on intermedial theory have used Katie Mitchell's combinations of live theatre and recording technologies as exemplars of posthuman or cyborg trends in theatre, constructing compelling readings of her work that are wholly incompatible with her interest in naturalism.¹² This thesis runs counter to attempts made by scholars of various disciplines to reference certain productions in isolation as illustrations of cutting edge performance trends whilst rejecting other productions by the same directors as unremarkable or conservative. As practitioners who are still working (and at a faster rate than ever), Mitchell and Ostermeier have been given highly focalized attention in a number of discrete essays and book chapters, and rarely has their work been compared in any depth. As well as connecting and contrasting their

¹¹ See also Jörder's (1999) interview with Ostermeier, for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, in which the director makes similar claims.

¹² See Lepage (2008); Jeffries (2011); Parker-Starbuck (2011).

approaches, this thesis stresses the consistencies within their still-evolving oeuvres. The innovative experiments that reflect the forward momentum of each director's body of work emerge out of their engagement with persistent problems rather than constituting abrupt shifts in direction.

Turning to a comparison of their separate work on the same play, we are able to perceive two tightly connected, yet radically different, directors. This comparison focuses on a text that, in professional terms, brought Mitchell into Ostermeier's orbit – after seeing her production of Kroetz's play at the 2009 Theatertreffen, he invited Mitchell to stage a production using the same multimedia technique in his Berlin theatre, one of the many concrete expressions of the appetite in Germany for the innovative use of digital media Mitchell was developing.¹³ It reveals, too, how Mitchell, as a freelance practitioner, has to seek out networks to support her work (in Germany, predominantly the theatres run by Karin Beier and Ostermeier); Ostermeier, on the other hand, leads an organisation. One of the ways in which he has ensured that his productions remain representative works is through developing the Schaubühne's identity in line with his own directorial agenda. As his ensemble tours the world, the Schaubühne and Ostermeier have become linked with the sentiment that a play's urgency is uncovered in the extent to which it still resonates in a contemporary context. Although their productions of *Wunschkonzert* differ significantly, this comparison argues that they are also ideologically compatible, going some way towards establishing why Ostermeier has lent Mitchell considerable institutional support.

¹³ This production, which would open in 2010, was *Fräulein Julie*, an adaptation of Strindberg's play seen from the perspective of the maid, Kristin. It serves as a central case study in Chapter 3.

CASE STUDY: FRANZ XAVER KROETZ'S *WUNSCHKONZERT* (1973)

Thomas Ostermeier directed Kroetz's *Wunschkonzert* in 2003 as a sequel to his iconoclastic 2002 production of Ibsen's *Nora*.¹⁴ Anne Tismer played the central character in both productions, which ran in repertoire at the Schaubühne am Leniner Platz, the Berlin theatre that Ostermeier had run since 2000. Although *Nora* reached a far wider audience through a series of domestic performances and international tour dates that culminated in 2009, it was occasionally accompanied on its outings by its sister piece, *Wunschkonzert*.¹⁵ Ostermeier updated both texts – Ibsen's written in 1879 and Kroetz's in 1973 – by situating them in sets resembling apartments typical of Berlin in the early 2000s. Through Tismer, these productions forged a link between two characters of disparate historical and socio-economic status, inviting the local Schaubühne audience to view Nora Torvald alongside Fräulein Rasch as complementary studies of contemporary women trodden underfoot by the triumphant march of neoliberalism.

In 2007, Karin Beier became artistic director of Schauspiel Köln, in which capacity she invited her longstanding friend Katie Mitchell to stage a play of her choice. Mitchell sketched out ambitious plans for a multimedia *Wunschkonzert* on the back of a napkin, re-envisioning Kroetz's one-woman play as an enormously costly, technically audacious, and labour-intensive spectacle. She was surprised to secure Beier's immediate approval.¹⁶ The hugely successful production, which premiered in 2008, was then invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen the following year; chosen to perform at this annual showcase of theatrical excellence, Mitchell's inaugural project in Germany was counted

¹⁴ In Germany, the play is known by the title, *Nora, oder Ein Puppenhaus* (*Nora, or A Doll's House*). The publicity materials for Ostermeier's *Wunschkonzert* made the explicit point of inviting critics and spectators to view it as a sequel to his *Nora*.

¹⁵ They played together at Avignon in 2004, Madrid in 2005, and Taipei in 2006.

¹⁶ The director told me this story in person (Mitchell 2012). In conversation with Andrew Haydon she revealed that she had always wanted to stage Kroetz's play without words (Haydon 2013a). She also told Connolly (2009) that she considered it unlikely producers would put *Wunschkonzert* on in London because of its subject matter and its lack of dialogue.

among the ten best German-language productions of the theatrical season – a feat never before accomplished by a British director.

Thomas Ostermeier set his *Wunschkonzert* in a contemporary Berlin apartment recreated in forensic detail, except for a missing fourth wall, across the width of the smallest of the Schaubühne's three stages. Katie Mitchell set hers in a facsimile of a 1973 West German apartment, faithful to the year of the play's publication, complete with an external fourth wall able to fly in and out of position. This apartment set, however, only took up a fifth of the stage in Schauspiel Köln's main house. The rest was occupied by twenty-first century technology characteristic of her Live Cinema work, as well as a large soundproof booth containing a string quartet, and a projection screen dominating the upper two-thirds of the stage area. Whereas Ostermeier's production showcased a virtuoso performer engaged in a solo-exercise, Mitchell's exhilaratingly asserted its status as a colossal collaborative endeavour: a company of 12 actors, musicians, and technicians executed a cinematic representation of the final hours of Fräulein Rasch that was edited live and simultaneously projected on a screen above the stage.

Ostermeier's updating of Kroetz's 1970s scenario illustrates his obsession with reading plays "through the glasses of today's society" (Florin & Meidal 2012). This contrasts with Mitchell's comments in the 1990s, during an anthropological phase of her career distinguished by what Barbara Hodgdon termed her "insistence on exploring material history" (1999: 18). Mitchell's justification for resisting the temptation to update *3 Henry VI* in 1994 rested on the assertion that "we need to re-observe the world through a new pair of glasses" (Hickling 1994), which a historical context would provide. The metaphors used by both directors are strikingly similar in the way they establish a dialectical relationship between classic texts and the contemporary moment. For Ostermeier, the pair of glasses represents contemporary society, and the object scrutinised through its lenses is the play; for Mitchell, the referents are reversed: she advocated precise historical materialism as a way of working through contemporary concerns. What Mitchell's multimedia treatment of *Wunschkonzert* did, however, was

embody that dialectic through technology. Although Fräulein Rasch and her apartment remained resolutely tied to 1973, the modern digital apparatus, and the technicians who operated it, literally filtered Mitchell's exploration through contemporary lenses.¹⁷ Indeed, this dialectical movement between then and now has shifted to the centre of Mitchell's practice since she began to develop her work through new channels in Germany, not least at the Schaubühne.¹⁸

Kroetz's dramatic text brings the central preoccupations of this thesis into especially clear focus because it is composed entirely of stage directions, and illustrates that dramatic writing isn't exclusively predicated on the verbal. That is to say, it foregrounds behaviour rather than language in much the same way as do these directors. Kroetz's short text is structured in five parts, each narrating the actions of a single middle-aged woman, Fräulein Rasch, after she returns home to her apartment following a day at work tending to envelopes in a stationary factory. She watches television, listens to a sentimental radio request program, prepares and eats a solitary supper, accomplishes some sewing, and readies herself for bed. A few minutes into a restless sleep, she gets up and takes an overdose. Kroetz's fiercely leftist political vision infuses his preface to the play as he draws clear lines between Rasch's economic enslavement and her lack of emotional fulfilment; her ordered and mundane everyday activities, and her romantic daydreams; her unfulfilled expectations and her hopeless prospects. In Kroetz's estimation, the play "documents one's inability to shake loose the slavery of production" (1978: 25). It culminates in the self-destructive act of a woman whose own exploitation and repression by capitalist culture has been, literally and tragically, privatised. In the

¹⁷ Her first production at the Schaubühne (*Fräulein Julie*, 2010) also marked the first occasion historical costume had been used at the theatre under Ostermeier's leadership. Mitchell remembers him seeing these costumes for the first time and "feeling a bit sick" (2012). Nevertheless, the fact that they were offset by modern technology, used to select and frame the action in real time, was enough to signify "a modern interpretation of an old piece" (ibid).

¹⁸ See Angelaki (2014) for a discussion of Mitchell's 2013 production of Martin Crimp's new play *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino* (*The Rest Will Be Familiar to You from Cinema*) in Hamburg. Crimp's radical adaptation of *The Phoenician Women* by Euripides oscillates between ancient myth and the modern day. Mitchell told an interviewer that German audiences are engaged by "trying to look at how layers of time and history function. The amount [of] time between now in Hamburg and then in the bronze age." (Haydon 2013a)

collaboration it requires of its directors, the play is an especially effective test case for the particular forms of realism that Ostermeier and Mitchell have pursued.

Ostermeier & Neo-Realism

Kroetz's leftist political commitment aligns with Ostermeier's desire to document the lives of society's underrepresented in his theatre, epitomised by the 1998 production that made his reputation in Germany virtually overnight, *Shoppen & Ficken* (*Shopping and Fucking*).¹⁹ Kroetz's play depicts the fatal, self-directed violence of a figure belonging to a class of people who, as his preface asserts, "like animals [...] communicate their desperate situations by remaining mute, which implies a stern measure of order, of resignation, of an unquestioning acceptance of 'things as they are,' of exploitation, and of repression to the point of infirmity and collapse" (ibid: 25). Fraulein Rasch's muteness registers inarticulacy. The absence of language in the play allowed Ostermeier to focus exclusively on what is, for him, a central concern: how the pressures of globalised, flexible capitalism resurface as symptoms in the bodies of contemporary citizens. Kroetz's carefully calculated list of physical actions provided the skeleton over which Ostermeier fleshed out a twenty-first century body in thrall to the economic imperatives that structure neoliberal ideology.

Ostermeier's Fraulein Rasch was a woman performed by (rather than performing) the repetitive daily routines that order her leisure time. Soon after she returns home, Kroetz calls for her to "discover some dirt on the window sill, take a rag off the pipe under the sink, and clean off the whole sill" (ibid: 29). Anne Tismer, in Ostermeier's production, scoured the sill vigorously, grunting as her body jerked with the vigorous effort she put into eradicating the dirt. Kroetz's script is interspersed with similarly meticulous routines, such as hand washing rituals that follow food preparation and using the bathroom. Ostermeier found opportunities to build in additional reflex

¹⁹ The most widely read trade magazine on German-speaking theatre, *Theater Heute*, crowned Die Baracke "Theatre of the Year" in 1998, and *Shoppen & Ficken* was invited to the 1999 Theatertreffen.

actions over the course of the performance; every time Tismer's Rasch crossed from one side of the room to the other, her arm reflexively extended to touch the radiator, monitoring the energy efficiency of her apartment. Faucets were checked for drips, doors double-checked to ensure they were locked, and Rasch even used her apron to polish each individual cherry tomato that accompanied her supper, presumably for fear of ingesting chemical fertiliser. Johanna Straub (2003) read Ostermeier's emphasis on hygiene, security and economy as evocative of an oppressive compulsiveness which had "crept into the smallest gestures" of the character. Esther Slevogt (2003) went further, diagnosing Rasch with "obsessive compulsive disorder," whilst Ulrich Seidler (2003) read Tismer's performance as manifesting a "pathological hygiene fixation". Such responses indicate how Ostermeier's view of behaviour as symptomatic worked in alliance with Kroetz's insistence on the link between "desperate situations" and a "stern measure of order" (1978: 25) in the life of his character. The production effectively associated Rasch's order obsession, in the minds of these critics at least, with pathological *disorder*.

This vision of theatre as a laboratory for contemporary sociological analysis is everywhere in evidence in Ostermeier's work, suiting the tenor of his Berlin theatre, which treats classics like new plays and new plays like classics and thus privileges the *Zeitgeist* at every turn.²⁰ Kroetz's mute realism of the body, highly political because it emerged from meticulous social research (he gathered evidence from contemporary police reports that stressed the prevalence of "normality" and "routine" in the lead-up to suicide), exposes what Ostermeier claims to be the redundant clichés of psychological realism (Treusch-Dieter 2003), recycled endlessly in many of Germany's city theatres – clichés that have lost all connection to the "reality" they purportedly depict.

In contrast, Ostermeier contrived, in *Wunschkonzert*, to develop a performance language capable of disclosing social relations through an intricate score of repeated

²⁰ See Craven (2012), in which Ostermeier discusses "approaching classical drama, approaching Shakespeare, approaching Ibsen, in the spirit of [Sarah Kane's] writing". Boenisch writes that, in Ostermeier's theatre, "classics become a means to scrutinize current 'structures of feeling'" (2010a: 347).

actions. It was through Rasch's repetitive rituals that the director communicated his conviction that "the human being is the result of the surroundings [she] is living in" (Craven 2012), rather than an expression of an innate individual character:

In *Wunschkonzert*, every single move, each close of a door, each turn of the back of an object, the clatter of dishes being washed – all of these sounds, which result from the movement, are constructed. They are not notated, because I try to proceed intuitively, but I have manufactured what I call a 'movement score', and the actress [...] simply sticks to the framework/scaffolding of these sounds. (Treusch-Dieter 2003)

Ostermeier's comments here illustrate the significance of his training to an understanding of his aesthetic. In 1968, he was born into an "upper working class" (Woodall 2010: 375) family in Bavaria (and to a right wing conservative father who became a violent alcoholic). He was thus deeply embedded, geographically and ideologically, in the conservative Western sector of a divided nation. On the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, however, Ostermeier repositioned himself, moving to the former Eastern sector of the new capital – a consciously ideological and political act, corroborated by his decision to join the Trotskyist organization The Socialist Workers' Party. The young Ostermeier rushed into East Berlin and distributed the long-banned works of Trotsky, Bakunin and Gramsci alongside copies of the revolutionary newspaper *Spartacus* (Woodall 2010: 375; Pascaud 2012). Soon after, he auditioned at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts, the most prestigious training institution in the former Eastern sector. Although it rejected him from the acting course, the school instead invited him to take up a vacant place on their directing programme.

To this day, the physical location of the school influences its politics. Describing his ideological outlook in this period as "to the left of the left" (Pascaud 2012), Ostermeier worked under the tutelage of Manfred Karge, and thus established a direct

link between himself and Brecht, in whose Berliner Ensemble Karge had worked after being “discovered” by Helene Wiegel in 1961. In the years during which Ostermeier studied at the Ernst Busch, the school also programmed intensive sessions in Biomechanics, led by Russian disciples of the early twentieth-century pedagogue Meyerhold.²¹ His system stressed that the central material of stage performance is the actor’s body, and Ostermeier underwent rigorous training in a series of études designed to enhance an actor’s work in three dimensions. As Chapters 2 and 4 will investigate, the actor’s body is Ostermeier’s central material, playing a crucial role in a neo-realism that applies Brechtian concerns to neoliberal constraints.

Born in the 1960s, both directors belong to a generation that came to maturity in an era of collapsing European boundaries – ideological as well as physical. As Dan Rebellato writes of Mitchell, referring to her formative research trip that began three weeks after the Berlin Wall fell, her career “was forged in the dying embers of Old Europe” (2010: 321). The same is true of Ostermeier. As the utopian promise of socialism seemed finally to crumble with the Wall in 1989, he took advantage of the freedom this new openness afforded. Both directors placed themselves in close proximity to remote practitioners and ideologies, raiding artistic and cultural borders during the formative years of their careers. As we are about to see, Russia would prove a crucial source of inspiration for Mitchell as well as Ostermeier.

Mitchell & Neuro-Realism

Whereas Ostermeier’s neo-realism works from the outside in, rendering social structures of feeling legible through expressive physicality, Mitchell’s realism travels in the opposite

²¹ Ralf Rauker and Gennadi Bogdanov spent over six months delivering intensive training in Biomechanics to a group of actors and directors including Ostermeier. This demanding physical training – over six hours a day – profoundly influenced Ostermeier’s collaboration with fellow directing student Christian von Treskow on *Die Bekannte* (*The Unknown*) by Aleksandr Blok. Playing as part of the Moscow-Berlin festival, this student production generated excitement. The Deutsches Theater’s chief dramaturg (Michael Eberth) and lead actor (Christian Grashof) invited Ostermeier and von Treskow to set up an experimental offshoot in construction worker lodgings at the back of their theatre, which was christened Die Baracke.

direction. The concrete effects of her *Wunschkonzert* sought to reveal an individual consciousness. Unlike Ostermeier, Mitchell didn't take up Kroetz's play as the raw material for a theatre of the inarticulate; the play's erasure of language allowed her to make Fräulein Rasch's interiority the centre of interest. In fact, in the space cleared by the play's lack of dialogue Mitchell situated the words of another 1970s author, Anne Sexton, whose poetry provided Rasch's internal monologue. Spoken through a microphone as voice-over, Sexton's words registered Rasch's "emptiness" paradoxically, as they allowed audiences to measure, and find wanting, the banal reality of her mute solitary existence against the rich texture of her memories and emotions. Speech's absence, in Kroetz's play, prompted Mitchell to lend performative substance to subjectivity.

As well as poetry, visual imagery revealed the complexities of Rasch's inner life, materialising eddies of emotion and experience that tugged at the character in the present moment, directing her behaviour. Rooted in Kroetz's suggestion in his preface that the involuntary sexual abstinence of his romantic, but isolated, protagonist followed "one early, short, and painfully sad love affair" (1978: 26), Mitchell created flashbacks revealing an adolescent romance, supported by poetry from Sexton: *I Remember*, an elegiac lament spoken over a close-up of Rasch (played by Julia Wieninger) crying as she ate supper, harks back to a time when "the door to your room was / the door to mine" (1964: 51).²² The music playing on the radio request programme triggered synaptic connections to past events that were given visual form in the flashbacks on screen, and aurally connoted by Sexton's poetry.

Mitchell's approach bears the stamp of formative experiences in Eastern Europe. After studying English Literature at Oxford and spending two years as an assistant director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, which she spent "thinking about being abroad" (2012), the young director used a travel grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Fund to research directing in Poland, Russia, Georgia and Lithuania.

²² These extracts from Sexton's work were, of course, spoken in German translation.

Following a month-long stint spent with Gardzienice, Mitchell's journey led her to Russia. In late 1989, she sat in the rehearsal rooms of Lev Dodin and Anatoly Vasilyev at the Moscow Arts Theatre. As she watched them directing in a language she didn't understand, she was deeply affected by the precision of the behaviour these directors elicited from their actors: "it was a matter of learning to watch what actors do with laser eyes and to help them become immersed in a situation to play a character in a real time, in a real place, so an audience could believe that the action was really happening" (Higgins 2007).

Through these figures, Mitchell established a direct link with Stanislavsky, and using his techniques she would go on to develop her own rehearsal system designed to facilitate actor immersion. Mitchell learnt to register immersion by the extent to which an actor's behaviour in the role revealed accurately the perceptual processes of the character. As Chapter 3 explores, her forays into neuroscience in the early twenty-first century afforded the opportunity to update and extend her enquiry into how consciousness shapes behaviour, based on new scientific insights. The intermedial technique used in *Wunchkonzert* allowed her to concretise perceptual processes such as memory, communicating directly to her audience previously hidden aspects of the Stanislavskian technique that had underpinned her methods from the start.

Ostermeier's contact with Meyerhold's system and Mitchell's early exposure to the methodologies of Stanislavsky ensured that when these directors began to approach dramatic texts, they did so through the lens of a training that prioritised behaviour over language. They didn't, therefore, see texts primarily in terms of words spoken, but for what they might disclose on supplementary levels (psychological, behavioural, structural, political). In *Wunschkonzert*, there was one telling detail that serves to elaborate the similarities and differences in their approach, stimulated by these genealogies of learning. Its inclusion worked as a metonym for the distinct, yet related, approaches to realism pursued by each director.

A glass fishbowl featured in both directors' productions, nowhere stipulated in Kroetz's text. One of the first actions in Ostermeier's physical score involved Fräulein Rasch entering her apartment and, before even taking off her coat, visiting the fishbowl perched on the shelf above the radio. She retrieved some fish food from her shopping bag and proceeded to feed the solitary goldfish, her finger lovingly tracing its movement on the other side of the glass. The single fish in its bowl, as well as an echo of the large fish tank that dominated the set of *Nora*, mirrored the single woman in her apartment. Similarly, Rasch's observation of her fish swimming aimlessly around its environment reflected the audience's own voyeuristic scrutiny of Rasch in her habitat, peering through an invisible, rather than glass, fourth wall. At several moments throughout the production, Ostermeier had her revisit the fishbowl and stare at it intently, before glancing around at her own surroundings. In choreographing these interactions, Ostermeier foregrounded the social isolation of Kroetz's protagonist.

Katie Mitchell's Rasch, on the other hand, owned a bowl occupied by two goldfish. Rather than at the beginning, she fed the fish in the middle of her evening. After cling-wrapping her own half-eaten supper, she took a tube of fishfood from a kitchen cupboard and returned to the dining table on which the fishbowl sat. She knelt so that her head was level with the bowl, and a camera operator captured a close-up of Julia Wieninger's face that was simultaneously projected above the stage, her pupils dancing around as they traced the movements of her feeding fish.

Ostensibly, they offered an ironic parody of Rasch's isolation – even her goldfish were paired, illustrating how Mitchell's use of props tends to reveal character insights (Rasch's romanticism) rather than externalise social relations. However, this moment of performance actually offered spectators an even more complex layering of elements through its use of technology. As the projection screen showed Rasch staring intently into her fishbowl, another actor provided a voice-over sourced from Sexton's poem *The Silence*. The words, amplified by a microphone, didn't establish a literal connection to the on-screen visuals, but instead described the silence of death: "It comes each day with its

shock / to sit on my shoulder, a white bird, / and peck at the black eyes / and the vibrating red muscle / of my mouth” (1974: 33). As Mitchell’s audience observed Rasch, they were invited to juxtapose stark reality with her stream of consciousness. Once the text concluded, the film projected on the screen above the stage abruptly cut between Wieninger’s face and the output captured by a camera at another location. This camera showed an aerial view of an older woman lying on a patch of grass who had experienced some kind of attack, attended by a girl that earlier flashbacks had established as the adolescent Rasch. The film footage depicted a memory related to the introspective text heard moments earlier, temporarily displacing Kroetz’s naturalism by concretising the character’s perceptual processes (showing memory) and orchestrating a complex synthesis of elements to be worked out by the spectator.

Although such an approach differs from Ostermeier’s sociologically inflected neo-realism, Mitchell’s neuro-realism is charged with a force that is equally political. Whereas Ostermeier shows bodies in thrall to social forces, Mitchell contests the forms of repression encountered by the characters she depicts with intense flashes of inner life, and her use of technology works to materialise traces of memory and subjective experience that counter the ostensible destruction faced by her characters in narrative terms. This thesis will explore Mitchell’s interest in female erasure and absence. It also seeks to probe the politics of the differences in emphasis between both directors’ approaches. Whereas Mitchell is interested in the invisible and the unsayable, giving shape to the indefinable and exploring the nature of consciousness, Ostermeier sets out to probe the extent to which the already visible (physical action) reveals the invisible (social oppression).

Male vs. Female Gaze?

In drawing this introductory discussion to a close, I’d like to use this comparison to open a discussion about the role of gender in the work of both directors. Critics analysed the hidden dimensions that objects disclosed in both of these productions. Reviewing

Mitchell's *Wunschkonzert*, Christian Bos (2008) found that "the imagery on screen and its interaction with the stage creates a psychological undertow; the many close-ups give even the small and silent things a threatening dimension".²³ The objects populating Rasch's apartment in Ostermeier's staging posed a *literal* threat in that they persistently injured the protagonist. When she washed her cutlery in the sink, Tismer's Rasch cut her finger on a knife and had to apply a plaster. When she entered the apartment she stubbed her toe painfully on a chair. When she did a little dance to a track on the radio (stipulated in Kroetz's script), Ostermeier had her slip over on the wet bathroom lino, her outstretched arm plunging into the uncovered toilet bowl, and as she tried to get up she banged her head on the underside of the sink.

Although similar, these approaches differ hugely in tone. Ostermeier's carefully choreographed sequences were painful to observe, but they were also funny. Indeed, critics' conflicted reactions to these sequences suggest that Ostermeier's focus on the external, in contrast to Mitchell's attempt to reveal the internal, maps over a gender politics. The assumptions underpinning such an assertion must be scrutinised with some care, but this thesis will consider the implications of gender in these directors' views of the subjects that they stage. The way in which they realised a specific stage direction provides a point of comparison that allows us to open up such a discussion. Of a moment during which Rasch uses the toilet, Kroetz writes: "It takes quite a while until she can wipe herself. This, too, is done as pedantically and as hygienically as one can imagine" (1978: 31). In Mitchell's version, the video output cut from a flashback to show Rasch already sat on the toilet, in a bathroom hidden behind the set's walls, and the camera only showed her upper half. After a moment, she discretely wiped, pulled up her tights under a long skirt, and flushed. An overhead shot showed her brushing the bowl. The long sequence that Ostermeier made out of this stage direction differed entirely.

Because of the layout of this apartment, Tismer's Rasch sat on a toilet at the front of the stage in full view of the audience. Following the sound of her urinating, she

²³ See Chapter 3 (p. 161) for a discussion of this sequence.

sat straining for over two minutes, making lots of noise, clutching onto the rim of the sink, succumbing to a panic attack, crying, and finally managing to unblock herself with the requisite sound effect. She then tore off short pieces of toilet roll, and wiped herself three times, inspecting the paper after each wipe, holding the tissue close to her face because of her short-sightedness. Reviewers responded in conflicting ways. Johanna Straub (2003) found it uncomfortable: “Ostermeier shows the audience even more clearly what it does not want to see. Rasch sits down on the toilet and cries, and we have to watch”. In contrast, Esther Slevogt (2003) found it “hilarious, not only because of the poor young lady on the toilet, but also because Herbert Grönemeyer’s song “Der Weg” (*The Way*) was playing on the radio in the background, dedicated by a listener to his deceased wife”.²⁴ This sentimental love song (“I’ll carry you with me / Until the curtain falls”) made sense of Rasch’s upset – just before using the toilet, she had muffled the radio with a napkin on hearing this song. However, Ulrich Seidler (2003) accused Ostermeier of turning Kroetz’s unbearable play into something that wasn’t half as unbearable. In his reading, this sequence was symptomatic of Ostermeier’s denunciation of Kroetz’s protagonist, making her “a figure for our amusement,” which began for Seidler “when she exchanges her work shoes for her house slippers and stuffs them with newspaper”. Citing the “pathetic fold away tray” that Rasch fitted over the arm of her sofa, Seidler attacked Ostermeier for relegating Rasch “to a curiosity”. Having “extended the potential for making jokes by having her near-sighted and in need of spectacles,” he encouraged spectators, in Seidler’s view, to “indulge in the consolation that we are better than the daft Fräulein Rasch”. Slevogt agreed that in this production Rasch was doomed from the start: “Such hideous curtains [...] such eerily patterned tablecloths and senseless practical folding trays cannot make a life worth living.” Whereas Mitchell went for pathos, Ostermeier went for bathos; Tismer’s Rasch owned (and kissed) a cushion cover printed with the faces of the American boy band *N-Sync*, and wore a pyjama t-shirt emblazoned with “Be My Valentine” as she unfolded her single-

²⁴ From the album *Mensch* (2002).

person sofa bed. Wieninger's Rasch, in contrast, reflected on an early love affair and cried as she listened to a Bach cantata. Although such details point to stark and illuminating contrasts, they also reveal that both directors – whether objectifying or subjectivising their protagonist – aimed to expose the alienation of a woman unable to survive in a hostile reality.

Indeed, we will see throughout this thesis that the aesthetic and mood of their work differs considerably. As her *Wunschkonzert* suggests, Mitchell's approach is a predominantly visual one, whereas the "scaffolding of sounds" that Ostermeier refers to above indicate his musical approach. As is suggested by the presence of an onstage string quartet, Mitchell's Fräulein Rasch listened to a series of classical pieces on her radio throughout the evening, culminating in an instrumental version of Dido's lament from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.²⁵ Ostermeier's selections were all sourced from popular culture. Whereas Mitchell used Anne Sexton's poetry as an additional textual source, Ostermeier used pop song lyrics to do similar choral work.

Kroetz's play shows how revealing text can be of the personality of its director. Despite their differences, however, these are directors who investigate the link between concrete stage effects and internal perception, seeking to externalise states using physical and technological methods. Having teased out some of the social, cultural and political implications of the distinct realisms that they pursue, this thesis begins the work of addressing how those approaches stem from their engagement with Chekhov and Ibsen.

²⁵ And thus foreshadowing Mitchell's multimedia staging of Purcell's opera in London the following year. This co-production between the Young Vic and ENO, called *After Dido*, included a live cinema element that intercut three contemporary narratives of love and loss, and was also accompanied by Anne Sexton's poetry (as well as that of Sylvia Plath).

1. FROM IDEA STRUCTURE TO EMBODIED CONSTELLATION: KATIE MITCHELL & CHEKHOV

Chekhov talks politics through people's individual psyches, and the play works on the level of recognition. People can see their own lives in it.

—Katie Mitchell on *Uncle Vanya* (Gardner 1998)

Introduction

Whereas Thomas Ostermeier fastened on Ibsen's plays in the early 2000s, Katie Mitchell has avoided them since her RSC production of *Ghosts* in 1993. Instead, Chekhov emerged as foundational in her ongoing project of animating robust and meticulous representations of human behaviour. Ibsen offered Ostermeier naturalistic situations through which to analyse contemporary neoliberal structures of feeling, as will be explored in Chapter 2. In contrast, Mitchell's interest in Chekhov was primarily a response to his radical formal qualities. Christopher Innes describes him as the naturalist for whom "politics form only the most muted subtext" (2000: 128); references to contemporary events are hinted at only obliquely in his plays, and characters rarely expound outright polemics. Indeed, rather than politically charged content, Chekhov's writing offered Mitchell a methodology.

However, as she points out in the above quotation, Chekhov's radical formalism is political in its own right. Studying his plays analytically, she came to view text in terms of its ability to disclose deeper structures that allow actors and spectators to project themselves into the mental states of others. Consequently her engagement with these

works has proven crucial because it forced her to develop practical strategies prompting spectators to recognise themselves in the individual psyches that Chekhov's dramaturgy interweaves. Beginning with the actor, Mitchell worked under the assumption that his or her full immersion in the world of the play would grant spectators access to the text. However, finding that what is legible to an actor is not always legible to an audience, Mitchell began investigating means of communicating with spectators more directly – even situating them within the drama – circumventing the actor in order to facilitate audience “recognition”. Chekhov thus pushed Mitchell along a pathway that would lead directly to her experiments with technology as a means of prising psyches open – affording even more personal and direct communion with spectators invited to identify themselves in Mitchell's art. An analysis of her engagement with Chekhov thus supports the wider claim that, in contrast to how they were generally understood at the time, Mitchell's experiments with technology in the late 2000s were consonant with, rather than a departure from, a larger aesthetic trajectory.

It is important to acknowledge the magnitude of the challenge these plays posed for Mitchell, who found that “if you do not get the deeper structure, it is like walking through a snowstorm. You cannot see anything” (Shevtsova 2006: 16). The significance of Chekhov's writing to the director's development stems from what she described to Aleks Sierz (2003) as its impossibility: “Despite its title, [*Three Sisters*] is about 16 or 17 people, and has four or five stories going on at the same time – how do you create a focused narrative from such an egalitarian canvas?” Her painterly metaphor relates to the analogue for Chekhov's innovatory style she found in art history, describing it as the theatrical equivalent of Impressionism in that “every bit of the painted canvas has equal value” (Sierz 2003). When Mitchell gathered her insights into a handbook on directing published in 2009, she warned young directors, “One of the pitfalls in early attempts to direct is a levelling-out, in which all the moments in the action are given equal value by the performers” (2009: 61). Since, as we shall see, the director has been openly self-

critical concerning her own inability to manage sections of his works, it is tempting to hear this advice as a lesson Mitchell learnt directly from Chekhov.²⁶

In combating the snowstorm tendency of Chekhov's writing, Mitchell developed close reading strategies in order to diagnose what she has termed the Idea Structures that lay at a play's heart.²⁷ Mitchell has used Idea Structures to locate access points in the complex web of Chekhov's dramaturgy, and to help her focus events. In striving to communicate his plays clearly and precisely she has investigated a whole array of stage techniques, carefully orchestrated and tightly connected to an Idea Structure that, as a product of her literary analysis, remains firmly linked to the text itself.

By 2006, however, many critics were beginning to argue that something had gone radically wrong, and Mitchell's *The Seagull* aroused particularly heated debate regarding authorial intention and the limits of directorial intervention.²⁸ Although fed by a root system firmly anchored in the text, the thickly textured performances that her methods elicited had always been only partially mediated by spoken language. This goes some way towards explaining certain critics' frustrations with what they perceived as Mitchell's "interference" with the text, although reaction to *The Seagull* also reveals its status as a transitional work. In extending the reach of her immersive techniques, Mitchell was developing a performance style that demanded the phenomenological engagement of her spectators, and thereby challenged conventional habits of spectatorial participation. Organising her productions and their vivid use of stage techniques around Idea Structures, Mitchell forged a form of poetic realism that went beyond common expectations surrounding naturalism's role in "bringing a written play to life" (Billington 2006). In turn, the increasing sensual intensity of her poetic realist productions at the National Theatre in the early 2000s – including *Three Sisters* (2003), *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2004) and *The Seagull* (2006) – pushed at the limits of a naturalistic approach to

²⁶ See Mitchell's comments on the failures of her *Three Sisters*, discussed on p.52 of this chapter.

²⁷ See Jones (2008); Mitchell (2009: 44-51); Rebellato (2010: 331). Throughout this chapter I have capitalised Mitchell's own terminology in order to add clarity.

²⁸ For representative reviews see Billington (2006); Kettle (2006); Morley (2006); and Nightingale (2006), all of whom argued that Mitchell's production was not Chekhov's play.

character and behaviour, eventually bursting through in the intermedial experimentation that distinguished Mitchell's later output. It was, however, the desire to render Chekhov legible that instigated her development of these rigorous and experimental techniques.

Situating Actors in the Snowstorm

Jean Benedetti has described Chekhov as “an author who expected [readers] to infer that Uncle Vanya was dressed, not in great boots and untidy clothes like a country farmer, but in an elegant suit on the basis of a single reference to his fine silk ties” (2004: 38).²⁹ Chekhov's plays are complex systems that leave implicit their interconnected nature: they perform their author's understanding of art's ability to disclose life through a tightly woven aesthetic structure, releasing meaning and generating insight only as the reader forges connections. This clarifies what Chekhov was protesting when he complained of Stanislavsky's addiction to supplementary naturalistic details that the director often sought to shoehorn into productions. Such details, although lifelike, hampered the actual life in Chekhov's plays as he saw it, because they existed outside of his carefully constructed weave: “The stage demands a degree of artifice” (Chekhov cited in Braun 1969: 30).³⁰ Although Stanislavsky planned to bring the whole household onstage at the end of Act 3 of *The Seagull* (including a crying child), Chekhov remained adamant that his own orchestration of essential and meaningful elements, rather than Stanislavsky's literal naturalism, would best “reflect the quintessence of life” (ibid: 30).³¹

Mitchell follows Chekhov in that, rather than simply using naturalist text as the pretext for evoking a vivid sense of external reality, she orchestrates (and uses technology

²⁹ Stanislavsky refers to this in *My Life in Art*. Having failed to pick up on the reference, he remembers Chekhov being indignant and telling him, “You didn't read the play!” (1924: 360-363).

³⁰ This and the next quotation from Chekhov are reported in Meyerhold's diaries (trans. Edward Braun), and pertain to conversations between the playwright and the actors during rehearsals for *The Seagull* at the Moscow Arts Theatre, September 1898.

³¹ “‘Yes, but the stage demands a degree of artifice,’ said [Chekhov], ‘You have no fourth wall. Besides, the stage is art, the stage reflects the quintessence of life and there is no need to introduce anything superfluous on to it.’” (Braun 1969: 30)

to modulate) the resources of her stage. This orchestration takes the Idea Structure as its basis, and Mitchell has developed analytical procedures that respond to the non-linear mode of engagement Chekhov's writing invites; apprehending his plays as dynamic constellations, she restructures and organises significant details in elaborate lists. As we will see, Mitchell's trawl of the text for biographical information, or characters' thoughts about themselves and others, gathers details used in rehearsal to generate prismatic layers of subjectivity through which actors are able to show their characters reacting to the play's events.³² Lists thus provide a means of transforming linear writing. They allow the text to be approached from different angles and entered at different points, bringing dispersed evidence to bear on individual moments. They render navigable the detailed patterning of Chekhov's plays, and stimulate embodied performance in which nothing is extraneous to the symbolic weave. Mitchell sees her job in terms of "making actors see the three-dimensional structure of the play and the characters so that they play everything, not just one little muscle of it" (Shevtsova 2009: 196).³³ Although this three-dimensional metaphor is used here to conceptualise a character's inner life, it might also be understood as a literal statement in that Mitchell also translates text into concrete structures in which to physically situate her actors. By mapping out geographies in her rehearsal rooms, Mitchell projects textual details into physical space as the first step in helping actors orientate themselves amidst the blizzard of detail – in this way, the difficulty of Chekhov's texts has proved crucial to the development of the director.

³² For Mitchell's own instructions on the lists that underpin her mode of textual analysis, see Mitchell (2009): Facts and questions, p. 11; Circles of place, p. 22; Character biographies 25; Immediate circumstances, p. 31; Events between scenes or acts, p. 36; Timelines, p. 41; Events during scenes, p. 55; Main events, p. 60; Intentions, p. 62; Characters' thoughts about themselves, p. 68; Characters' thoughts about other characters, p. 70. Many of these lists can be broken down into further lists, e.g. long-term thoughts/new thoughts, family members from whom certain thoughts seem to be inherited, etc.

³³ There are a great many similarities between Mitchell's Chekhov productions and her work on Euripides in the same period. Intriguingly, she sees these writers as similar, describing Euripides' characters as "360-degree articulated, and that seems to be closer to how we experience ourselves in life" (Aspden 2004). Mitchell supported this claim by suggesting that, in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Euripides "never judges Helen and Paris (whose erotic liaison sparks off the Trojan war). We get the full 360-degree view of that couple. There isn't the black and white view of today. For Euripides, everything is more complicated" (Aspden 2004).

In rehearsal note 1 of *The Seagull* (2006), Deputy Stage Manager (DSM) Pippa Meyer notified the stage team: “So far I think there are at least 3 offstage areas that will need to be built: the living room (poss in dock s/l³⁴), the kitchen, and Arkadina’s room”.³⁵ Having undertaken a close reading of the play with her designer, Mitchell had collated a list of facts providing enough explicit and implicit information to sketch out a detailed floor plan extending beyond the limits of the “acting area”.³⁶ The allocated National Theatre rehearsal room was large enough for stage management to be able to mark out much of the ground floor of the house in which the play is set, including “the two rooms where the action of Acts Three and Four was located: the dining room and Konstantin’s study” as well as a bootroom, the kitchen, and hallways that were “not seen by the audience in the final design but [...] used by the actors in rehearsals to help them build a picture of where they had come from and where they were heading to during the action” (Mitchell 2009: 172).³⁷

Meyer’s rehearsal note reveals that Mitchell often requested these other rooms to be physically built in backstage areas so that, during live performance, the actors could continue living the action of their characters before they entered and after they exited the stage. Mitchell thus constructed a series of fourth walls receding further and further back from the stage environment visible to the audience. This network of spaces facilitated total actor immersion in the 360-degree reality and, indeed, allowed her actors

³⁴ This refers to the scenery dock in the stage-left wing space.

³⁵ The purpose of the rehearsal notes is to keep all members of the creative team and technical departments (sound, lighting, wardrobe, carpenters) aware of developments that may impact on their work. The rehearsal note number indicates the day of the rehearsal (i.e. Rehearsal Note 12 is from day 12 of rehearsals). All rehearsal notes cited in this chapter are held in the National Theatre Archive in the box of materials preserved from each production (*Three Sisters*, RNT/SM/1/497ii; *The Seagull*, RNT/SM/1/536).

³⁶ For these Chekhov productions, Mitchell repeats this preparatory textual analysis with her actors, allowing them to invest in the world of the play through making their own discoveries.

³⁷ Mitchell’s productions of Euripides’ plays from the same period used identical tactics. Hattie Morahan, who played Iphigenia in *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2004), remembers that she and Kate Duchêne (Clytemnestra) spent the first 20 minutes of the production acting in offstage spaces. In the wing space a small booth represented their mode of transport to Aulis, arranged like the inside of a small carriage with two seats facing each other. Morahan remembers how “Kate and I sat next to each other, pretending to look out of the window, chatted about home life (two little sisters, servants etc.) and the future, and every now and then she would call out of the window to the footman who was driving us to check how far we had to go” (Morahan 2014).

to carry the sensual knowledge of offstage rooms, activities and events with them in their bodies as they entered a scene.

As Mitchell saw it, the wider she stretched this totality beyond the playing space, the more legible, detailed and truthful the performances she would elicit. In a directors' workshop in which I participated, led by Mitchell and based on *The Seagull*, she treated us as her actors and led us through other list making exercises in which we identified "circles of place".³⁸ Working in four groups, we produced lists (and drew maps) containing all of the references to place in the play according to four "circles": the House, the Estate outside of the House, the Russian Empire outside of the Estate (inc. Medvedenko's house), and anything outside of the Russian Empire. Mitchell then asked us to link all of this information back to the characters to discover how they were affected by this research and we noticed, for example, that Sorin was unusual in having never been abroad, unlike other characters such as Dorn who had a wide mental and physical reach. In performance, each of Mitchell's actors would know specific information about their character's relationship to all of the places mentioned in the dialogue, having undertaken research to allow them to see these places as their character remembers (or even imagines) them.

Indeed, Mitchell often undertook field trips, gathering audio-visual material to share with actors so they might more fully imagine their characters' environment and experiences.³⁹ She travelled to Norway with designer Vicki Mortimer to record bird song, take light readings, and measure the temperature in preparation for *Ghosts* (1993), striving "to get as close to the text as I can from as many different angles as possible" (Mitchell 1999: 96). Similarly, all of the techniques described thus far offer Mitchell's actors the means of seeing scenes from new angles, literally so in asking them to enter them from offstage rooms and improvisations. Mitchell's meticulous research is thus

³⁸ See also Mitchell (2009: 22). This workshop ran at the Jerwood Space, London, in June 2005.

³⁹ Mitchell: "[Field] trips offer a sensory experience of the world of the play that you cannot get from reading books or surfing the net." (2009: 18)

driven by a conviction that the phenomenological entanglement of self (character) and world may lead to new insights in staging the words on the page.

Mitchell's temperature recordings in Norway reflect her understanding of climate's ability to exert as strong an influence on behaviour as the physical environment. The DSM on *The Seagull*, in another rehearsal note issued for the Make-up department, registered that "Act Two is very hot. Med[vedenko] may be very shiny and slightly sunburnt". Character biography, constructed from the close analysis of details in Chekhov's text (in this case, Medvedenko's Act 1 reference to his long walks – approximately four miles – between his home and the estate) was used to calibrate his physical appearance, even his skin tone, in the light of the atmospheric conditions mentioned in Act 2. His dedicated visits to Masha were materialised in his flesh.

Such details are always driven to meticulous conclusions in Mitchell's process; the humidity of the summer evening in which a storm is about to break, mentioned early on in Masha's dialogue before the outdoor performance of Konstantin's play in Act 1, was tangibly and continuously communicated by the actors. Sandy McDade (Masha) periodically lifted her arms and pinched her sodden dress away from her armpits whilst Juliet Stevenson (Arkadina), like many of Konstantin's spectators, swatted at summer insects and mopped her brow. Indeed, Meyer's fifth rehearsal note let the Props department know that "lemon and thyme [will] be burnt to ward off mosquitos in act 1, in pots that Polina lights", which is exactly what audiences saw Liz Kettle (Polina) do, on her first entrance with Angus Wright (Dorn), crouching to light herbs in terracotta pots either side of the platform seating. Although the front rows of the Lyttelton audience may have smelt the burning herbs, it is likely that their "practical" function remained oblique to most spectators; their full significance related to the world of the actor, giving Liz Kettle a logical activity to play that grounded her in her location, and in her role as

head of the domestic sphere.⁴⁰ Despite being nowhere mentioned in the play, these objects helped to orient the character within its constellation of relationships and environmental details.

Mitchell's *Three Sisters* (2003) displayed an equally intense environmental fundamentalism. Each act was precisely located both in geography and in seasonal time, calculated using references drawn from the text.⁴¹ Rehearsal note 13, for instance, asked the Make-up department if it would be possible for Ferapont's beard to have icicles in it during Act 2, "as he has been standing outside for 3 ½ hours in a temp of -20" (the February winter of 1898). The NT's archive materials also feature a document detailing the responsibilities befalling whichever member of the Wardrobe department was stationed backstage during the performance. Pertaining to Act 4 (set on a rainy October afternoon), it describes each character's level of wetness as he or she passed between an offstage garden and a visible courtyard onto which the set's doors opened. Based on diligent calculations of how many minutes each character would have spent in the rain, and whether or not they carried an umbrella, Wardrobe staff used a water spray and an offstage paddling pool to achieve the right level of saturation on the right parts of each actor's costume.⁴² Such precision indicates the realist fidelity that Mitchell's process inculcates.

Mitchell thus raids the script for information that indicates the material conditions of utterance, and translates this into embodied situations in rehearsal and performance, achieving a phenomenological mingling of subjectivity and world. Mitchell doesn't merely read text as thoughts expressed by characters (or indeed, by the playwright) through the spoken word. As we shall see, one of her foremost questions –

⁴⁰ The analysis of *Fräulein Julie* in Chapter 3 shows how Mitchell selects, foregrounds, and shares details like this with audiences using Live Cinema, for instance in the flowers Kristin picked and hung to dry, used later as an ingredient in the potion she brewed for Julie's pregnant bitch.

⁴¹ Meyer recorded the following information in a rehearsal note: "Act One is 1896 Spring, May 5th, Sunday / Act Two is 1898 Winter, Feb, 21 months later / Act Three is 1899 Summer, July, 17 months later Act Four is 1899 Autumn, end of October, 3 months later".

⁴² "Each time you spray [Eve Best, playing Masha], concentrate only on her face, hair, shoulders, arms, and the bottom of her skirt. Leave the rest." Kate Bassett (2003) registered the pathetic fallacy, describing how, in Act 4, "Best is [...] heartbreaking, soaked and bedraggled in her black dress, falling to the ground as if her wings are broken when Vershinin walks away".

we might call it a preoccupation – is how the text *situates* the character (in an architecture, amongst objects, relationships, thoughts, memories and emotions) and how that information can be used to situate her actor in an Idea Structure. Rather than an imposition on the text, these methods remain responsive to the distinct challenges of Chekhov's writing.

A Phenomenology of Perception

Indeed, through these methods Mitchell has found a way of solving the contradiction that Raymond Williams identifies in Chekhov's plays. For Williams, his writing presents difficulties for theatre makers because "that which it seemed to make real, in theatrical terms, was what it wished to show as a limited reality, in dramatic terms" (1995: 126). External naturalism cancels out Chekhov's poetic realism in Williams's reading, and focusing on things as they seem, or "what is visible and directly expressed," obscures Chekhov's use of reality as a "counterpoint to the unrealized life" (ibid: 126) that forms his real subject. It may seem that Mitchell's realist fidelity would be deemed by Williams to have radically missed the point of the challenge that Chekhov's writing issues. However, a comparison with Stanislavsky's treatment of the plays as he oversaw their premieres is clarifying here, and reveals precisely how Mitchell's Chekhov is distinct.

As we have seen, Chekhov harboured misgivings about Stanislavsky's heavy-handed attempts at naturalistic fidelity. Stanislavsky's autobiography records Chekhov, during a lull in rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard*, proposing new dialogue designed to restrain Stanislavsky's proclivity for aural embellishment: "How wonderful. We hear no birds, no dogs, no cuckoos, no owls, no clocks, no sleigh bells, no crickets" (1924: 420). Mitchell's tenacious advocacy of the contributions made by contextualising and atmospheric elements, registered in sound design, in her extended geographies – not to mention the make-up notes – might be viewed as similarly superfluous. Stanislavsky's flourishes, however, were based on evoking a sense of everyday life inspired by Antoine's revolutionary realism at the Théâtre Libre. Chekhov rarely believed they were deployed

to communicate the play's thematic content or externalise mental states.⁴³ Mitchell's innovations and additions, in contrast, have remained collaborative with the text at every turn. More than this, through studying Chekhov's writing Mitchell began to generate a form of realism grounded in a phenomenological theory of self, pushing her further along the path towards Live Cinema.

Phenomenology posits subject and environment as radically intertwined, opposing the Cartesian dualisms of mind and body, or consciousness and world. As David Seamon writes, Merleau-Ponty's work "attempts to circumvent any dualistic relationship, since always because of the lived body, people and world are intertwined; they are existentially one rather than conceptually two" (2010). Situating the perceptual act in three-dimensional space is a customary tactic of phenomenological analysis, grounding mental processes in flesh, sensation and corporeality. Mitchell, as we have seen, has used Chekhov to conduct similar experiments, finding not that environment shapes people, or that people shape their environment, but that the two are fundamentally fused. Chekhov's text led her towards an understanding of behaviour that, rather than mediated by language, is rooted in the science of perception and consciousness. Fascinatingly, it wasn't until 2004 that Mitchell sought out mentors in the field of neuroscience, adding scientific rigour to her explorations.⁴⁴ These were interests that had been initially stimulated through the director's collaboration with Chekhov.

Mitchell found in his plays the evidence to contest Williams's false binary between external reality and the unrealised inner life. As processed in Mitchell's theatre, Chekhov's writing reveals that the very act of embodying the words theatrically de-prioritises language as an index of interiority – showing it to be a "limited reality". This clarifies why Mitchell's strategies of reading are geared towards aggregating information that establishes the *conditions of utterance* – Chekhov's writing stimulates the artistic

⁴³ Benedetti's assessment of Stanislavsky bears this out. He writes that, when tackling *The Seagull* in 1898, the director had been "disconcerted by the lack of 'action', the absence of opportunities for production effects. In fact, as he himself admitted, he planned the production without really understanding the play" (2004: 37).

⁴⁴ See the Conclusion for details on Mitchell's relationship with neuroscientist Mark Lythgoe.

creation of a mode of subjectivity that circumvents the divisions between cognitive processes and concrete phenomena. This phenomenology of perception that Mitchell has uncovered in Chekhov is more clearly discerned in the way her process transforms thoughts and emotions, gleaned from the text, into “intentional objects” of the same status as physical objects like photographs or teacups. As Edmund Husserl theorised, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, irrespective of whether the thing actually exists (clocks, teacups) or not (memories, fantasies).⁴⁵

Mitchell takes abstract concepts like relationships and memories and turns them into embodied sensations for the actor. Part of her early rehearsal work involves actors scrutinising the text for evidence to help them construct a detailed timeline for their character (from birth), before using and comparing those timelines to diagnose significant shared anchor points for improvisation.⁴⁶ Through this method, the text is processed into a series of mental images of (past and future) events that inform behaviour and acting. Improvisation thus allows Mitchell’s actors to distinguish between “imaging” and “imagining”, as outlined in Sartre’s brand of phenomenology (2004 [1940]). Following Husserl’s claim that all images and objects (regardless of whether they are physical or mental, people or things) are defined by their “intentionality”, Sartre made a further discrimination. He distinguished between seeing (or remembering) an intentional object – whereby it is posited as given and real – and *imagining* one, which posits the intentional object as non-given and unreal; thus, “the problem of memory” is “radically different from the problem of imagination” (2004 [1940]: 181). Angus Wright (Kulygin)

⁴⁵ Cf. Husserl: “Natural objects, for example, must be experienced before any theorizing about them can occur. Experiencing is consciousness that intuits something and values it to be actual; experiencing is intrinsically characterized as consciousness of the natural object in question [...] Objects would be nothing at all for the cognizing subject if they did not “appear” to him” (Moran 2002: 125).

⁴⁶ For instance, in *The Seagull*, Konstantin refers to having been a university student. In a gradual process, Mitchell and her actors use the text to make inferences that help to pin down unanswered questions raised by these biographical details. During the directing workshop in which I participated (based on *The Seagull*), we inferred from the references to atoms and physics in Konstantin’s play that he could have studied a related subject at university. After having compiled a full list of biographical details gathered from the text, Mitchell also asked us, “What does Konstantin do throughout the play that is absent in his biography?”, to which we answered, “Write”. Mitchell then suggested that “we need to work out why this character wants to write and when in his character biography he started to have these thoughts”.

recalled constant improvisation of key events in the characters' pasts (from the birth of Irina attended by Dr Chebutykin) in the early stages of rehearsal on *Three Sisters*, claiming that "what it revealed about the play was extraordinary" (McDevitt 2003: 6):

There were improvisations about the tormenting of Tuzenbach at military academy for his German name, Vershinin's wife attempting suicide, the Prozorov's leaving Moscow for the provinces, Kulygin's proposal to Masha, the parties and dancing in the house during General Prozorov's time and, a year before the play begins, his death. (ibid: 7)

Actors were able to recall these events as "given and real" (rather than "imagined"), and Wright found that Act 1 of Chekhov's play was less a beginning than the "continuation of a life about which one already had a fair amount of information" (ibid: 7). Mitchell had therefore not only allowed her actors to physically explore an expanded geographical network beyond the bounds of the playing space, she also organised their sensual encounter with an expanded temporal framework beyond the limits of the play.

Mitchell's improvisation technique served, then, to provide her actors with a memory bank of shared experiences whose potency lay in their embodiment rather than in intellectual discussion. To have a conversation about the backstory of a character around a table is very different from *living* it. From Mitchell's perspective, "When you think back to the key events in life, you often don't remember the words you said, you remember some key sentences or some key words but more often you remember pictures of how people sat, or a close up of a cup with a little bit of steam coming out of it" (Davies 2009).⁴⁷ Improvisation allowed the actors to explore memories as physical realities, generating mental pictures that could be drawn upon later, and stimulating

⁴⁷ Such a description – the close-up of the steaming cup – foreshadows Mitchell's future experiments in using technology to materialise first person perception itself. It also stresses the way in which those explorations, ostensibly radical departures from naturalism, are actually connected to aspects of her rehearsal work with actors on Chekhov.

phenomenologically grounded perceptual processes in the real-time of a performance. In these productions, Mitchell's audiences watched memory happening onstage, rather than actors representing themselves remembering.⁴⁸

The action that Mitchell's audience saw onstage as the curtain went up on Act 1 of *The Seagull* can be seen as a literal continuation of a shared life, rather than the beginning of a play. Five minutes before each performance began the cast would assemble onstage, hidden from audience view behind the theatre's safety curtain. The Stage Manager was tasked with asking them to set their watches to 8.10pm, and to begin an improvisation in the large dining room of Vicki Mortimer's set.⁴⁹ Once the Lyttelton audience had all found their seats, the actors would migrate to an offstage "living room" space where their improvisation would continue. In case the real audience had taken too long to settle and the show started late, the ASM was instructed to visit the offstage "living room" as the DSM began the show, and to ask the company to reset their watches to 8.15pm. Actors would enter the play having literally been living offstage. These measures also ensured that nothing would disrupt them from attending to Mitchell's Act 1 timeline, which had been worked out according to details gathered from Chekhov's script.

Konstantin reveals to Sorin early in Act 1 that his play is scheduled to start as the moon rises at 8.30pm, and he worries that Nina's delay may ruin the effect. Strictly setting clock-time allowed Mitchell's actors to genuinely monitor their proximity to the advertised beginning of this outdoor entertainment. Again, they metabolised textual details into somatic knowledge, making "time pressure" legible in their bodies. Mitchell's theatre thus materialises Merleau-Ponty's claim: "I am not in space and time, nor do I

⁴⁸ Future pictures exert as strong a force as past pictures in Mitchell's theatre. When a participant on the directors' workshop run by Mitchell in 2005 asked whether it was important to question what happens after the play ends, Mitchell's affirmative response revealed the influence of future pictures on her understanding of the actor's craft: "Yes [...] The actor playing Nina in Act 4 [of *The Seagull*] might play despair when Nina's future picture is to go and act; it's useful to the actor".

⁴⁹ As notated on the Stage Manager's cue sheet, held in the NT's archive materials for this production.

conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them” (2003 [1945]: 162).

Using a metaphor apt for Chekhov’s drama, Merleau-Ponty also writes, “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’” (ibid: 273). His definition of “comprehension” grounds our ability to process meaning firmly in corporeality. In other words, the world and our conscious experience of it unite in the tactile encounter of body and object. It comes as no surprise then that Mitchell also populates her stage with resonant objects, prompting physical encounters between actors and props that become loaded with meaning and ambience, and thus stimulate “behaviour” rather than “acting”. Again, these procedures are based on analogues in Chekhov’s own writing, like the use he makes of the spinning top in Act 2 of *Three Sisters* (discussed in the next section). As Stanislavsky came to learn through experiencing great difficulty with his scripts, Chekhov’s inanimate objects resonate well beyond their representational currency.⁵⁰

In between Acts 1 and 2 of *Three Sisters* Andrey marries Natasha, who installs herself in the Prozorov household and asserts it as her domain. A note issued from Mitchell’s rehearsal room on day 11 called for a change in the family crockery between the acts: “Act 2 cups and saucers – please can these be pink. They represent Natasha’s first purchase for the house”.⁵¹ The incongruity of the fragile china (known in the bodies of the actors as they engaged in a tactile encounter with it) in relation to the unrelenting

⁵⁰ Stanislavsky: “Chekhov discovered to us the life of things and sounds, thanks to which all that was lifeless, dead and unjustified in the details of production, all that in spite of our desires created an outward naturalism, turned itself into living and artistic realism, and the properties that surrounded us on the stage took on an inner relationship with the soul of the actor” (1924: 350). However, at the time of staging *The Cherry Orchard* in 1904, and after much experience directing Chekhov’s work, Stanislavsky couldn’t resist the kinds of embellishment that irritated the playwright.

⁵¹ Mitchell’s forensic attention to the life of domestic objects has remained an obsession throughout her work, from her earliest productions at the RSC – where rehearsal notes called for weighted doilies to cover water jugs in *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1991) – through to *Fräulein Julie* (2010) at the Schaubühne. There is a feminist politics to be discerned here. Chapter 3 connects Mitchell with figures such as Gertrude Stein, whose modernist prose poem *Tender Buttons* (1914) displays a similar fascination, devoting a section to the consciousness of everyday objects.

power of Natasha as she embeds herself into the household is unlikely to have signified for audiences. Its function, however, was to immerse the actors in a collective situation which, as the replacement crockery reveals, is already changing over time.

Mitchell thus not only stages voluntary memory (where characters recall events located in their character biographies), she also stages involuntary memory, where environmental cues encountered by the characters trigger recollections of the past without conscious effort. The phenomenological mode of subjectivity that Mitchell uses Chekhov to develop resonates strongly with literary modernists like T. S. Eliot, who used their texts to explore temporalities imbued with subjectivity. Indeed, *Burnt Norton* (1936) was quoted in the *Three Sisters* programme, and literary modernism would provide a crucial focus for Mitchell in her staging of Woolf's novel *The Waves* in 2006. The most famous literary example of an object stimulating involuntary memory occurs in the opening of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, where tasting a madeleine dipped in tea opens a gateway into the narrator's childhood experience.⁵² In a *Whatsonstage* interview, Mitchell revealed this to be her favourite book: "You can't really read that book without reassessing how you look at the world, how you record it, how you perceive time, yourself, and others" (Mitchell 2004). Mitchell sees in Proust, as in Chekhov, the interconnected nature of subjective perception and concrete world.

Her comments on Proust's novel also demonstrate her belief in the power of artistic objects to re-wire the brains of those who encounter them. This chapter began by discussing how Mitchell understands Chekhov's potency in terms of his ability to stimulate the spectator's identification with character, inviting audiences to "see their own lives" in the drama (Gardner 1998). The same happens *within* Mitchell's productions. Taking their cue from Masha's request to be inscribed in Trigorin's literature in *The Seagull*, they extend the opportunities for art to open up intertextual

⁵² "But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening inside me. A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion as to its cause" (Proust 2013 [1913]: 49)

gateways, showing how a character's subjectivity, perception and self-consciousness (or self-dramatisation) absorbs literature and culture into the project of self-definition. A note from the *Three Sisters* rehearsal room asked the Props department, "Can Masha's Act 1 book be *Hamlet*?" (Rehearsal Note 18). Chekhov has Masha silently sat with a book for pages of dialogue before speaking herself, and although her persistent quotation from Pushkin's *Ruslan and Ludmila* ("tied up with a golden chain") offers a concrete textual reference, Mitchell is alert to Masha's *surprise* about that line's circulation in her head, suggesting that the book in her hands has been left undefined. In choosing *Hamlet*, she connected Masha's immersive reading experience during the initial minutes of Act 1 to her declaration, after confessing her love to her sisters in Act 3: "The rest is silence" (Chekhov 2003 [1901]: 61). Mitchell used this textual opportunity to reinforce, for the actor, a more sustained identification with the Prince.

In this case, a phenomenal object served to stitch details together, forging connections to deepen Mitchell's exploration of character. Perceiving the play's three-dimensional structure thus assists the actor in developing links that support three-dimensional behaviour. Mitchell's lists parsed from the text became absorbed by the actor, from Medvedenko's sunburn to Masha's reading. However, in providing physical structures that extend the acting space to allow actors continuous immersion in the world of the drama, and in imbuing phenomenal objects with significance that grounds the characters in a shared history and environment, Mitchell undertook a great deal of work that remained inaccessible to an audience.

Nevertheless, the integrity of the performances this work facilitated translated into the intensities of visible outcomes at stage level, and a unity of artistic purpose. Critics were quick to register the strong sense of cohesion Mitchell achieved in her early work on Chekhov. John Gross (2003) compared Mitchell's *Three Sisters* to a recent West End revival with a movie-star Masha: "There is nothing at the Lyttelton as disruptive as Kristin Scott Thomas queening it around [...] Where Mitchell and her cast really score is in great coherence and unity of tone. The production is a triumph of ensemble work."

Benedict Nightingale (2003) commended Mitchell's "ability to infuse plays with such intensity that they resonate like the Amadeus String Quartet," echoing Rachel Halliburton's (2002) impression of Mitchell's *Ivanov*: "As intimate and subtly plotted as a piece of chamber music."

These musical metaphors convey the resonance of the performances Mitchell's methods elicited, and also their careful orchestration, which is to say, their sensitivity to time. Charles Spencer (2003), in a rare enthusiastic review of Mitchell's work, declared that he had never before been as fully persuaded that Chekhov's three sisters were "inseparably linked by shared memory and experience," perceiving these performances as grounded both in present time (the moment of the performance), and on a timeline (of shared memory). The next section of this chapter investigates how Mitchell gradually moved beyond her initial strategies for achieving coherence and legibility, experimenting with the ways in which time itself might be used as a crucial tool in guiding spectators, as well as actors, through the snowstorm; she became more daring in her use of temporality – clock time, dramatic time, and subjective time – to shape her material, and give audiences access to the psyches of Chekhov's characters.

Guiding the Audience

Mitchell's strategies of actor immersion resulted in highly detailed work, but as her comments to Maria Shevtsova regarding *Three Sisters* made clear, the director still found it challenging to shape a focused narrative out of Chekhov's writing in places: "There are sections of Act Three, which I think are weak. I do not know what some of the characters are playing. I have no idea why Irina has incredibly long speeches in that room, at that time, to those people. Sections of Act Four feel expositional" (Shevtsova 2006: 16). In Mitchell's production everything played out in an unhurried fashion. The actors remained immersed in a reality, but for the director, some of the clarity of the play was lost by a production that took too long.

Three Sisters ran at three hours and twenty minutes, resulting from Mitchell's insistence on letting dramatic time play out in real time, and exacerbated by frequent slow-motion sequences that interspersed the action to highlight significant events. For Dan Rebellato, its length "brought the production into the realm of durational performance" (2010: 330), which suggests that Mitchell's approach took its cue from Chekhov's striking Act 1 stage direction in which Fedotik presents Irina with a spinning top as a birthday gift, and "sets it going. It spins and hums. Everyone watches and listens till it stops" (2003 [1901]: 23). Structured around the duration of an object set in motion and left to come to a natural stop, this concentrated moment of attention forced the pace of the reaction in the actor to be mirrored by that of the audience, inviting all parties to share the same space and time. Mitchell even created other such effects, seizing on the three photographs that Chekhov stipulates being taken in Act 1 by Fedotik and Rode as additional opportunities to extend time around an object, in this case one engaged in a mechanical act of perception. The following research document was preserved by the NT archive:

Hand cameras using roll film were in use by 1901 but for a formal group portrait a large format wooden, bellows camera on a tripod would have been used. [...] The exposure would depend upon the lighting. Outdoors in shade perhaps a second or so. Indoors near a window two or three seconds maybe. They had rapid plates by then but it might be difficult to light a group evenly indoors.

Mitchell's rigorous research culture caused two of Chekhov's stage directions to expand into suspended moments in the production's dramatic time. Erecting the tripod, positioning the bellows camera, and inserting a plate, Thomas Arnold (Fedotik) then used hand signals to communicate to Irina's party guests (and to the DSM watching from the box so that she could cue dips in lighting) how long they were to remain still as

the plate was exposed. The company, arranged in a group pose, held their position for a full 20 seconds on the archive recording, pushing duration well beyond a realist fidelity to the two or three seconds mentioned in the research.⁵³

Durational performance can be seen as a strategy for granting spectators access to the mental states of the characters, enveloping stage and auditorium in expansive moments of real time, as opposed to condensing, focusing and narrating events in dramatic time. However, as Mitchell's comments have revealed, she thought her *Three Sisters* suffered from a lack of shaping, and she advised young directors to avoid the kind of "levelling-out" (2009: 61) that durational performance implies. Thus, across her work on Chekhov, Mitchell has been monitoring the cognitive capacity of her audience, and making adjustments to better guide them into the play's Idea Structure, which is literally reflected in the running times. The four acts of *Three Sisters* all came in at around 45 minutes; by the time Mitchell staged *The Seagull* they averaged half an hour.⁵⁴

Finding that it wasn't sufficient to get actors and spectators to share time, Mitchell used slow-motion sequences as a tool of special emphasis throughout *Three Sisters*, generating moments-out-of-time triggered by characters attending to significant phenomena in the script. When Angus Wright (Kulygin) noticed that the grandfather clock was running seven minutes fast, he adjusted it using his pocket watch. When the sisters and guests turned to hear violin music suddenly invading the room from an offstage location, as if responding to a hypnosis command they began moving towards its source in extreme slow motion – a surreal sequence broken, and explained, by Masha's line "That's our brother Andrey playing" (2003 [1901]: 13).

⁵³ Mitchell added a fourth photo opportunity, right at the end of Act 1. Instead of two officers entering and catching Andrey and Natasha kissing, as Chekhov's directions stipulate, Mitchell had Fedotik and Rode creep downstage and literally "expose" this moment in a quickly captured photograph supplemented by a powerful blast of flash powder to punctuate the end of the act. This interest in the apparatus of early photography anticipates Mitchell's Live Cinema work – see Chapter 3 for a discussion of how the technique can be productively viewed as animated early photography rather than cinema.

⁵⁴ Although *Three Sisters* is Chekhov's longest play, this is not sufficient to account for the significant tightening that Mitchell achieved in *The Seagull*. *Three Sisters* had a running time of 3 hours and 20 minutes (including interval), and *The Seagull* 2 hours 30 (including interval). When Mitchell directed *The Cherry Orchard* in 2014, she removed the interval itself, playing the production straight through in under 2 hours.

Such sequences allowed Mitchell to share an aspect of her work on objects discussed in the last section more publicly. They served to underline heightened moments of consciousness, stimulated by directions in Chekhov's script, but carefully focalised using Mitchell's stage techniques. They therefore anticipate her Live Cinema work, where the subjective perception of time is given formal shape using cinematic techniques. Indeed, Maddy Costa (2003) framed her criticism of the production in filmic terms: "The careful beauty [of Mitchell's composition] leaves the audience feeling distanced from the action. It is as though we, like Fedotik, are watching the Prozorov family through a camera lens." Although Costa experienced Mitchell's techniques as a barrier to access, the director was in fact seeking to open up the play.

Mitchell sees plays as containing "between three and four major ideas", which "the writer focused on whilst writing the play – either consciously or unconsciously" (2009: 47). Every character must relate to a Major Idea in some way, and "large chunks of the action must be concerned with investigating this idea" (ibid: 47). Although the assumptions underpinning this methodology will be interrogated later, it led her to identify – non-controversially in this instance – that one of *Three Sisters*' major ideas is "time passing" (McDevitt 2003: 9). Slow-motion offered Mitchell one means of connecting a network of significant moments and stage directions in the script, rendering sensible to the audience what her analysis had revealed. However, her treatment of the "spinning top" sequence demonstrates a number of other tools that she increasingly came to use in intensifying audience as well as actor focus on moments of performance that materialised the play's Idea Structure.

As Fedotik set the top spinning, the lighting was subtly recalibrated, so that the ambient light slowly dimmed and the daylight flooding in through the set's rear windows was lost; an amplified, ethereal humming effect was layered into Gareth Fry's soundscape, lending the spinning top an almost mystical resonance; and the sound effect of the ticking grandfather clock was imperceptibly teased into the foreground (it ran throughout the act, its volume carefully modulated – as the frequent sound cues in the

DSM promptbook indicate). Any sequence in *Three Sisters* featuring these delicate alterations had a designated endpoint (in this case Masha's line "tied up with a golden chain"; in another, the sound effect of a distant dog barking) that alerted actors and DSM to the return to "clock time" and the requisite adjustments in states. In the service of the Idea Structure, Mitchell, with her sound and lighting designers, was developing subliminal means of working on audience perception. Sound cues in the DSM prompt script include "Knock on pipes", "tonal", "camera foley" and "tonal build", demonstrating Fry's sampling of diegetic and abstract elements to enhance the work with actors. In another stark contrast with Stanislavsky, having studied the ways in which cinema uses these elements to sharpen changes in atmosphere and psychological conditions, Mitchell increasingly came to use sound and lighting to heighten the nature of the audience experience rather than simply as representational tools.⁵⁵

As well as these technical tools, Mitchell's work on Given Circumstances shaped audience attention. As in *The Seagull*, she engineered a sense of pressurised time during Act 1 of *Three Sisters*. In rehearsal note 11, the DSM describes the Given Circumstances agreed upon by the cast: "It's 12pm and [Irina's birthday party] is due to start at 12.15. The table is not yet laid and flowers are laid on it waiting to be arranged. The maid and Anfisa are hurrying around trying to lay the tables. This action takes place before the dialogue starts." In performance, this action continued during Olga's opening speech, and its interruption served to highlight the first symbolic incursion that upset the naturalistic balance of Mitchell's staging.

Olga begins the play by remembering the death of their father, "A year ago, one year to the day, it was the fifth of May, your birthday Irina" (2003 [1901]: 3). When she pulls her focus out of the past to address her sister, standing before her dressed in white,

⁵⁵ Mitchell's approach to sound design is heavily influenced by her study of Russian cinema. Responding to Maria Shevtsova's interest in the soundscape created for her production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, she explained: "That's [Elem] Klimov!" (Shevtsova 2006: 13). See also Mitchell (2009: 86): "Klimov used sound in his film *Come and See* [1985] to communicate what it is like to be inside the head of someone who has just had his eardrums blown out. Another Russian film maker, Andrei Tarkovsky, used complex aural patterns to communicate how memories lodge themselves in the brain." Mitchell introduced a special screening of *Come and See* at London's BFI on 29 April 2015.

Chekhov stipulates that the grandfather clock strikes twelve – an aural cue that drives Olga back inside her memories. In Mitchell’s production, the lights darkened and a strong gust of wind invaded through an open window, causing the curtains to billow and knocking down a vase that smashed as it hit the floor. An almost imperceptible drone accompanied this elemental disturbance. After the vase broke, the stillness that followed was intensified because of the constant bustle it interrupted. The maid and Anfisa, together with the sisters, turned and stared at the window, its curtains still dancing in the breeze. Indeed, they remained held in this freeze through the rest of Olga’s speech, as the clock prompted her to recall more details of her father’s funeral. It was only when Irina reasserted the present moment (“Why go on and on about the past?” (ibid: 3)) that the servants broke from their freeze, swept up the shattered ceramic, and returned to their party preparations.

Rachel Halliburton (2003) perceived, in what she called this “distinctly supernatural moment”, a visceral theatricalisation of how “the past invades the present as [the father’s] memory is felt as strongly as any evocations of Hamlet’s father’s ghost”, demonstrating the efficacy of Mitchell’s techniques. Whilst props, lighting states, and abstract sound design helped Mitchell create a moment of intensity, its success also rested on her careful attention to the actor’s rhythm. The maids’ engagement with the Given Circumstances of the scene, and the way this “supernatural moment” interrupted their activity, allowed Mitchell to pull every character onstage – as well as her audience – into a relationship with a significant thematic moment, rendering Mitchell’s understanding of the play’s Idea Structure tangible.

This analysis reveals in miniature a technique that would dominate Mitchell’s work on *The Seagull* – her use of Main Events to focus each act. Whereas she sensed that sections of her *Three Sisters* succumbed to the snowstorm tendency, by the time she rehearsed *The Seagull* she had come to see her role as playing the text like an instrument, solving the problem of Chekhov’s multivalent textuality through more rigorously-pursued analytical procedures – procedures that shaped his text for performance in ways

which were, she believed, more compatible with the cognitive and attention capacities of her audience. Whilst Mitchell had used Main Events in *Three Sisters*, the choices she made to support her textual analysis in the case of *The Seagull* were far bolder, prioritising the substructure Mitchell and her company had discerned over the script's own stipulations.

Staging *The Seagull*'s second act, Mitchell changed the location. In prising apart the play, reformulating it as lists, working on character relationships, and diagnosing Events and Intentions, Mitchell was led towards relocating the scene, radically complicating traditional notions of what constitutes "fidelity to text". Main Events are, for Mitchell, the structural pivots of each act, and she identifies them by analysing which, out of all of the act's incidents, is of a significant magnitude to affect every character onstage. The care Mitchell takes over this process is carried through into her delicate phrasing, designed to make the event resonate with the ensemble rather than the individual. "Konstantin stops the performance" was one of a sequence of events that her analysis had identified in Act 1 of *The Seagull* (Mitchell 2009: 61). However, when she had settled on it as the *Main Event*, Mitchell re-worded it for the purposes of ensemble playing: it became "The cancellation of the play". She writes: "By rephrasing the [main] event so that it starts with a noun rather than a character's name, everyone can have a relationship to what you are describing. [. . .] The event only works if all the characters play it fully and clearly" (ibid: 60-61).

Focusing Act 2 of *The Seagull* around the Main Event of "The refusal of the horses" (ibid: 60), Mitchell's production made use of exactly the same technique of interrupted domestic activity as had structured the opening beat of her *Three Sisters*, although on a much larger scale. She organised the scene around an interrupted lunch (documented in a rehearsal note as "sliced tomatoes, caviar, pickled herring, pickled cucumber, bread, butter, fresh cucumber soup"), and showed maids preparing the long dining room table, supervised by Polina, in the background of the act's opening sequence. Although Chekhov had set his scene on the croquet lawn outside, Mitchell's

need to focus the Main Event and draw everybody into its orbit led her to devise the act around “the interruption of lunch”.⁵⁶ Although ostensibly an act of directorial usurpation, this decision was designed to emphasise, rather than alter, the action that Chekhov had scripted. As Martin Crimp wrote in his note on the new version, restoring the scene to the croquet lawn “needs no change to the spoken text” (Chekhov 2006 [1896]: 67).

After the characters, following Chekhov’s arrangement, continued to assemble in the dining room, Mitchell followed the arrival of Shamrayev with Yakov and a maid serving lunch to the seated household. Just after the first course was underway, Chekhov’s dramatisation of the flare-up between Arkadina and Shamrayev, triggered by his refusal of the carriage horses for her planned trip into town, sent characters reeling out of the room in all directions, abandoning their untouched bowls of soup. This left the dining room empty for the series of exchanges (between Nina and Trigorin, Nina and Konstantin) that followed in this event’s wake. However, Mitchell’s use of the lunch as a structural device had also brought every character in the play – even the silent maid – into a legible, physical and psychological relationship with the Main Event. In addition, she complimented Arkadina’s about-turn (after calming down, she retracts her impulsive threat of immediately leaving the estate) by letting the act run on beyond Chekhov’s designated endpoint, showing the guests reassembling in the dining room to continue lunch and therefore re-setting the situation.

The director’s rules about Main Events affecting everybody onstage may sound arbitrary, but they offer a focused response to Chekhov’s significant challenge to practitioners – the fact that there are no central characters. When staging a play about 14 or 15 people – each of whom Mitchell situates in the complex constellation of relationships and Given Circumstances – Ideas and Events provide focal points that release rich layers of character work. Chekhov often positions many more characters on his stage than the number speaking. In the case of Shamrayev’s refusal of the horses, he

⁵⁶ Incidentally, Masha’s dialogue in Act 2 establishes that it is indeed lunchtime.

ensures that there are seven bodies present (in Mitchell's staging there were ten). As the director states, her approach militates against "the actor who is in a room of ten people and who only plays one relationship, as opposed to ten. You have to play ten. It's more stimulating" (Shevtsova 2006: 15).

Another comparison with Stanislavsky helps to reveal the effects and implications of Mitchell's analytical approach to Chekhov's text. Stanislavsky's doom laden *mise-en-scène* for the final exchange between Konstantin and Nina in *The Seagull* – underscored by the "howling of wind and noise of rain louder than ever"; the "distant tolling of a church bell (as in Act I during the performance of Konstantin's play)"; the slamming French door "(a pane breaks, so powerfully did the wind slam it)"; the "knocking of night-watchman"; loud bursts of laughter from offstage; Konstantin dropping the glass he held (Innes 2000: 150) – put the melodramatic focus of the act squarely on the lead-up to Konstantin's suicide. It privileged the storyline of one character over and above the ensemble that Chekhov weaves together.⁵⁷ But Mitchell diagnosed Act 4's Main Event as "The arrival of Trigorin with Arkadina from the station" (2009: 60). Even in the exchange between Nina and Konstantin, Hattie Morahan (Nina) played a strong awareness of Trigorin and Arkadina in the other room (which the dialogue clearly supports). Mitchell's direction ensured that her actors were still playing their relationships with other characters, even when those characters were out of the room.

The end of Act 4 also reveals how Mitchell often orchestrates moments of performance at the tail end of an act to materialise the weave of Chekhov's dramaturgy. Dorn's announcement that Konstantin had shot himself (which everybody heard in this

⁵⁷ Stanislavsky would later revise his position regarding the techniques best suited to realising Chekhov's dramaturgy: "Bear in mind that the *mises-en-scène* of *The Seagull* were made according to old, now utterly discarded methods of the enforced imposition of one's own personal feelings on to the actor, and not according to the new method of a preliminary study of the actor, his attributes, the material for his role, in order to create a *mise-en-scène* that will suit him and be useful to him. In other words, the method of the old *mises-en-scène* belongs to the despotic director, against whom I now lead the fight." Stanislavsky, in a letter to Sergey Balukhaty, 14 February 1925, cited in Senelick (2014: 463).

version)⁵⁸ was followed by a shocked silence, then a flurry of activity in the few moments before the curtain swiftly descended. Amid the finely detailed simultaneity of the reactions, it was possible to perceive Masha standing immobilised in stunned shock, then Polina and Dorn moving in unison, making a quick and direct approach towards Masha as Arkadina cried “No, no no!”; their first thoughts were with comforting Masha in *her* loss, consonant with the logic of a production that had heavily implied Dorn’s paternity.⁵⁹

These moments show Mitchell’s rigorous pursuit of a logic teased out of the text, whereby actors are encouraged to inhabit an independent life within the limits that Chekhov has set up. Even after the words themselves run out, Mitchell often allows her actors to complete their relationship with the act. Based on *Given Circumstances* and the *Main Event*, she shows her audience everything that would logically occur in the act’s time frame, and sometimes lets it run on to allow the act to arrive at a logical resolution. Trevor Nunn’s 2007 production of *The Seagull* offers an illuminating contrast. He invented a new sequence in between Acts 2 and 3 showing Konstantin’s failed suicide attempt, imagining what might have happened looking back from Act 3. Hearing the gunshot, everyone ran on and shouted. The effect was farcical, as it didn’t flow out of the momentum of Act 2, nor did it allow the other actors to work on anything happening to their own characters. Significantly, Mitchell hasn’t staged action that lands in-between acts, choosing instead to show her audience only the frames of action immediately preceding and immediately following the scripted scene.

Chekhov reprimanded Stanislavsky for the same impulse, but again the distinction between Stanislavsky’s ideas and Mitchell’s direction proves clarifying. Act 3 of *The Seagull* ends with a stolen kiss between Nina and Trigorin just before his departure

⁵⁸ This was a consequence of the director and adapter’s decision to remove asides. See p. 67 for a discussion of this.

⁵⁹ Crimp and Mitchell restored lines between Dorn and Polina that Chekhov had removed from the acting edition before the play was published, after they were the subject of a dispute with the censor. These occurred in Act 1, straight after Dorn reminded Polina that he was the only reliable obstetrician in the district. **Dorn:** It doesn’t mean I’ve abandoned you. Or Masha either. **Polina:** (grasps his hand) I’m sorry. I know you haven’t. **Dorn:** Don’t. Someone’s coming. (Chekhov 2006 [1896]: 10-11)

with Arkadina. Chekhov's insistence that the stage demanded a degree of artifice, registered at the beginning of this chapter, was a response to Stanislavsky's plan to bring the whole household onstage here. "He mustn't," ordered Chekhov, "It would be like playing *pianissimo* on the piano and having the lid suddenly crash down" (Braun 1969: 30). Whilst Mitchell similarly continued beyond the scene's endpoint, she also seems to have taken Chekhov at his word. After Trigorin departed and Nina had left through a separate door, Konstantin entered and sat at the piano in the dining room. Mitchell reinforced what Chekhov left implicit – namely that, although Arkadina had asked someone to fetch her son earlier in the act, she had not actually said goodbye to him. He opened the piano lid and began playing a delicate Chopin recital, whilst Masha, hearing his music, entered and began waltzing with her eyes closed, holding out her arms to dance around the room with an invisible partner. Mitchell literally finished the act *pianissimo*, but in a way that teased out character relationships.

However, reviews of *The Seagull* illustrated a pervasive sense of annoyance that Mitchell was too busy inventing supplementary material. Nicholas De Jongh (2006), for instance, decided that "Mitchell's itching urge to interfere with Chekhov does big damage", whilst David Benedict (2006) admonished her for being "so busy stressing the potential of traditionally overlooked characters that she badly overbalances the play". For him, "the subsidiary character" of Masha was severely over-endowed in performance: "[Sandy] McDade unostentatiously presents utterly legible emotion, but Mitchell gives her so much stage space and time that the play's complex web of relationships, causes and effects is pulled out of shape." Intriguingly, this critic uses similar terminology to that invoked throughout this chapter, but he insists that the Chekhovian "web" has only one correct "shape".

Benedict's comments also overlook Chekhov's radical questioning of the idea of a subsidiary character.⁶⁰ What they do reveal, however, is that Mitchell's attempts to

⁶⁰ Masha is a case in point. She is shown to directly experience all of the situations and themes that are woven through Chekhov's text. Her unrequited love for Konstantin haunts Masha

guide audiences through Chekhov's drama were often received as heavy-handed, resulting in over-explicit performance that suffered from being *too* legible. Whereas Mitchell felt she was making the play clearer, critics perceived a director who seemed to feel it as her responsibility, once she had noticed something, to underline it.

Renovating or Re-writing?

In Michael Billington's two-star review (2006), he warned directors, "You ignore [Chekhov's] instructions at your peril," finding Mitchell's production to be "directors theatre at its most indulgent in which the play, as Chekhov wrote it, is definitely not the thing". It seemed that certain writers were more amenable to directorial intervention than others, however, for in 1999 Billington had isolated for praise in her staging of *The Oresteia* Mitchell's "boldest stroke": keeping the ghost of Iphigenia onstage throughout. He saw this as "following Aeschylus" in demonstrating that "past actions echo and reverberate in the present," indicating his receptiveness to Mitchell's attempt to materialise Idea Structure. But by the time of *Women of Troy*, a year after *The Seagull*, Billington (2007b) condemned Mitchell as "an auteur whose signature is on every moment of a production". Although her approach had certainly evolved in this period, these responses also reflect the idiosyncratic evaluative criteria against which critics measure fidelity to text – even across a single reviewer's appraisals of the director's work.

To add to the confusion Mitchell's approach has elicited, Susannah Clapp (2006a) found that *The Seagull* "gets into the dark corners of one of Chekhov's trickiest plays". Indeed, critics of her productions have each, at their own peculiar points, turned from praising her ability to illuminate text to begin criticising her overbearing readings. In this respect, the *Financial Times* reviewer Alastair Macaulay was ahead of the crowd. Having steadily praised her previous work, things changed when he reviewed her

continuously, just as her depression mirrors his own struggles; in marrying Medvedenko (the man she initially rejects), we see her repeating the mistake of Polina, who settled for Shamrayev despite her love of Dorn; and after becoming a mother, Masha's neglect for her child in Act 4 suggests her as a prototype Arkadina.

production of *The Oresteia* – so celebrated by Billington – and he accused Mitchell of taking “unpardonable [...] structural liberties” (1999) with Aeschylus’s play.⁶¹ Throughout the 2000s, he pronounced her work to be riddled with “Euro clichés” (2004; 2005; 2006a), deeming the director to regard the text as an “inconvenient encumbrance” (2004).

It took some critics far longer to share Macaulay’s suspicions about Mitchell’s attitude towards authors, but when they did a word entered into circulation that expressed their strong distaste for her treatment of text. In Benedict’s (2006) review of *The Seagull* he referred to Mitchell and Crimp as “arrogant” in their handling of Chekhov, criticising a director and adapter partnership that De Jongh similarly judged to be “remarkable for arrogance and perversity” (2006). The following year, Mitchell’s *Women of Troy* – in which she took an approach almost identical to her work on *Iphigenia at Aulis* in 2004 – elicited criticism that seemed to be a delayed reaction to her handling of Chekhov; whilst John Peter called it “director’s theatre at its most ignorant and arrogant” (2007), Charles Spencer (2007) described Mitchell’s “overweening arrogance” as a “speciality of mostly female directors” who attract a “devoted coterie of admirers”. Spencer also seemed to use his review to react to Nicholas Hytner’s interview comments in *The Times*, earlier in the year, in which he described a correlation between hostile critiques of female directors and the “dead white men” who “take up too many of the critics’ seats’ in British theatre” (Hoyle 2007). We see, then, that these reviews participate in larger narratives that are building over time, refuting Billington’s insistence, in his rebuttal of Hytner’s accusation, that critics “judge a production by the quality of what happens on stage” rather than the “prior reputation of the participants” (2007c). They also reveal *The Seagull* as a turning point in terms of Mitchell’s British reception; despite the personal eccentricities of individual reviewers, a dominant critical narrative about Mitchell’s work was gaining traction, and it related to her treatment of Chekhov.

⁶¹ His reaction may well reflect the fact that Macaulay read Classics (Latin and Greek) at Cambridge – as does his quibble about the cast’s pronunciations of Greek names Pylades, Zeus, Orestes and Aegisthus (Macaulay 1999).

In addressing what critics found so off-putting in Mitchell's and Crimp's version of *The Seagull*, it is helpful to track the ways in which textual adaptation evolved over the course of her Chekhov productions. In her *Three Sisters*, Mitchell laboured to help the actors uncover references (to art, to authors, to places) in the nineteenth-century text and make them meaningful through research. Small adjustments crept into Nicholas Wright's version of the play, commissioned for Mitchell's production, intended to make those references resonate not just for the actors but also for a twenty-first century audience. As Angus Wright (Kulygin) recalled:

Mitchell has been less reverent than many directors are with Chekhov and has worked to find the parallels between Chekhov's time and ours. If many of us now have no concept of who Lermontov is and why Solyony compares himself to the poet, then change it to Byron so the reference has a similar effect on the listener as a reference to Lermontov would have done in Moscow in 1901. (McDevitt 2003: 7)

These minor alterations became wholesale changes in Martin Crimp's version of *The Seagull*, commissioned for Mitchell's 2006 production. In a two-pronged approach, Mitchell and Crimp worked on a linguistic and formal translation of Chekhov's play, designed to render Chekhov's original more directly accessible to the perceptual experience of twenty-first century spectators. In an article published by *The Guardian* immediately prior to the production's opening, Mitchell wrote:

Martin compared the process to renovating old paintings. Some people like looking at old paintings through the layers of grime that build up over the years and others like cleaning the grime away to reveal the colours afresh. Some like the freshness and others feel that it loses the authenticity of the work. We wanted to see the text renovated. (Mitchell 2006)

Jane Edwardes (2006), in her review of the production, responded by arguing: “There is a difference between scraping the varnish away from a classic and tearing holes in the canvas.” With so much of Chekhov’s text slashed away, she asserted that Mitchell’s production was hard to understand “for anyone who has not seen the play before”.

Paradoxically, Martin Crimp had seen translation as a way of solving “problems of comprehension” (Cracknell 2006: 7) that stood between Chekhov’s original and modern spectators. He contributed an essay to the educational workpack for *The Seagull* that explained his approach, using as a case study a line of Konstantin’s dialogue in which he describes his horrified reaction to 1895 mainstream theatre: “I run and run, like Maupassant ran from the Eiffel tower, which weighed on his brain with its vulgarity” (Cracknell 2006: 7).

Crimp anticipated that this line would raise a series of questions for those watching the play today, including: “Who is Maupassant? Why is the Eiffel Tower (if we know what it is) vulgar? [...] What does ‘weighed on his brain’ mean? And what exactly is ‘vulgarity?’” (ibid: 7). This list reads like those formulated by Mitchell’s actors during her Facts and Questions exercise on the text (see Mitchell 2009: 143), showing the adapter to be engaged in the same analytical process that Mitchell developed for rehearsal. In addressing these questions, Crimp had discovered that Maupassant – widely read at this time in Russia – had thought of the recently built tourist destination (the Eiffel Tower) as “a piece of commercial and technological trash that threatened the highbrow position of traditional arts (novels, paintings etc.)” (Cracknell 2006: 7). Crimp’s solution:

I’ve taken another iconic art-work from round 1900 – Munch’s painting *The Scream* – and used this to give an image – instant I hope – of Konstantin’s reaction to contemporary plays: “When I see people churn out the same theatrical clichés time after time after time after time, then I want to scream and

scream – like the man in Munch’s picture.” And hopefully by using the word ‘scream’ the audience immediately ‘sees’ which picture Konstantin is talking about. (ibid: 7-8)

Crimp found the issue of ‘vulgarity’ to be more problematic: “Who is more vulgar – the contestants on *Big Brother*, or the members of the Royal Family? The work of The National Theatre, or episodes of *Little Britain* or *The Office*? The arguments are difficult, but the solution is simple. The word has been cut” (ibid: 8). Significantly, in sidestepping decisions that he feels are too heavily predicated on subjective valuation, Crimp begins making his own subjective choices about what audiences can and can’t handle. There are other questions raised by such an approach – not least the assumptions underpinning the referents that Crimp swaps-in to take the place of those he deems to have lost their currency. Rather than an entirely new version that makes use of wholly contemporary references, he selects analogous historical examples based on expectations about what contemporary educated audiences will recognise from the art history canon. That many of these exchanges went unremarked in reviews perhaps testifies to their success, but the creative choices being brought to bear on Crimp’s version of Chekov’s play pose a serious challenge in terms of the limits of renovation, and what constitutes re-writing.

A more noticeably controversial aspect of Mitchell and Crimp’s approach proved to be their attempt to stabilise the play’s literary form. Many reviewers discussed the consequences of the director and adapter’s decision to “reduc[e] the exposition, and cut the asides and soliloquies” (Crimp cited in Chekhov 2006 [1896]: 67). Most reviewers did so with reference to what Billington argued was the “bungled” delivery of the play’s last line, where Dorn announced Konstantin’s suicide to the whole room, rather than in an aside with Trigorin. In Billington’s eyes, making this choice “reduce[d] one of drama’s great anti-climactic endings to melodrama” (2006).⁶²

⁶² See also Macaulay (2006a); De Jongh (2006); Cavendish (2006).

Again, Mitchell and Crimp's pursuit of their stated intentions yielded the opposite effect. Crimp described how their rule about insisting on every character hearing everything spoken onstage was designed to "strip away some of the apparatus of nineteenth-century drama" (Chekhov 2006 [1896]: 67). Whereas Billington mourned the revival of melodrama, Mitchell was actually attempting to remove aspects of Chekhov's naturalism that she found weren't naturalistic enough.

As we saw earlier, her painstaking analysis of the Main Event around which to focus each act of *Three Sisters* met resistance from what she called "expositional" sections (Shevtsova 2006: 16). By the time she directed *The Seagull*, Mitchell had come to understand such moments as indicative of an author sliding between literary forms. In collaboration with Crimp she began to clear away the "expositional" dialogue, which she regarded as novelistic, in order to more clearly reveal Chekhov's dramatic structure.

A consequence of this approach is that Mitchell began to see Chekhov himself as standing in the way of his own drama; as she told Shevtsova, "He is difficult because he is not a playwright" (ibid: 15), a statement that she qualified by explaining:

He is not always formally accurate. He starts writing a play and it slides into a novel and then back into a play. I can show you the lines which I think should go because of that in many of his plays. It might just be my taste, but I really find some of them a bit crude for theatre, especially when people say things that they would only think. So I think it's a good idea to have your scissors to hand when you're about to direct Chekhov. (ibid: 15-16)

The formal instability that she perceives in Chekhov's writing thus stems from her own developing definition of realism in terms of a phenomenology of perception. When his writing contradicts her understanding of the external reality of first person perception (when "characters say things that they would only think"), it is no longer "drama" in her eyes and needs to be cut. This thrusts to the fore the question of the director's own

subjectivity, and the extent to which it shapes strategies of reading which, in the steps of her process outlined thus far, we have seen described in wholly objective terms. Indeed, the director herself points towards this issue when she concedes, “It might just be my taste.” Mitchell’s interest in the accurate representation of human behaviour – which was, to a large extent, influenced by her engagement with Chekhov’s multivalent textuality and the mode of phenomenological perception that she had discovered it supports – began to heavily determine her rules about literary form. It is thus the case that the lessons that Mitchell learnt from Chekhov began to work against Chekhov’s own writing in Mitchell’s process.

This potentially clarifies why some find her approach so antagonising. Mitchell’s language – in rehearsals and in interviews – is distinguished by a forensic analytical vocabulary that prioritises clarity, accuracy and objectivity. She positions the text as both the generator of the interpretation (through its Idea Structure) and the mediator when dealing with challenges from an actor, using it to defend her own decisions:

When affinities get in the way of the actor I tend to draw them back to the writer. The writer becomes the mediator. I say: ‘It is very interesting that you, as the actor, have this thought about your character, but what does the playwright mean when he or she says x’ and I refer them to a bit of the text. I could say: ‘I know you might find it distressing, but, unfortunately you are going to have to absorb what is there in the play’ (Shevtsova 2009: 196).

The director endorses a similar notion of the text’s power when she argues its ability to disclose significances beyond the ken of its writer. In identifying the ideas that writers were focusing on (consciously or unconsciously) as they wrote, Mitchell has devised systems designed to reveal the play’s secrets. A detail in *The Director’s Craft*, relating to Crimp’s own play, *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), is illuminating in this respect:

I listed the images that appeared in the play and counted the number of times each one was used. Unexpectedly, the most recurrent image was children. When I asked Martin what he thought the most common image in the play was, he confidently said war, then ashtrays and, finally, aeroplanes. (2009: 46)

Mitchell also writes that once she presented her analytical findings to the writer, they triggered his own recognition. Confronted with this evidence Crimp realised that – unconsciously – he had “put the experience of children at the heart of the play” (ibid: 46). There is a strong sense here that Mitchell conceives of her work as penetrating to the authentic core of the text, unveiling robust insights defensible against the vagaries of subjective readings – and perhaps helping us understand why some shout so loudly that she has got it wrong. Through isolating and counting the “recurrent” and “common” images in Crimp’s play, Mitchell makes the hermeneutical move of establishing the experience at the play’s heart, seemingly without acknowledging that questions of methodology are themselves questions of hermeneutics. Does finding the frequency of a word in a text better reveal its thematic concerns than other strategies of reading? Many of the procedures to which Mitchell submits a text are circumscribed by perimeters that heavily shape their outcomes – for instance, her insistence that Main Events must involve every character.

We might, however, approach the issue from another angle and explore what Mitchell’s analytical strategies expose – namely, that all reading is an act of perception in which a subjectively grounded gaze begins to organise, and thus interpret, certain aspects of the text. Whereas most British theatre critics believe that texts encode a specific style of production, Mitchell develops new reading machines that point to the multiplicity of ways in which critical approaches might generate insights about a text, revealing surprising angles on familiar dramas. The tight – almost algorithmic – constraints of Mitchell’s procedures unfold rich interpretive possibilities for director and actors, and open up new perspectives for audiences. Mitchell is right to claim that her

reading of the text is *rhetorically* defensible, as it is built on an impressive foundation of textual evidence. As in any literary criticism, the incontrovertible *truth*-value of an interpretation is never what is at stake. Many critics can approach the same material from different points of view, gather different forms of evidence using different methodologies, and construct different, equally defensible arguments. However uncomfortable one might feel about Mitchell's claims to an objective understanding of a writer's conscious and unconscious vision, what is important to register is that her conclusions about a text are always *robust*. Far from deserving the "auteur" label that critics stereotypically use to describe work they see at best as tangentially related to a script, Mitchell's productions emerge out of studied and rigorous engagement with their textual source, and in so doing they expose the fallacy at the heart of a critical culture which mistakes conventions that have accrued around canonical works for the texts themselves. De Jongh's (2006) disgruntled rejection of Mitchell's "itching urge to interfere" with Chekhov is guilty of the same critical myopia that asserts there is one, stable, authoritative Chekhov, and that denies that all acts of reading are, in fact, acts of interpretation.

However, this chapter concludes by looking at *The Seagull* and seeing how, using an extensive foundation of textual evidence as its support, Mitchell's steps of interpretation became bolder in ways other than guiding the audience through a complex dramaturgy. Indeed, this later work on Chekhov reveals a director in crisis – all the things that she is doing lead towards abandoning a Chekhovian frame. The building intensity of these productions pushed the conventional understanding of the director-text relationship to breaking point. The next section examines how Mitchell sought to make Idea Structures literally resonate in the bodies of spectators, and explores the limits of the Chekhovian path for Mitchell. Once she met these limits, Live Cinema offered her the only means of escape.

Repositioning the Spectator

As Crimp's translation practice has illustrated, Mitchell's *The Seagull* sought to move beyond situating the *actor* in a 360-degree world, immersing them in Chekhov's constellation, to situating the *spectator* in that constellation. Alongside Crimp's work on renovating the script, Mitchell pursued additional strategies for communicating Idea Structure using affective means, often circumnavigating the actor and making increasingly creative use of previously hidden rehearsal techniques.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Mitchell's early work on Chekhov explored the potential of offstage spaces as a tool for actor immersion. By the time she staged *The Seagull*, however, these spaces weren't merely restricted to the wings; Vicki Mortimer's warren-like design of corridors and windowed spaces, and Mitchell's careful rotation of the geography of the house between the acts, resulted in what Dan Rebellato described as "various layered interior spaces into which the audience's eye is voyeuristically drawn" (319). This often afforded audiences glimpses of "offstage" bodies – such as those engaged in tango-dancing, making their own entertainment after the interruption of Konstantin's play in Act 1 – that asserted for spectators as well as actors an ongoing reality behind every door and window.

Mitchell now began sharing her formally private rehearsal work in public. What started out as a tool for the scientific analysis of behaviour – investigating backstage rooms to explore how they influenced the actors' comportment as they entered and exited the stage – now served as a tool for artistic creation, justifiable as a literal exploration of the world of the play. As we will see in Chapter 3, when Mitchell found a metaphor for her perceptual process in filmmaking, she became increasingly inventive in terms of which elements of these "offstage" spaces she would share with spectators. Whereas her carefully worked-out geographies emerged initially from objectively reading the play for facts about location, Mitchell's increasing interest in subjective perspectives and feminist statements made her far more selective. When staging *Miss Julie* as Live Cinema, for instance, she let spectators follow Kristin in and out of the action scripted in

Strindberg's play. As we watched her hearing Jean and Julie's dialogue as noises-off through the floorboards of her bedroom, the actors playing Strindberg's scene were located in *sound-proof* booths rather than offstage booths, their voices modulated by technology to give audiences a clearer impression of Kristen's subjective perception. Although Mitchell would go on to wholly sacrifice actor immersion in the pursuit of realising character subjectivity – and thus prioritise audience perception – such experiments still lay in the future in 2006. What *The Seagull* demonstrates is a director still trying to balance her desire to keep the actor grounded in a reality with her desire to shape that reality in a way that draws the spectator further into the play and its psyches.

In Act 1 of *The Seagull*, Mitchell intensified what Chekhov shows to be pressurised preparations by altering the angle from which her audience viewed the action. Having rotated Chekhov's staging by 180 degrees, Mitchell's Lyttelton audience was positioned as if submerged in the lake that acts as the backdrop to Konstantin's play. Subsequently, as Konstantin's onstage audience assembled behind an improvised curtain strung up across the back of the house, Mitchell's spectators were privy to the final backstage preparations. Nina and Yakov frantically tested a microphone that they soon discovered wasn't plugged in properly. Yakov trailed the cable back into the house while Nina flapped, occasionally literally as she swatted away mosquitos. Konstantin engaged in a charged exchange with his mother, thrusting his head through the curtain and shouting upstage, and the strong sense of time pressure generated behaviour that suggested this would be anything but a calm performance. By giving her audience a different perspective on Act 1, Mitchell allowed them to see the rigorously worked out offstage activity (literally backstage activity, in this case) which, in other productions, had been privy only to the actors involved.

After the cancellation of Konstantin's play in Act 1, its star Nina eventually re-emerges to address her audience. In Mitchell's staging, just after Arkadina had introduced Nina to Trigorin for the first time, a huge gust of wind rolled across the auditorium and buffeted the characters against the back of the house. So forceful was the

gust that it flung the characters some distance; the maid dropped a tray that scattered glasses on the floor; and, as reviewer Kate Bassett (2006) registered, “with perhaps a hint of poltergeist-like violence, several chairs [were] sent flying”. As opposed to *Three Sisters*, in which atmospheric incursions happened discretely through a window at the back of the set, this gale tracked a path across the auditorium – partly thanks to Mitchell’s decision to rotate Chekhov’s geography by 180 degrees. Similarly, Gareth Fry’s sound design wrapped around the auditorium, surrounding the audience in the reality it evoked and transforming the Lyttelton into an atmospheric echo chamber. When Chekhov’s characters heard music wafting across the lake from an estate on the other side, the sound came from the back of the stalls, so that the spectators (although never acknowledged by the actors) were firmly situated in the geography of Chekhov’s 360-degree reality.

Strikingly, however, the magnitude of this event, and its relatively unremarked passing, seriously subverted any naturalist logic. Only Dorn made a comment on this disturbance, and that concerned the broken glass on the floor – the rest of the company stood up, dusted off, and continued with the scene. This strange event clarifies on learning that Mitchell, as she states in her book on directing, “decided to direct *The Seagull* as symbolism” (2009: 50), a move inspired by the “premonitory disturbance” of a gust of wind that Chekhov prescribes in Act Four, where Konstantin opens a window and talks about feeling uneasy, and Arkadina complains about the draft:

In a realistic production this would be a slight and unnoticeable moment, but in a symbolist production it is an event that you must present strongly so that all the characters and, in turn, the audience experience the strange, premonitory disturbance that Chekhov intends. If you had to name the event, you could describe it as baldly as: ‘The writer lets us know that Konstantin will die soon.’

(50)

Mitchell's decision to stage *The Seagull* as symbolism is intimately connected with her desire to use all of the sensory tools at her directorial disposal to communicate directly with her spectator. Working on audience perception rather than actor immersion, Mitchell's priority began to shift.

Indeed, the realist fundamentalism that had driven the director's early work on Chekhov was being displaced by something far more abstract. Mitchell, with her designer Vicki Mortimer, decided to accompany Crimp's textual renovation with a visual one. The production's *mise-en-scène* consisted of an assortment of objects and clothing spanning the 1890s to the early twentieth century "such as wind-up record players, microphones, plastic raincoats and high heels" (Mitchell 2006). The rationale behind these anachronisms, in Mitchell's words, was to "refresh the visual landscape in the same way that we had renovated the verbal world" (ibid).

Intriguingly, Mitchell had begun developing this approach in *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2004), which included sequences where the chorus began engaging in dance routines with invisible partners every time a lighting cue was triggered that looked like the fourth wall was lifting, bathing the stage in white light from a source somewhere in front of house. As scratched records played 1940s dance tunes, the women practiced their choreography – often stumbling on chairs that were strewn across the space. Mitchell had described these sequences as a variation in the production's formal language that "stimulated and surprised the audience and kept them more engaged in the ideas of the production" (Shevtsova 2006: 13). However, *The Seagull's* design anachronisms represented a new direction in Mitchell's work. Even in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Mitchell had insisted, "We could not bring the action any further forwards than 1940 because the arguments made by a woman (Clytemnestra) to save a child include womanly virtues, like good housekeeping, which are an anathema now. The 1940s was the latest we could set it" (Shevtsova 2009: 194). Her attempt to "refresh the visual landscape" in order to communicate the atmosphere and the ideas of *The Seagull* more arrestingly, whilst consistent with a symbolist aesthetic, resulted in some confusion amongst critics

conditioned to expect a certain fidelity to historical materialism in Mitchell's realist stagings. As Martin Kettle (2006) lamented:

If there is one thing that today's audience might be expected to know about Russia in those years [1920s/30s] it is that there was a Soviet revolution going on. But not even Crimp has the audacity to insinuate verbal or visual references to kulaks, collective farms and five-year plans. So we are left with an updating that floats free of history, and is thus fundamentally misleading. In the ostensible cause of fully connecting with a contemporary audience, Crimp disconnects from reality – and from Chekhov.

Mitchell had encountered the limits of the Chekhovian frame. Her desire to shift the spectator's perspective between each of the acts, and her impulse to refresh the visual landscape as an aesthetic means of engaging them in Idea Structure found an accomplice in visual montage techniques that were possible using Live Cinema. Cutting between cameras would allow Mitchell to constantly shift audience perspective without having to move her audience whilst still working within the proscenium arch. It would also allow her much more effectively to refresh the visual language – as we shall see in Chapter 3, video (and sound) offered the means of combining abstract and realist approaches in a way that made sense to spectators.

In retrospect, it is clear to see that the logical way for the impulses behind *The Seagull* to resolve involved shifting medium. Channelling them through Chekhov only caused confusion and anger on the part of critics who couldn't comprehend the choices she was making. By introducing technology onto her stage, Mitchell found an experimental frame within which she could fragment audio/visual elements and massively change the form in which the ideas were communicated.

It is possible to perceive lines of continuity here that stretch back all the way to 2003 and Mitchell's *Three Sisters*. The lengthy scene change between Acts 1 and 2 of

Mitchell's production was masked by a safety curtain, onto which a projector threw a large square of white light. As this looming block of light slowly "developed" into a recognisable image, Mitchell's audiences came to perceive a photograph forming, a sepia-tinged group portrait of the assembled guests captured by Fedotik during Irina's birthday party in Act 1 that the audience had watched being taken onstage some minutes earlier. The spectral figures slowly accrued depth and shade as the focus of the composition sharpened, showing a moment of time infused with the auratic intensity of a lengthy exposure. The image signified as a historical artefact that recorded life in a distant period, but it was simultaneously imbued with the familiarity of the characters whose lives we had just been witnessing, in a relationship built up over the preceding thirty minutes of Act 1.

Mitchell repeated the effect during the transition between Acts 3 and 4. Behind the safety curtain, Vicki Mortimer's bedroom set was being deconstructed and replaced with Act 4's courtyard design. Meanwhile, a projector threw another white blur onto the curtain's surface, out of which the face of a young woman gradually appeared. The image Mitchell's audience saw "develop" this time was the solo portrait of Irina taken back in Act 1, a potent reminder of the youthful idealism of this youngest sister at her birthday party five years earlier. Photography is a powerful motif that resurfaces throughout Mitchell's work, as we shall see in Chapter 3, and as a technology it materialises the intertwining of subjective perception with the world that both shapes it, and that it shapes. These large-scale projections, however, prepared the ground for Mitchell's forthcoming explorations with technology in another sense. In these moments, Mitchell used the closed fourth wall as a projection surface through which to communicate directly with her audience, presenting them with scaled up phenomenal objects (the photographs we watched being captured in Act 1) that resonated as clearly and emotionally for spectators as the various phenomenal objects (like Natasha's cups) that populated Mitchell's stage. Rather than for the actors, these large-scale projected photographs were treats for an audience, allowing them to have an emotional response

to objects analogous with the resonance that Natasha's cups accrued for the characters. The symbolic and emotional resonance of Irina's solo portrait, sutured together in spectators' minds with its capture over two hours earlier (five years ago in dramatic time), was both clear and moving, a powerful act of communication between director and audience that transcended the footlights. We can view Mitchell's slow motion sequences or the symbolic moments she inserted (the supernatural breaking of the vase, for instance) in the same way, each standing as one in a series of carefully distributed moments that kept the audience engaged in the drama. Instead of merely watching a company of actors fully immersed in a world behind a fourth wall, these moments spilled over into the auditorium, transmitting affect between stage and spectator. By making her work more "difficult" through her Live Cinema innovations, Mitchell made it easier for communication across the footlights to occur.

2.

WEAPONISING THE CLASSICS: THOMAS OSTERMEIER & IBSEN

It's a scandal that we have to play [Ibsen] again today.

—Thomas Ostermeier (Salino & Hanimann 2013)

Introduction

Thomas Ostermeier's twenty-first century productions of Ibsen's plays, as noted by Peter M. Boenisch, "put him on the international map" (2010a: 339). Since 2002, he has used six of Ibsen's twelve "social plays" to push the boundaries of a contemporary politically committed theatre that resonates globally as well as locally.⁶³ Situating personal breakdown in sleek interiors redolent of glossy lifestyle magazines, Ostermeier's *Nora* (2002) and *Hedda Gabler* (2005) have been perceived by audiences and critics in the mostly Western urban centres to which they have toured as urgent interrogations of the proliferating pressures faced by an anxious middle class under neoliberal capitalism.

In contrast to the rapturous international reception of Ostermeier's work on Ibsen, the director himself has raised concerns regarding the quality of Ibsen's writing. Conceding his inferiority to Chekhov, Ostermeier has become an increasingly vocal critic of Ibsen's dramaturgical skill and has revealed his frustration with the descending quality of the diminishing pool of plays left available to him to stage; in 2013 he characterised Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* as essentially "propaganda", alleging that its

⁶³ Although easily received as international works, they also signify at the level of local detail. The fact that Katharina Schüttler's Hedda spoke in a strongly accented Berlin dialect, for instance, aligned the character with a hip comic cynicism in Berlin and elicited initial laughs of recognition from Schaubühne audiences, but, of course, this escapes international crowds.

appeal to Hitler is evidence of the play's proto-fascist sentiment (La Biennale di Venezia Channel 2014).⁶⁴ Unlike his interest in exploring the rich possibilities and dramaturgical subtleties of Shakespeare (discussed in Chapter 4), Ostermeier's use of Ibsen relates to the timeliness of these plays in a twenty-first century context. As we will see, from the director's point of view it is this very timeliness that renders the necessity of staging them scandalous.

Additionally, Ostermeier has stressed the extent to which, since the 1970s, Ibsen's plays have been commandeered by explorers of the subtle, mysterious and emotional dimensions of the inner. As Theoharis C. Theoharis argued in 1999, a backlash against the dramatist's status as a socially progressive force had set in by mid-century; consequently, "Ibsen's continuance of the romantic concentration on subjectivity was held to be the playwright's primary, if not exclusive, subject" (1999: 69). The young Ostermeier saw the consequences of this backlash materialised in the German Regietheater where directors, in his words, sought to stage "the landscape of the soul," stressing the "psychoanalytical" dimensions of plays that they perceived as a "pre-dramatisation" of Freud (Woodall 2010: 370).⁶⁵

This chapter begins by asking why a twenty-first century, politically engaged, director returned to a form of bourgeois realism that, particularly in the German context, had found itself aligned with a psychological mood, an elitist realm of institutional art, and an uncritical historical realist praxis. In part, Ostermeier's project can be seen – like Mitchell's work on Chekhov – as an attempt to recover the originating spirit of a playwright whose radical singularity had been obscured by the generalising

⁶⁴ Ostermeier: "I sometimes have the feeling [Ibsen's] not the best writer, and that makes him so suitable for us to rewrite"; "We are going down in the quality of the plays" (La Biennale di Venezia Channel 2014). See also Ostermeier: "Chekhov is probably greater than Ibsen, but I find it hard to imagine his vaguely aristocratic and full of trouble Russians in the world today" (Pascaud 2012).

⁶⁵ Marvin Carlson argues that "Zadek became interested in studying the psychological complexities of the characters in these plays, while Stein created a sensation in the mid 1980s by his 'rediscovery' of Stanislavskian realism, producing a series of Chekhov revivals which attempted to be exact recreations of those fountainheads of modern realistic production, the original stagings of the Moscow Art Theatre" (2003: 4). Carlson also describes how Zadek's 2000 production of *Rosmersholm* emphasized the "rich and subtle interpretations" of his actors Angela Winkler and Gert Voss "rather than any striking directorial concept" (2003: 5).

force of late twentieth-century naturalist conventions.⁶⁶ Significantly, Ostermeier's practical use of Ibsen – rejecting the bias of subtle and soulful stagings locked in the historical past – has paralleled scholarly moves to resuscitate bourgeois realism as a political tool by which, in Kim Solga's phrase, "the mainstream theatre might intervene in discourses of contemporary neoliberalism" (2013). Pursuing this line of enquiry, Part I will investigate how Ostermeier used *Nora* and *Hedda Gabler* to launch a sociologically inflected realism that restored the political bite of these foundational naturalist texts.

Ostermeier's use of these texts to envision a new form of realism entered into dialogue with their recent legacy, mobilising expectations that have accrued around Ibsen's work in order to subvert them. And if staging Ibsen has prompted Ostermeier to create work responsive to the history of its raw material, this has, in turn, prompted him to interrogate his own complicated relationship with the ideals and institutions of the bourgeoisie. Part II of this chapter takes up these generative contradictions and argues that Ostermeier's dramaturgy has actually become increasingly consonant with Ibsen's: they are both artists who turned inwards in order to talk outwards. In 2012, using *Ein Volksfeind* (*An Enemy of the People*) as a critical lens through which to examine himself and his earlier work on Ibsen, Ostermeier moved beyond a merely critical theatre to espouse a theatre of self-exploration in which contradictions are scrutinised and antagonism is embraced. Just as Ibsen stated that "Writing means summoning oneself / To court and playing the judge's part" (1965: 187), Ostermeier came to understand, in this later work, the necessity of evaluating his own experience.⁶⁷ What threatened to be a myopic and limiting gesture, however, has resulted in highly resonant work that speaks to contemporary anxieties: with one eye on untangling his own cultural and political contradictions, Ostermeier has found reflected in himself the failures of a generation.

⁶⁶ Dan Rebellato has described contemporary stage naturalism in these terms, writing that its "particular and peculiar stylistic conventions have been naturalized", rendering it "a kind of dead metaphor" (2009: 26).

⁶⁷ Ibsen wrote this comment in a letter to Ludwig Passarge, June 16, 1880.

PART I

Rehabilitating Realism

What Ostermeier has enacted in practice, the scholar Toril Moi was exploring in theory, seeking to repair realism's reputation through an investigation of Ibsen. Her revisionist attempt to link his drama with the birth of modernism excavated Ibsen's "radical, political, committed" realism (2004: 230) out of the rubble of late twentieth-century appraisals of his art, and simultaneously refuted realism's status as the "abjected other" and "necessary precursor" (ibid: 2) of modernism. Her argument countered prevailing post-war attitudes towards these plays as "dead historical monuments" (ibid: 18), their formal qualities characterised by critics from Adorno to Raymond Williams (even when they acknowledged their canonical importance) as "unexciting, old-fashioned and boring" (ibid: 18).⁶⁸ Moi linked these dismissals to a retrospective and disproportionate promotion of "formal innovation" by the post-war architects of a modernist historiography that recast realism as a "negative aesthetic term" (2004: 19). Indeed, Ostermeier's comparisons between Ibsen and Sarah Kane might be viewed as attempts to vanquish the obfuscating tendency of historical distance, and the vagaries of canon formation, which had drained Ibsen's social plays of their original antagonism.⁶⁹ Both Moi and Ostermeier found naturalist conventions to be smothering, seeking instead to resuscitate Ibsen's far more radical realism.

⁶⁸ Although hyperbolic, Moi's assertion is supported with a wide range of evidence. She cites Adorno's statement, "No sooner is a name like Ibsen's mentioned, than he and his themes are condemned as old fashioned" (1945); Erich Auerbach's study, *Mimesis* (1946), in which he claimed that "we can now better see how calculated and contrived [Ibsen's] art often is"; Eric Bentley's 1950 observation, "Today the mention of the Norwegian's name elicits, in many quarters, a certain feeling of tedium"; and Raymond Williams's claim, in his 1969 book *Drama: From Ibsen to Brecht*, that although Ibsen's liberal tragedy is still powerful, "It belongs to history now" (all cited in Moi 2004: 18).

⁶⁹ Ostermeier: "All my Ibsen work is very much inspired by the writing of Sarah Kane. I kind of saw these plays through the glasses of Sarah" (The Big Swap 2013). The programme for his *Hedda Gabler* issued at the Schaubühne featured an extract from Kane's play *4.48 Psychosis* in which an unnamed speaker lists emotional and physical symptoms.

Moi relates Ibsen's radicalism to his negation of aesthetic idealism.⁷⁰ She shows, for instance, how *Hedda Gabler* unmasks the lunacy of idealism's claims to truth and beauty. Although she reads Hedda as "inflamed by the idea that it is better to die than to live without honour," Moi sees the play itself as proving that, "in 1890, an action that Hedda still thinks of as an expression of noble, heroic idealism, comes across as utterly baffling, both to Judge Brack and to the audience" (ibid: 81). For both Moi and Ostermeier, Ibsen's import stems from his status as a social commentator, his work launching an assault on social mores in order to pose fundamental questions regarding how we live. Turning his critical gaze on idealism, Ibsen exposes its ability to alienate his characters (and his contemporaries) from the values idealism claims to espouse – the trinity of "truth, beauty and goodness" (ibid: 88). Moi's articulation of the dialectical tension between reality and idealism that energises Ibsen's work shines light on his appeal for Ostermeier; and yet, an assault on aesthetic idealism itself doesn't immediately seem relevant to the social pressures that his productions seek to diagnose and critique.

However, Kim Solga's recent work on realism helps us connect Moi's insights much more clearly to Ostermeier's practice. Claiming "'Bourgeois realism' [...] at its point of origin, was rigorously political as well as stylistically innovative," Solga (2013) argues that it emerged out of "an economic-political moment very similar to our own, and one that experienced very similar social stresses". She is attentive to ideals that distort and destroy character in Ibsen's plays, but sees those ideals as heavily influenced by the role of economics and industrialised capitalism (both then and now) in subject formation: "The modernist realists speak to a moment in which individual and familial relationships to work, to wages, to welfare and to class and gender difference were shifting dramatically and not for the benefit of all" (ibid). Solga's larger project involves rehabilitating a realist praxis that has become "tainted by accusations that [it is]

⁷⁰ Moi uses "idealism" as "a synonym for 'idealist aesthetics' or 'aesthetic idealism', understood as the belief that the task of art (poetry, writing, literature, music) is to uplift us, to point the way to the Ideal (2004: 4).

stultified, apolitical, sexist and racist, masking rather than revealing the very hard work on which [its] illusions are predicated” (ibid). In this she is inspired by Moi’s identification of political commitment in Ibsen’s metatheatrical dimensions, which positions him as a precursor to the modernism of Brecht rather than part of the dramatic tradition that Brecht’s Epic Theatre opposed.⁷¹ Both stress that the conventional use of Ibsen’s drama to buttress a contemporary theatre of naturalist illusion has been stultifying. Yet as Ostermeier’s productions force audiences to see and feel, the bourgeois realism that Ibsen’s plays document can support a theatre in which “naturalising” forces are exposed and alienation is brought to light – particularly when the labour of “performance” itself is foregrounded. In his Schaubühne production, Nora’s frantic tarantella literally drew blood. She threw herself against the apartment’s sharp edges, and then collapsed in a heap after being buffeted back and forth in the sonic reverberations of a CD that kept skipping.

Ostermeier’s practice bears out what these critics have theorised. More than this, his resistance to postdramatic theory’s disparaging accounts of “dramatic theatre” matches their refusal to dismiss realism as an uncritical form predicated on illusion.⁷² As we will see, Ostermeier’s many defences of realism in the press, and his calls for new forms of realism relevant to the twenty-first century, match Moi’s assertion that there is no such thing as a “monolithic” realism (Moi 2004: 3; 25; 31; 67).⁷³ Whereas Hans-Thies Lehmann announced that “dramatic theatre was the formation of illusion” (2006 [1999]: 22), the variants of realism to which Ostermeier refers contest this

⁷¹ Moi: “I draw attention to Ibsen’s constant metatheatrical, or rather meta-aesthetic self-consciousness which, in the eyes of idealists, completely ruined the effect of many of his most promising works, but which today emerges as evidence of his immense artistic hunger for something new” (2004: 8).

⁷² See also Rebellato (2009). His scrutiny of the assumption, concomitant with the rise of Performance Studies, that “‘conventional’ theatre is obvious and uncomplicated” (2009: 17) resists Lehmann’s claim that postdramatic theatre shatters the dramatic theatre’s illusionistic spell (see Lehmann 2006: 22). Rebellato investigates metaphor as a way of figuring the complexities of ostensibly “straightforward” theatrical representation, claiming that the “hermeneutics of ‘dramatic theatre’ [is] every bit as complex, paradoxical and supple as that of performance and the postdramatic” (2009: 27).

⁷³ See Ostermeier (1999; 2009; 2013) and Treusch-Dieter (2003), which are liberally quoted from in the proceeding discussion.

oversimplification, existing in many forms (psychological, emotional, Capitalist, sociological) and as an aspect of diverse arts. To a substantial degree, the importance of both Thomas Ostermeier and Katie Mitchell lies in their insistence on the vitality and relevance of realist theatrical approaches today, shaping their own particular forms of realism with distinct political efficacies.

Ibsen has become central to Ostermeier's invention of a neo-realism that "might intervene in discourses of contemporary neoliberalism" (Solga 2013). His initial use of these plays focused on exposing the forces that distort and determine behaviour, drawing on social and economic theory (in contrast to Mitchell's phenomenological and cognitive approach). Ostermeier's methodology thus generated a kind of realism grounded in different notions of identity and agency than Mitchell's; as we shall see, whereas her theatre *explored consciousness*, his early work on Ibsen was driven by a desire to *expose "false consciousness"*. Responding to moments in which Ibsen shows characters driven to perform at dangerous intensities, Ostermeier crafted explosive visceral moments of corporeal forcefulness that punctured the external naturalism of his productions and directly exposed states of suffering and alienation. In depicting the physical and emotional costs of the devastating "performances" prompted by competing claims on the subject, Ostermeier opened up an enquiry into twenty-first century ways of living.

These productions recoil in horror at the reactionary momentum that sees bourgeois sensibilities resurfacing in contemporary culture. Their devastating impact becomes central to Ostermeier's critique.⁷⁴ His Nora and Hedda both turned on their personal stereo systems to blast out "Rockstar" by N.E.R.D at climactic moments.⁷⁵ Although in Hedda's case it figured a gesture of rebellion (replacing her piano playing in the play's closing moments), the music also served a choral function, its significance all but lost on the characters themselves. Music frequently illustrates Ostermeier's pursuit of

⁷⁴ Following this logic, Hinrich Schmidt-Henkel's German translation of *Hedda*, adapted by Marius von Mayenburg, excised all reference to Eilert having vine leaves in his hair. Ostermeier replaced idealism with neoliberal pressures.

⁷⁵ From the album *In search of...* (2001).

social commentary over psychological subtlety: “Rockstar’s” refrain, “Fuckin’ Posers”, resounded as an outraged admonition of the bourgeois posturing enacted by the neoliberal yuppies Ostermeier’s actors had made out of Ibsen’s characters – although, as will become clear, in invoking those sensibilities his theatre is itself unable to evade its own critique. In these productions, empty bourgeois ideals and the symptomology of late capitalism create a perfect storm, leading to the onstage expressions of personal breakdown through which Ostermeier fashions his own form of resistance. Nonetheless, it is also true that Ostermeier avoids didacticism. His is a theatre in which dialectics are explored and contradictions exposed, challenging audiences to consider what might arise in their place rather than insisting on solutions. By exploring Ostermeier’s work on *Nora* and *Hedda Gabler*, this chapter seeks to outline how – in his hands – Ibsen’s plays become *instruments for knowledge* rather than vehicles for propaganda.⁷⁶ Through Ibsen, Ostermeier generates a non-didactic political theatre that encourages spectators to pose their own questions of the “reality” in which they live.

***Nora* (2002) / *Hedda Gabler* (2005)**

In these initial productions, both selected for the Theatertreffen, Ostermeier established his practice of using Ibsen to examine modern couples and modern relationships. Confronted by this updating, critics across Europe, North America, and Australia consistently admired the close proximity of Ostermeier’s contemporary adaptations to Ibsen’s scripts. The Ibsen scholar Joan Templeton, reviewing *Hedda Gabler* at the Ibsen Festival in Oslo and describing the director as “minimalist in his approach to text” but “extravagance itself with the set,” judged it to be “a production that remains mostly faithful to the original even as it updates the action to ‘now’” (2007: 292). Jan Pappelbaum’s sleek yet sterile glass, concrete and wood designs dominated most notices.

⁷⁶ Ostermeier used this phrase to describe Hamlet’s play-within-the-play *The Mousetrap*, describing it “not as an instrument to straighten out reality, but as an instrument of knowledge without which Hamlet would have remained incapable of action” (2009: 2). As we will see in Part II, Ostermeier became conscious of using Ibsen in these terms following his work on Shakespeare (begun in 2008).

Nora's set was savoured by the *New York Times* reviewer Charles Isherwood (2004) as a "mouthwatering modernist apartment," whilst Kate Kellaway (2008), reviewing *Hedda* in London, claimed that this set "could not be more stunning: it is a drama in itself". Such comments suggest the strong visual and aesthetic identity of these productions; indeed they enjoy a notoriety based on architectural statements rather than their textual departures. Ostermeier's *Hedda*, for instance, used a new translation that made reference to laptops rather than manuscripts, mobile phones, and the Tesmans' (absent) cleaner rather than their maid (who was cut entirely); nevertheless, in Australia, Chris Boyd (2011) characterised these updates as "seamless and unexceptionable". Daniel Mufson, who saw the production at Berlin's Theatertreffen, concluded that Ostermeier's "accomplishment lies in reinterpreting *Hedda* in a thoroughly modern manner while still seeming to respect the play"; he went so far as to suggest that the next English-language translation "should use this one as a model" (2007: 63).⁷⁷

This consensus on the legibility of Ostermeier's commitment to Ibsen's writing even characterised the reception of his radical treatment of *Nora*. Despite the fact that this production concluded with Torvald floating as a corpse in the home aquarium, and his assassin, Nora, paralysed rather than energised – in the production's final moments, after slamming the door, she slumped down the exterior wall of the apartment next to the doorstep – Isherwood (2004) was startled by the production's "overriding fidelity to the trusty mechanics of Ibsen's drama". Rachel Halliburton (2004) found that locating the production in a "gadget-gorged playground for the rich" – digital cameras, a hi-fi system and laptops littered the Helmers' steadfastly chic living space – reinvested the force of Ibsen's original text. For her, this punchy update "rescue[d] this play from the museum and launch[e] it once more as a bombshell".

⁷⁷ These reviews span almost a decade and three continents, illustrating the longevity and extraordinary reach of Ostermeier's Ibsen productions. Helland writes that, as of 31 December 2013, the Schaubühne Ibsens "have been performed 644 times, to an estimated audience of 462,000 people" (2015: 12). He has also plotted the tour destinations onto a world map, which reveals "the impressive trajectories of these productions, but it is equally a map of global centres of power and prestige. Not only do these [productions] travel; they travel to important places and prominent festivals" (ibid: 15).

Not only do such reviews evoke the extraordinary allure of Pappelbaum's aesthetic in the cosmopolitan centres that have received these productions, they also endorse material extravagance as a generative context for Ostermeier's adaptations – sometimes unwittingly. Pappelbaum's training as an architect in Weimar and the influence of the Bauhaus is evident in his design of architectural stage environments that combine functionality with aesthetic impact. They provide sculptural opportunities for director and actors and send signals to spectators alert to the ways in which design can encode ideology.⁷⁸ The Mies van der Rohe chairs Pappelbaum placed in Nora and Helmer's sunken living room invoked the cultural, ethical and social ideals of a Bauhaus aesthetic that encapsulated in its modular mass-produced creations utopian and socialist proposals for living. Having been co-opted by a capitalist catalogue-living aesthetic, they also seemed to substantiate what Melissa Trimingham describes, in her book on the Bauhaus, as “a vision of the future hijacked by ‘modernism’ in architecture, which reduced it to the simplified functionalism of the ‘international style’” (2011: 1). Trimingham's description of an architectural vision that, untethered from its social and political moorings, lost contact with its energising utopian ideals, is reflected in the non-ironic delight Pappelbaum's Bauhaus-esque designs have elicited across the world. As “mouthwatering” statements that enchant “international style” festival audiences, the shallow succour offered by these apartments to Ostermeier's/Ibsen's doomed characters is easily overlooked. Yet the Helmers' Mies van der Rohe chairs told the story of a stage haunted by failed utopias – showing the director's responsiveness to the history that has intervened between Ibsen's then and our now. Drained of their once revolutionary content, these chairs were inert material remainders of the idealism that gave them form; as such, they resonated as objects that, like Ibsen's plays in Moi's diagnosis (2004: 89), seemed uneasily “poised between utopia and critique”.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ See Anja Dürrschmidt's preface in Pappelbaum (2006) for a comprehensive biography of the designer, and an overview of his approach to design.

⁷⁹ As a reference for the apartment in which he set *Hedda Gabler*, Pappelbaum used Farnsworth House (1951) – a structure designed by Mies van der Rohe as a country retreat for private client

However, the material excess of capitalist culture in the design of *Nora* and the expensive minimalist modernism of *Hedda Gabler's* apartment foregrounded genuine details in Ibsen's texts that helped Ostermeier confront urgent contemporary issues. Reviewing his *Hedda Gabler*, Ian Shuttleworth (2008) perceived the same congruence Solga sees between the originating economic-political moment of bourgeois realism and today's western world: "None of this updating is gratuitously modish; rather, it serves to emphasise how the matters at the core of the plot [...] have not significantly changed in the 120 years since Ibsen wrote his play." Ostermeier articulates that congruence explicitly. He defines his interest in these plays as stemming from Ibsen's analysis of "social devastation in a new historical situation" (Salino & Hanimann 2013), investigating strains placed on emotional life by the late nineteenth-century rise of the bourgeoisie. For him, this directly correlates with the emotional consequences of financial deregulation that, post Reagan and Thatcher, led neoliberal capitalism to flourish, and ensured the subordination of democratic politics to the economy.⁸⁰

This makes sense of the rich seam of imagery and incident surrounding material culture in Ibsen. *Hedda* depicts a woman who has danced herself tired before marrying Tesman, relinquishing ideals and passions in response to a deeper desire for possession, position, and social and financial security. Tesman promises her that they will enter society and keep open house – along with (in Ibsen's text) a liveried footman and a bay mare. Similarly, Nora's profligacy is immediately evident in her lavish tip to the porter, her appetite for spending, and her request for money as a Christmas present (alongside her monthly allowance from Torvald) – which, as is soon apparent, is also driven by her need to clear the substantial debt she accrued in her attempt to secure her husband's

Dr. Edith Farnsworth on the banks of the Fox River in Plano, Illinois (see Pappelbaum 2006: 138). Its floating terrace and continuous glass walls evoked the extreme distillation of modernist architecture. However, the owner and the architect fought over the inclusion of a wardrobe. The house's practicality was questionable, and Farnsworth filed a lawsuit finding the house to be unliveable in, feeling uncomfortably on display.

⁸⁰ See Ostermeier: "The theories of Chicago school economists like Milton Friedman still govern the political thinking of the likes of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the architects of financial deregulation. Note that the financial crisis is not fundamentally financial, it is political, for politicians gave power to economic interests" (Lefebvre 2013). See also Ostermeier in Woodall (2010: 364); Ostermeier in Craven (2012).

health and wellbeing, and safeguard the comfort of their bourgeois existence. In Ibsen, a degree of social advancement breeds chronic insecurity.

In *Nora*, Ostermeier quickly established that every character oriented their lives according to money, in line with what he perceives as the “huge economic pressure” that Ibsen makes “the motor” of these social plays (2010a: 69). Anne Tismer’s high-pitched Nora choreographed with dexterous intensity the unpacking of various Christmas gifts she’d purchased for the children, having entered laden with boutique shopping bags. A few minutes into the production, after Torvald expressed how pleasant it felt finally to have a secure job and some surplus cash, Nora beckoned him up to the middle of their cherry-wood floating staircase and, surveying the sunken living room, rattled off changes she’d like to make to the furnishings with an open lifestyle magazine in her hand; Ostermeier exhibited this couple as nouveau-riche enthusiasts, building a materialistic life based on the promise of Torvald’s new position. When her childhood friend Kristine arrived, Nora sat on a white leather footstall as she explained that her husband had become the director of the equity bank: eyes tightly shut, she pressed her palms into the leather and rocked back and forth. Explaining how beautiful life becomes when one has money, she traced her forefinger back and forth along the edge of the leather footstool, then laid back, extending her arms and legs in orgiastic pleasure; finance was her fetish. But then the mood of eroticism was punctured by Nora’s sudden and startling shift in tone: “Nein, nicht nur genug, ich meine richtig viel Geld! So richtig viel Geld! Kristine, ich meine richtig viel Geld!” (*No, not just ‘enough’ money, I mean lots of money. Really a lot of money, Kristine, I mean lots and lots of money*).⁸¹ Snarling through clenched, bared teeth, she advanced on her knees towards a clearly spooked Kristine – arms outstretched, hands distorted like claws, temporarily embodying the monster this money could make of her. Throughout the play, Nora’s cool would collapse into shrieks and agitated outbursts, as her almost hyperventilating attempts to enact her happy life eluded her control. Her

⁸¹ This was her response to Kristine’s line, “Ja, wenn man genug Geld hat, das muss schön sein” (*Yes, when one has enough money, that must be wonderful*).

exhaustion and fear were exposed in periodic flashes of a suppressed emotional turmoil; maintaining this performative mask was taking its toll.

Turning to Ibsen in the early 2000s, Ostermeier was struck not only by the centrality of economic talk in the plays (showing himself to be prescient – these productions, in retrospect, seemed to anticipate the psychic wounds inflicted by 2007s “credit crunch” across Europe and America), but also by the way in which Ibsen’s drama exposes the hurt caused by ideals now being reclaimed by a sector of contemporary German society known as *Die Neue Mitte* (the New Middle). In an essay on Ibsen’s drama, Ostermeier analysed this new kind of German bourgeoisie, characterising it as a sector of society (often female) unable to ground an identity in work and wages, and instead seeking “meaning in life in values which were most important in the golden age of bourgeois society, like family values, marriage, Christian religion, having children and being a good mother to them” (2010a: 69). The private realm becomes, in Ostermeier’s reading, a reactionary refuge from the draining and wearing flexibility demanded by contemporary neoliberalism and the precarity on which it thrives. His comments illustrate the ease with which the director moves between a dramaturgical analysis of Ibsen and a sociological analysis of the contemporary West. He described the “big issue” at the heart of his productions of both of these texts as the exposure of “how you can build your own prison, and how you think you make the right decisions in your life by going for material security [...] And then all of a sudden you find yourself trapped” (Cosic 2011). Although Peter M. Boenisch argued that, in these works, “the contemporary context [...] became the main text” (2010a: 347), Ostermeier was responding to what he saw as the uncanny congruence between Ibsen’s dramas and contemporary reality: “[*Hedda*] was the story of a woman living at the end of the 19th century, but the scandal is that it is still happening today in Germany” (Cosic 2012).

In Ostermeier’s *Nora* technology became a way of dramatizing these issues. It began with a defining sequence in which Torvald arrived home before Nora. He toyed around with a digital camera, taking selfies with the live-in *au pair* Monika. Then he

opened the door to his children's bedroom and greeted his three young offspring, picking up his daughter and placing her on top of a glass coffee table. He instructed her to twirl and hold her arms out by her sides as he took pictures of her. At the end of Act 1, they would be projected onto the revolving set as Nora and Torvald were left alone on their balcony. In the dim light, and overlaid with the projections of Torvald's earlier family snapshots, he instructed his wife to pose and fall backwards repeatedly as his camera flash seared the air in a mirroring of the opening sequence. The point, in Ostermeier's own words, was to establish "that Torvald wants a wife like a baby, like a doll" (2006: 236). Interpersonal relationships were founded on status and prestige, rather than feeling and compassion. Identities were overlaid on one another, manipulated and blurred.

Technology interposed between human beings. Content with his snapshots, Torvald frequently appeared too busy to engage in actual play with his children, or conversation with his wife. Towards the end of Act 1, Nora tentatively tried to open a discussion about Krogstad while Torvald sat devoted to his laptop, frantically answering emails; at the top of Act 2 she tried once more, only to have their conversation interrupted by his mobile phone repeatedly ringing. He kept answering these calls, speaking about urgent bank business via an in-ear headset, until Nora resorted to picking up the house phone and dialling his mobile herself in order to get his attention. He put his other call on hold and, hearing Nora's voice, turned to face her. She unbuttoned her blouse and stroked her breast through her bra. Having aroused his interest, she made him follow her up the staircase, wiggling provocatively. Once at the top, she rescinded her offer of intercourse and made her strongest attempt yet to persuade him to re-hire Krogstad, to which Torvald angrily reacted by going back downstairs, grabbing his briefcase, rifling through work documents, and refusing her request.

Throughout the production Nora used her body to appeal to men in ways that dominant cultural imagery had taught her brought success. As well as either allowing or inviting every male character to grope her at various moments, she replaced Ibsen's tarantella with a provocative MTV-style dance that involved licking a lightsaber and

gyrating to “Rockstar” by N.E.R.D. It evoked archetypal male fantasies of strongly sexualised females, mirrored in the fancy dress costume (Lara Croft) that Nora would wear in Act 3. At one point in the dance she stood in the huge waist-high fishtank that banked the upstage wall of their sunken living room. Drenched through, her clothing clinging to her, she whipped water across the apartment as she flailed her arms and flipped her hair. When the CD started skipping so did Nora’s body, pushed to its limits until the actor collapsed in exhaustion. As well as tensions resulting from the penetration of economic thought into all aspects of life, this sequence revealed how Ostermeier’s production, in his words, “talks of different images and pictures we get from the media, which are always providing us with different ideas of how we should be” (2006: 237).

Nora thus found performative means of anatomizing the various pressures distorting personality in contemporary society. Boenisch has referred to Ostermeier’s practice as a kind of “applied cultural studies” (2010a: 349), and Ostermeier has certainly made explicit his wide reading in social and cultural theory. At least twice he has referenced the sociologist Richard Sennett, drawing an explicit link between *The Corrosion of Character* and his own work on Ibsen in 2010.⁸² Sennett’s book, based on interviews with workers as diverse as IBM executives, bakers, and a bartender turned advertising director, examines the devastating implications for identity and personal relationships of modern capitalism’s premium on flexibility. Alluding to such texts, Ostermeier’s public statements have given cues to scholars and spectators as to how to interpret his theatre; as Boenisch concluded, *Nora*’s drama had become, in Ostermeier’s hands, “the drama of the ultimate flexibility and adaptability required from neo-liberal, globalized ‘dolls’” (2010a: 348).

Ostermeier has stressed the influence of Ibsen on his developing form of neo-realism. In his essay “Reading and Staging Ibsen”, he discussed the playwright’s dramaturgical strategy of lengthy preparatory exposition as a fantastic opportunity for directors who are “obsessed with the sociological observation of human behaviour in

⁸² See Jörder (1999); Ostermeier (2010a: 71).

daily life” (2010a: 72). The first halves of Ibsen’s social plays, he explained, offer “a laboratory without drama and this can be very exciting for directors like me,” interested in observing “the effects of modern times” in the “appearances of daily life” (2010a: 72-73). Indeed these plays allowed Ostermeier to respond to the challenge that he himself had issued for new kind of realism in a 1999 talk titled “Das Theater im Zeitalter seiner Beschleunigung” (*Theatre in an age of Acceleration*). Ten years later, his lecture “Erkenntnisse über die Wirklichkeit des menschlichen Miteinanders” (*Knowledge about the reality of human interaction*) – subtitled “Plädoyer für ein realistisches Theater” (*Plea for a Realistic Theatre*) – cited Brecht in order to clarify the distinction between naturalism and realism that Ostermeier had discovered through his work on Ibsen. In “The Threepenny Lawsuit” (1932), Brecht had used the example of a picture of workers outside the Krupp factory to attack an external form of naturalism that he aligned with photography: “The simple ‘reproduction of reality’ says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about those institutions” (Brecht, cited in Ostermeier 2009: 1); Brecht sought, in contrast, to develop a realism with the ability to disclose the relationships and power structures that constitute life *in* the factory. For Ostermeier, this was corroboration of his own definition of realism as that which can “capture the essence of human and economic interaction” (2009: 2).

A short segment of *Hedda Gabler* makes particularly clear the ways in which Ostermeier’s theatre calibrated physical expressivity and interpersonal encounters to register the forces that shape behaviour. Informed by the director’s East Berlin training and his interest in Meyerhold, it also demonstrates how these productions probed beneath the surface of the superficial reproduction of reality that Brecht linked with photography. When Tesman asks Hedda if she can bring herself to call his Aunt by the affectionate nickname “Juju”, she replies that she will try to call her “Aunt”, but that is as far as she can go. At the Schaubühne, Tesman pressed the point. He stressed that Hedda belonged to his family now. She cut him off with the exclamation, “Ich kann das nicht” (*I can’t do it*), and after this outburst, Katharina Schüttler’s Hedda stood and stared

defiantly at Tesman (Lars Eidingen), who sat perched on the end of their L-Shaped sofa with his laptop open. She collapsed onto the sofa, finding its proportions all wrong, her legs bent at the knees and her torso almost lying flat because of its enormous depth. She fidgeted in discomfort, tugging a bolster cushion out from behind her and hitting her head against the sofa's low back. Grunting and sighing, her eyes shut and her fists clenched, this Hedda seemed in the grip of anger and agitation. Tesman watched her closely, and after a tense silence asked "Sag mal, ist irgendwas?" (*Say, is something wrong?*). She looked at him from the corners of her eyes for some time, breathing heavily, then abruptly broke her freeze to rise to a standing position, pounding the cushions to propel herself upwards. They locked gazes, as if poised for a confrontation. After a moment, Hedda looked around the room and told him that she didn't think the furniture fitted in with the apartment.⁸³ Her eyes continued to wander as if she were searching for more significant reasons to explain her discomfort, but she found nothing else and grunted to affirm that she'd disclosed what the matter was. Tesman rose and approached her tenderly, assuring her that they could buy new furniture as soon as his first paycheck arrived.⁸⁴ He sat down on the sofa behind her and pulled her down onto his knees as if she were a ventriloquist's dummy, stroking her hair. Then he manoeuvred her rigid body in between his legs and wrapped his arms across her chest. Hedda sat limp and expressionless as Tesman, behind her, breathed deeply and sighed, contented. She then tilted her head down to kiss his wrist, a lingering kiss that abruptly turned into a sharp bite. He yelped, releasing Hedda as she sprung up and crossed the room, just in time to spy through a glass wall Mrs Elvstead approaching the apartment.

This choreographic sequence established a physical context for a dialogue that, although streamlined, was a direct translation of Ibsen's text.⁸⁵ It illustrates how the

⁸³ "Ich finde die Möbel passen hier nicht rein" (*I don't think the furniture fits in here*).

⁸⁴ "Sobald ich mein erstes Gehalt habe, kaufen wir was Neues" (*As soon as I get my first paycheck we can buy new things*).

⁸⁵ Cf. William Archer & Edmund Gosse: **Tesman**: Is there anything the matter with you, Hedda? Eh? **Hedda**: I'm only looking at my old piano. It doesn't go at all well with all the other things. **Tesman**: The first time I draw my salary, we'll see about exchanging it. (Ibsen 1950: 386)

pared-back textual adaptation became the skeleton for richly detailed patterns of physical and social interaction. Hedda here was fidgety and uncomfortable, displacing her agitation into the furniture whose upholstery she had to rearrange. Cameron Woodhead (2011) noted that “every gesture, each line, seethes with the paradox of unconscious calculation,” suggesting, as did this sequence, that Hedda’s physical actions showed her reactive in ways she neither understood nor controlled, but that directed her towards violent action. Indeed, Ostermeier’s interest in Hedda stemmed from the perception, “What a terrible terrorist she is in this bourgeois family life” (Cosic 2011):

Her fear of economic failure, [...] her weapons that get ever sharper in the fight to survive. We’re so agitated, stressed and afraid. Now that the middle class is threatened, we’re trying new things, new strategies of survival and exclusion. Un-solidarity, that’s the slogan; total concentration on the career. (Ostermeier: 2005b)

Ostermeier’s staging affirmed his conviction – as established in his manifesto “Die Zukunft des Theaters” (*The Future of Theatre*) – that “the installation of economic thought down to the smallest capillaries of society is visible in the physical and mental deformities of the modern man” (2013: 9). It correlates with Brecht’s insistence on a form of realism that disclosed hidden power structures in order to render them open to scrutiny. As Kate Kellaway (2008) wrote, “This Hedda is more obviously sick than any I have seen before.” Ostermeier understands Ibsen as a dramatist who recognises that our view of the world can be re-discovered as symptoms in our bodies. The body reveals more than the character’s words, and what it discloses is often beyond the character’s own comprehension.

When interviewed alongside the French director Stéphan Braunschweig, Ostermeier clarified how his outlook on Ibsen diverted from Braunschweig’s appreciation of the plays’ philosophical, existential and mysterious dimensions. He

stressed that Ibsen's focus on the breakdown of personal relationships divulges their grounding in social and political reality:

When the overloaded relationships in marriage and private life break today, the conflicts are only played out privately between the partners. The family is a trap of unconquered social conflicts. Ibsen saw this coming, and it is a scandal that we have to play him again today. (Salino & Hanimann 2013)

What he uses Ibsen to reveal, and thus resist, is the privatisation of the kinds of stress, depression and violence that, while documented in the plays, are also symptomatic of today's economic-political order, neoliberalism. Following contemporary sociological discourse, Ostermeier seeks to map the ways in which social problems are experienced individually rather than collectively. His theatre presents what Ulrich Beck in *Risk Society* ironically termed the "biographical solution[s] of systemic contradictions" (1992: 137) on which modern capitalism depends.

The rotating "podium" stage developed by Jan Pappelbaum for Ostermeier's first Ibsen productions became a crucial tool in a realism capable of disclosing insights that lay beyond the characters' grasp.⁸⁶ These three-dimensional apartments set on top of a revolve not only increased the three-dimensionality of the action, they simultaneously transformed the social world into an object to be analysed from different, changing, perspectives.⁸⁷ The podium, in line with stage naturalism, presents a dramatic world for a form of documentary inspection, but its ability to revolve introduces a fourth dimension (time) that allowed director and designer to constantly control the viewpoint from which the audience watched the action.

⁸⁶ See Pappelbaum on his development of "the freestanding podium in an empty space," which he found, in *Nora*, to be "more interesting when it rotates. That increases the three-dimensionality and is greatly attractive in terms of presenting the body itself and also the actors" (Pappelbaum 2006: 21-2).

⁸⁷ Helland counts that, in *Hedda*, "the stage revolves at fifteen points during the performance; sometimes several full 360 degree turns at a time" (2015: 17).

Hedda Gabler advanced this technique with a huge angled mirror suspended above the set, so that there was no position onstage without presence. Even when actors/characters were hidden by the concrete wall that bisected the stage, the audience still saw them in reflection overhead. Details were never visually isolated but always shown in relation to one another, meaning that the spectators always experienced the figures in context, expanding their view from the private into the social. Whereas, as we shall see in Chapter 3, Katie Mitchell's Live Cinema techniques gave her audience extreme close-ups of highly focalised action – granting access to the private and the internal – Ostermeier's podium productions asserted a relational and contextual view of the whole space, especially effective when areas were rendered invisible or inaccessible to individual characters. For instance, an elaborately choreographed sequence at the end of *Hedda Gabler* made use of the revolve to engineer multiple near-discoveries of Hedda's dead body to hilarious, and tragic, effect: behind the dividing wall, Hedda had shot herself through the head, blood splattering the post-it notes (Eilert's research) arranged behind her on the wall, her body slumped at the wall's base, her right-leg bent horribly out of shape. Over two and a half minutes, the world continued spinning as "God Only Knows" by The Beach Boys was pumped through the theatre's sound system – a choice explored in more detail in Part II.⁸⁸ As a kind of catastrophic replay of the climax of Richard Curtis' *Love Actually* (released Christmas 2003), where the song underscored emotional reunions at the arrivals gate of an airport, its use here registered a yearning for personal and emotional commitment fatally lacking from this stage and its atomized characters. Despite only a few yards and a concrete wall separating them from Hedda's corpse, nobody bothered to investigate the gunshot.

Finding the Subject in Suffering

Ostermeier's sociologically inflected form of realism, and its ties to Brecht, ostensibly seem founded on a Marxist structural outlook in which the economy determines an

⁸⁸ From the album *Pet Sounds* (1966).

illusory sense of agency and subjectivity. In using Ibsen to develop a theatre functioning “as a sociological laboratory that examines the behaviour of human beings” (Ostermeier 2010a: 71) – and in contrast to Mitchell’s use of Chekhov to investigate consciousness – these productions materialised, and therefore exposed, what Marxian theorists have termed “false consciousness”. Introduced by Georg Lukács in 1920 and taken up by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s, the term extended Marx’s own analysis of the ways in which ideology and class-consciousness relate to concrete social conditions. Louis Althusser (1971) popularised and developed “false consciousness”, arguing that structural forces (ideological, institutional, economic) that shape the behaviour of the proletariat are obfuscated by an imaginary sense of agency and selfhood. He introduced “interpellation” as a term to describe the very process by which ideology – which he defined as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (2014 [1971]: 181) – calls subjects into being.⁸⁹ Rooted in Marxist critique, Althusser’s ideas reflected those of a host of 1970s poststructuralist thinkers who sought to unmask subjectivity as an illusory discursive construct, and to uncover the ideological and political power structures that give rise to such an illusion. Indeed, poststructuralism (and postmodernism) proved incredibly hostile towards subjectivity. Deconstructing ideology and meta-narratives, its major theorists unmasked autonomy, coherence and the self-directing human subject as illusory concepts, which – even worse – served to tighten the grip of repressive hegemonic ideology. Such philosophical ideas dominated the late twentieth century. Judith Butler, for example, took up what she called Foucault’s emphasis on the “discursive production of the subject” (1997: 5) leading her to proclaim, “The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics” (1990: 6). Moving beyond subjectivity, her feminist critique of repression edged

⁸⁹ Althusser: “Every ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete [individuals as] subjects (such as you and me)” (2014 [1971]: 188).

perniciously close to becoming its accomplice. As Ostermeier states, shattering our sense of the autonomy of the subject “suits those in power very well” (1999: 76).⁹⁰

Here we see that understanding Ostermeier’s realism in purely post-Marxian terms raises significant interpretative problems. Although his theatre seems to stage “interpellation” (ideology’s ability to author a pseudo-subjectivity), Ostermeier has consistently attacked a poststructuralist logic that unveils the void or absence at the core of an illusory subjectivity. As early as 1999 he connected such a philosophical outlook with what he saw as a barren contemporary cultural aesthetic in German theatre that he termed Capitalist Realism. Comparing it to Socialist Realism in the GDR, Ostermeier described it as a postmodern theatre aesthetic allowed to flourish because it affirms a corrupt political system. Focused on individuals who are “no longer determined nor able to act,” this aesthetic, he argued:

Wants to realise people as totally flexible beings who, without history, can forget their past and their ideals overnight, who do not drag their personal biography as a load through the working day. This aesthetic leaves us hopelessly behind in the fragmentation of individuality: art subjects the subject in the face of the world’s powers. (Jörder 1999)⁹¹

Although some will likely quibble with this reading of postmodern theatre as an accessory to a totalising neoliberal hegemony, understanding Ostermeier’s thinking helps us position his theatre. In the same interview, his dramaturg Jens Hillje attempted to historicise postmodern approaches to subjectivity in order to reveal them as expressions

⁹⁰ See also: “Capitalism has, I think, no problem if people consider themselves as lame objects without identity and if this image of people is reflected on the stage. [...] But this also leads to a feeling of powerlessness, not to say depression” (Ostermeier 2009).

⁹¹ Ostermeier was speaking during an interview with *Die Zeit* (22 April) titled “Sehnsucht nach Welt”, in which the new artistic directorate of the Schaubühne (Ostermeier and Sascha Waltz, together with dramaturgs Jens Hillje and Jochen Sandig) answered questions on their plans.

of a past cultural moment. Such an outlook, Hillje argued, had been surpassed by a newly responsive realist aesthetic with a profound historical consciousness:

What postmodernism once was, namely a legitimate questioning of totalitarian forms of modern culture which made great gains through the loss of the subject and the fragmentation of world experiences, has today become a luxury problem of the 1980s. The kind of thinking that claimed the end of history was an attitude desperately perpetuated until deep into the 1990s. We live now, especially since 1989, in a world in which history has returned again – together with an extreme uncertainty for the future. (Jörder 1999)

Ostermeier's return to history via Ibsen's plays three years later thus becomes a recognisably political gesture; far from exercises in postmodern deconstruction, these productions revisited the nineteenth century in order to continue the investigation into what it means to construct a psychology of experience under early capitalism.

These quotations reveal the intensity of the incoming Schaubühne artistic team's rejection of a Capitalist Realist praxis that placed a premium on spectatorial reflexivity: another form of privatisation, in which the spectator is left to find biographical solutions to the stage's contradictions. Believing that it drained art of social relevance and its political impetus, Ostermeier registered in 1999 his frustration with an "Anything Goes" aesthetic, where "each reading and interpretation is allowed, and which constantly points out that the kernel of a self-determined subjective individual actually no longer exists, which is why everything can be deconstructed" (Burckhardt, Merschmeier & Wille 1999: 76).

Ostermeier has remained somewhat vague on specific examples of theatre practice that "merely repeat the non-narrative formal games of performance art for the hundredth time" (Boenisch & Ostermeier 2015: 18); although, in 1998 he did refer to the "once revolutionary" work of Christoph Marthaler, Frank Castorf and Christoph

Schlingensiefel as having “degenerated into the consumer culture” (Raabe 1998), from which we might infer that the Berlin Volksbühne produces work of the ilk Ostermeier criticises. He has, however, made frequent reference to postdramatic theatre in terms synonymous with Capitalist Realism.⁹² Calling it a “dominant, even dogmatic aesthetic horizon”, he challenged the ethics of a theory that found the world to be “so complex and such an impenetrable rhizome” that it “doesn’t even attempt to name and tell stories about the big, urgent problems in our society” (Boenisch & Ostermeier 2015: 18). Ostermeier is responding to what Hans-Thies Lehmann, the architect of postdrama, described as a “de-dramatised reality” in which “real issues are only decided in power blocs, not by protagonists who in reality are interchangeable” (2006 [1999]: 182). In the face of this new reality, drama – with its “action of a causal logic” and “inherent attribution of events to the decisions of individuals” (ibid: 181) – is found by Lehman to be inadequate. Instead, he embraces a politics of *perception* that moves to its centre “the mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of images” (ibid: 186).

Although Toril Moi never mentions Lehmann’s paradigm, her attempt to connect Ibsen to the birth of modernism helps us clarify the stakes involved in Ostermeier’s renunciation of the postdramatic. As explored earlier, Moi locates Ibsen’s modernism in his investigation of the dialectic between idealism and reality. Arguing that poststructuralist thinkers triggered “a plethora of more or less sophisticated theories of the ‘politics of form’” based on “the gesture of negation” (2004: 103), she raises concerns about the uncanny likeness between late twentieth-century philosophical trends and the very idealism Ibsen was seeking to denounce. Revealing her scepticism about “astute critics” who turn the “refusal of communication or commodification” into “a powerful political statement” (ibid: 103), Moi aligns such an attitude with idealism’s

⁹² See also: Ostermeier (2009: 2); Florin & Meidal (2012); “The Big Swap” (2013); and Ostermeier (2013: 7), where he qualifies that his criticisms do not apply to all representatives of postdrama, citing Rimini Protokoll as an example of a company whose documentary-style practice “is guaranteed to be more enlightening than the majority of what we see in normal City Theatres”.

portrayal of the artist as “seer” – turning the artist, “now perceived as a labourer of negativity, into a bearer of purity or authenticity in a corrupted world” (ibid: 103).

Strikingly, Ostermeier has spoken in identical terms about the dangers of a postdramatic politics of perception, grounded in representational refusal; describing artists who assert their independence from global complexities, creating avant-garde art outside of the institutions, he argues that “This very authenticity is exactly what today’s art market wants to buy” (Boenisch & Ostermeier 2014: 19). Not only, then, does acquiescing to (rather than resisting) the impossibility of political commitment in an overwhelmingly complex global situation suit “those in power very well” (1999: 76) – those who, incidentally, Ostermeier persists in seeing as individuals rather than “power blocs” – it also becomes highly sellable. So too, of course, is Ostermeier’s immensely popular international festival fodder, a point addressed in Part II of this chapter.

It emerges, then, that there are several factors determining Ostermeier’s return to Ibsen. Rather than recognising history to have “ended”, he sees that history is repeating itself. Rejecting postmodern and postdramatic approaches, his return to realism signals a highly politicised act, as does his return to drama written in and registering a time when capitalism was still an emerging phenomenon. Similarly, Ibsen’s use of idealism to expose the alienation of his protagonists from their reality supports Ostermeier’s attempt to expose the critical strategies of postdrama, which alienate spectators from their reality, and artists from any form of meaningful politics. In a series of publications over the last fifteen years, he has put forward his own vision for what he terms a “sociological kind of approach” (Craven 2012) to realism to counter the abstractions of a Capitalist Realist aesthetic (within which postdrama and postmodernism are subsumed).⁹³

In words evocative of Brecht, Ostermeier argued: “Realism is not the simple the picture of the world as it appears. It is a view on the world with an attitude that demands

⁹³ See also Woodall (2010: 374); Ostermeier (2010a: 71).

change” (1999: 5).⁹⁴ Indeed, in *Der Auftrag* (*The Mission*), published in the Schaubühne’s 2000 season brochure, Ostermeier and his team made an earnest pledge to re-claim theatre as a political instrument: “Theatre can be a place for society to gain consciousness, thus to be re-politicised” (Ostermeier et al. 2000). Consciousness thus emerges, in Ostermeier’s theatre, through the breakdown of “false consciousness”. Subjectivity asserts itself in suffering. Such a view corresponds with the Young British dramatists, like Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, whose plays brought Ostermeier considerable success in the late 1990s. For him, these dramas depicted characters who “feel and find themselves in injury and destruction” (1999: 8). Fighting “without any sense of the tragedy of their own destiny,” their “utopia is the moment of the true encounter” (1999: 7). Indeed, Boenisch aligns Ostermeier’s neo-realist strategy with the philosophy of the rentboy Gary in Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking*: “Only in suffering can we still feel and experience ourselves as individuals in a capitalist world” (2010a: 352). This knowledge formed the basis of Ostermeier’s refutation of postdramatic and postmodern deconstructions of subjectivity, and his assertion that “individuals suffer, even if the subject is only a construct and without a core. One feels oneself in pain” (1999: 5). Although economic forces may exert considerable strain on the lives of the characters depicted in his theatre, the director refuses to acquiesce to the notion that the structures that form identity are constructed around a void.

It is these glitches in the system of false consciousness that give Ostermeier’s productions their distinct quality, felt as moments of corporeal intensity by actor and spectator alike, and often accompanied by excoriating music and extreme kinaesthetic sequences. One such moment occurred at the mid-point of *Nora*, when Krogstad visited to discuss his precarious situation following Torvald’s promotion. Krogstad had already revealed that he had coercive means of securing Nora’s assistance; she had borrowed

⁹⁴ Cf. Brecht: “Realist means: laying bare society’s causal network / showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators / writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society” (1974 [1938]: 109).

480,000 kroner from him to help her look after her sick husband, and the bond had been guaranteed by her terminally ill father with a signature dated after his death – Nora’s forgery. Since Krogstad had been driven to similar crimes himself out of financial necessity, he now sought to salvage his reputation by using Nora’s own criminality as leverage.

After assuring Krogstad that she had tried in vain to persuade Torvald to reconsider, Nora asked him to think of her children. In Ostermeier’s version Krogstad (Kay Bartholomew Schultz) reacted instinctively by yelling “Habt ihr an meine gedacht?” (*Did you think of mine?*), at which Nora bared her teeth and stared menacingly at him before looking to the study door at the top of the staircase, where her husband was talking with Dr Rank. Her eyes urged Krogstad’s composure, imploring him not to let Torvald overhear their conversation. In the sequence that followed, however, the production renounced such naturalistic logic in favour of an intense, visceral encounter that registered the physical extremities to which both characters found themselves driven.

Krogstad took a letter out of his coat pocket, addressed to Torvald, that explained Nora’s forgery “so schonend wie möglich” (*as gently as possible*). He put the sealed envelope on top of a duffle bag that he had left on the set’s central walkway. They both paused for a moment in silence. Then Nora leapt across the stage flattening her body on top of the bag in an attempt to steal the letter, which Krogstad had snatched away just before she could get there. The apartment lights darkened, leaving it bathed in an ice blue wash. Menacing aural distortions flooded the theatre, and a guttural male voice spoke the words: “You never told me why / You never gave me a reason / I can kill / I’ll watch you die / Today, tomorrow / I can kill you / I don’t die”. This came from the soundtrack to the 1997 movie *Spawn*, a horror adaptation of a comic book by Todd McFarlane in which a soldier assassin is killed and resurrected as the leader of

Hell's army.⁹⁵ As this demonic music pulsed beneath them, Nora turned over onto her back and shouted: "Diesen Brief darf er nicht bekommen. Zerreiß ihn. Ich werde das Geld irgendwie beschaffen" (*My husband can't get that letter. Tear it up. I'll get the money somehow*). Krogstad stood over her, taunting her with the letter whilst she held her arms up to defend herself. He tucked the envelope away in his inside pocket to coincide with the lyric: "I'll watch you die".

Suddenly the music intensified, and Krogstad flipped Nora onto her front. He came down on top of her, rubbing himself against her. She managed to escape from under him, but he grabbed onto her bare leg as she pulled her body away. Turning her onto her back, he pinned her arms down and forced her legs apart. She took advantage of his proximity to bite him hard on the ear, following which he lurched backwards in pain. Nora kicked him across the room, then got down on her knees next to him and pounded him with her fists. Krogstad rose and seized her by the hair, pushing her down onto the central walkway and making as if to strike her hard on the head. He brought his right arm down, but hit the floor instead. The thudding music subsided, and Krogstad pulled away, crying, seemingly shocked by his own actions as he warbled "Entschuldigung Nora, aber ich sagte doch schon -" (*Sorry Nora, but I've told you already -*). Nora told him that she would extract money from Torvald – as much as he liked. He slowly and menacingly advanced on her, telling her that he didn't want her money, but instead must regain the position he had worked so hard to achieve. The music stopped, and Krogstad yelled at the top of his voice, in the direction of Torvald's study "In einem Jahr bin ich die rechte Hand des Direktors! Dann wird Nils Krogstad die Aktienbank leiten, nicht Torvald Helmer!" (*In one year I'll be the right hand of the Director. Then Nils Krogstad will steer the bank, not Torvald Helmer!*).

When Nora responded by saying that she had no fear anymore, Krogstad sat next to her on the stool, whispering menacingly, "Ein feines, verwöhntes Dämchen wie du [...] Unters Eis?" (*A delicate, spoilt dame like you? [...] Under the ice?*). As he talked, he

⁹⁵ *Spawn* (1997), dir. Mark A.Z. Dippé.

stroked her hair. She turned and stared at him. He put his hand on her breast. She leaned in as if to kiss him. At the last moment, she broke away, walked up the staircase and once more insisted that she wasn't scared of him any more. Krogstad picked up his bag and made to leave, ready to post the letter. A false exit. He returned to the middle of the living room. She stood on the staircase with one arm on the upper platform. Composed. Strong. No longer afraid.

Then Krogstad walked to the centre of the room and shouted up at her, "Haltung, Nora! Haltung!" (*Attention, Nora! Attention!*). He raised his arm, fist clenched. She flinched and screamed and saluted. Thrice more he shouted "Haltung!" (*Attention!*), and each time she responded with this reflex action. Krogstad left, and a new track, "Blood on the Motorway" by DJ Shadow, began playing as Nora stood, alone, staring into the distance.⁹⁶ As the lyrics, "You have not betrayed your ideals / your ideals betrayed you / what are you gonna do?" played over the theatre speakers, she lifted both hands to her temples and held them there in a gesture marked in the prompt script as "Kopfschmerz" (*Headache*). As the song continued, "Your eyes will not close, your tongue barely speaks", she dragged her hands down over her face and brought them to rest around her neck. The last words, "But I can still feel you", sounded out as she cupped her breasts, before breaking out of this moment of still suffering to resume the "performance" of Nora: a percussive beat kicked in and the stage revolved as, now assisted by the *au pair* Monika, she set the apartment straight and Ibsen's drama continued.

This violent, physical, and musical sequence punctured the external naturalism of the production to induce an affective response in Ostermeier's spectator. Such extreme corporeal intensity relates to his training in Meyerhold's Biomechanics, but this sequence raises an additional issue: although critiquing misogyny, Ostermeier's productions frequently show women being handled by men in violent and sexual ways.

⁹⁶ From the album *The Private Press* (2002).

Indeed, writing on *Hedda Gabler*, Frode Helland argued that “violence is gendered” in Ostermeier’s version:

All three men on stage covet [Hedda]: Løveborg finds her choice of husband ridiculous and tells her so, while making quite direct advances himself; Brack progresses from ‘subtle’ proposals for a *ménage à trois* to attempted rape. This modern liberated woman is considered as nothing but a legitimate object or target for men’s desire in her own home. [...] Little protection is to be found from the man who is supposed to take care of her. Tesman does not recognise or respect Hedda and it is not beyond him to manhandle her if ‘provoked’.
(Helland 2015: 26).

The sequence from *Nora* shows a female protagonist subjected to further intensities than those facing Hedda. Although Ostermeier’s public statements make it clear he in no way endorses the misogynistic elements of these scenes, there is a pattern of gendered violence in the dramatic worlds that he stages. Indeed, this extends into his work on Shakespeare, raising questions that will be investigated at greater length in Chapter 4.

The particular performative strategies used in the Krogstad/Nora sequence demonstrate how Ostermeier counters the psychoanalytical mood that had influenced Ibsen for decades: “I show the inner worlds of characters through sounds, light, space and the art of how they move in space, ‘And you’, I say to the actor, ‘you think, please, about yellow frogs, and not about having to manufacture an emotional condition’” (Treusch-Dieter 2003). As well as rejecting psychological modes of emotional realist performance, Ostermeier sacrifices the depiction of an illusionistic reality to create sequences that allude to contemporary intertexts (as we’ve already seen – Lara Croft, but also music from the Eurythmics, the Beach Boys). Indeed, *Nora* and *Hedda Gabler* were full of music and lyrics that functioned chorally and intertextually. Matching an ultra-contemporary *mise-en-scène*, these diagetic and non-diagetic aural intrusions forged

connections with popular culture, working with a range of other real-world references to establish a youthful, hip, and rebellious tone as well as offering additional textual perspectives on the action. In this respect, Ostermeier's inclusion of songs functions much like Mitchell's use of poetry in her Live Cinema work; both directors embrace additional texts from non-dramatic sources that resonate with their readings of the plays. The sound of Annie Lennox singing "You say why? Don't ask me why",⁹⁷ as the stage revolved and revealed Nora inert at the end realised musically what Ostermeier stated publically in 2005:

Why did this situation develop, why does Nora leave the home, or not leave it; I superimpose these things on today's society and direct the play while thinking of ways to make the questions come alive so that the audience will also ask why?
(Ostermeier 2005a)

From the first, Ostermeier had been very clear about telling his audiences how to interpret his sociological realism, and the reception has been highly sympathetic. Within and outside of Germany, these productions have brought Ostermeier accolades and considerable fame. Both *Nora* and *Hedda* were invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen (in 2003 and 2006 respectively), his *John Gabriel Borkmann* won the Grand Prix de la Critique in France (2009), and a host of international engagements and honours have cemented Ostermeier's position as an Establishment intellectual. The second part of this chapter reflects on these developments. Through an analysis of *Ein Volksfeind* (2012) and the new concerns Ostermeier used it to raise, it seeks to establish other ways of reading his work on Ibsen that, in retrospect, reach right back to its genesis in 2002.

Part II

When Revolutionaries Inherit Big Houses

⁹⁷ The Eurythmics, "Don't Ask Me Why". From the album *We Too Are One* (1989).

Hans-Thies Lehmann, interviewed by David Barnett in 2006, talked of German theatre's propensity for incorporating radical movements into its mainstream. With reference to the "great German theatre of the 1970s," epitomised for him by Peter Stein's regime at the Schaubühne, Lehmann argued that "young revolvers and revolutionaries" very quickly end up at the helm of "big houses", absorbed by Germany's cultural institutions (Barnett et al. 2006: 486).

Ostermeier's biography affirms Lehmann's thesis regarding this quick and common trajectory from margin to mainstream. His move from a "left of the left" (Pascaud 2012) activist in his early years in Berlin, distributing revolutionary literature in the newly accessible Eastern sector, to the Intendant of an institutional City Theatre on one of West Berlin's most affluent avenues (the Ku'Damm) is pronounced. Ostermeier was rewarded with the artistic directorship of the Schaubühne within four years of graduating from the directing course at the Ernst Busch.⁹⁸ This followed acclaimed productions of in-her-face new writing in construction worker lodgings attached to the side of the Deutsches Theater in the late 1990s – the anarchic and vibrant work generated in this temporary space, christened Die Baracke (*The Shack*), saw it crowned "Theatre of the Year" by *Theater Heute* in 1998. In being promoted to the Schaubühne, Ostermeier followed quite literally in Stein's footsteps – not least in the egalitarian socialist principles that underpinned his administration of the same theatre.⁹⁹

However, he gave an interview in 2005 implying the inoculating effects of institutional success. Explaining that his team at the Schaubühne "once really believed that we might – if not change the world – at least be involved in some major agitations", the director now conceded that "maybe we can't change everything, maybe the

⁹⁸ Itself a very political institution with a strong Eastern heritage, founded as a public body in the GDR in the 1950s.

⁹⁹ In 1970, and at the same age as Ostermeier (32 years-old), Peter Stein was invited to take over the Schaubühne by Berlin's politicians and he ran it as an egalitarian socialist democracy. He brought together an ensemble to create productions collaboratively whereby all participants had a say in the choice of play and the politics of the repertoire. Similarly, the artistic team selected in 2000 (Ostermeier, Waltz, Hillje, Sandig) established, as one of their first acts, an equal wage for all members of the company from stage crew to artistic director. See Boenisch (2010a: 356): "In line with his political convictions, he runs his Schaubühne as a collective of equals, where everyone gets the same monthly salary".

problems lie in the people themselves and not just in the circumstances” (2005b). This was a significant deviation from sentiments in the mission statement (*Der Auftrag*) published by the core artistic team when it took over the theatre in 2000; Ostermeier and Waltz, together with the dramaturgs Jens Hillje and Jochen Sandig, had insisted that “there is still a desire for a different life, to live together in true freedom beyond the values and laws of economic efficiency in neoliberal capitalism” (Ostermeier et al. 2000). Theirs would be a theatre in which the “possibility and necessity” of leading another kind of life would help “re-politicise” audiences and effect change.

Ostermeier’s 2005 comments might thus be seen as indicative of a waning political commitment, and contrary to the impulses that initiated his neo-realism. Crucially, however, the interview was headed “Disillusioned but not disorientated” (Ostermeier 2005b). Part II of this chapter seeks to demonstrate that the deflation of Ostermeier’s initial idealism helped to vitalise and add depth to his later work on Ibsen, rather than render it aimless. Indeed, by 2010 he had made substantial revisions to his earlier statements regarding theatre’s ability to intervene in society, arguing, “I’m not doing this in order to change the world and I don’t see theatre as a platform like the church, where people have to go in order to change themselves” (Modreanu 2010). Paradoxically, this is the personal context in which Ostermeier’s most wide-reaching and provocative production to date, *Ein Volksfeind* (2012), was created.

As was the case for his *Nora* and *Hedda*, Ostermeier situated this production in a contemporary context. In this version of Ibsen’s play, Thomas Stockmann, his wife, and their friends Hovstad and Billing (editor and sub-editor of the local newspaper) resembled in temperament and appearance an urban hipster cohort in their early thirties.¹⁰⁰ Wearing plaid shirts, black-rimmed glasses and vintage leather jackets, they were representatives of a young generation who espoused independent thinking, creativity, retro headphones and old-school sneakers – what reviewer Stefan Kirschner

¹⁰⁰ Whereas in Ibsen’s play the Stockmann’s have an adult daughter (Petra) and two adolescent sons, Ostermeier’s decision to make them younger resulted in only one child (a baby), and Petra’s lines were redistributed to Frau Stockmann.

(2012) called the “Prenzlauerberg experience of life”.¹⁰¹ The first act, in Ibsen’s play a dinner hosted in the Stockmann apartment, was extended to an evening of food and music in Ostermeier’s version. The group had convened not only to eat, but also for a band rehearsal, and as Frau Stockmann (Eva Mechbach) served bowls of spaghetti from a large saucepan in the middle of their dining room table, the stage superficially told the story of an idealised creative community, jamming together, eating from the same pot, and having a great time.

The songs whose new arrangements they rehearsed, however, offered a commentary on the production, for once again culturally-loaded music functioned as a contemporary Greek chorus to refract Ostermeier’s themes. Charting a trajectory from 1960s idealism to rampant twenty-first century individualism (and processed here as quasi-folk sound generated by red-wine-glugging hipsters using amplified instruments – electric guitar, electronic drum pad controller, keyboard), these musical citations addressed the issue of utopian social energy appropriated, and cynically recycled, by a subculture that had itself become mainstream.

The rehearsal began after Stockmann opened a letter containing the results of the scientific analysis that confirmed his suspicions about pollution in the town’s source of spa and drinking water, revealing it to be riddled with pathogenic micro-organisms caused by industrial effluence. He explained to his wife and his newspaper friends that, in his capacity as spa doctor, he had harboured these suspicions for some time but was waiting for scientific confirmation. After Ibsen’s long conversation in which Stockmann’s friends praise his discovery, the group ran through a verse and a chorus of their cover of David Bowie’s “Changes”, a paean to reinvention and youth culture, embodying a restless and dynamic transformational energy and a desire to question the norms of a parent generation: “And these children that you spit on, As they try to change their

¹⁰¹ Prenzlauerberg is a borough of Berlin that, after unification, became a centre for bohemian youth, and in the twenty-first century has experienced rapid gentrification.

worlds, Are immune to your consultations”.¹⁰² But before Stockmann’s band reached this line his wife stopped drumming and told her husband: “Ich versteh nicht, warum du nichts gesagt hast!” (*I don’t understand why you didn’t say anything!*). Stockmann’s secrecy about his suspicions caused a faultline to appear in their relationship and their rehearsal – in the intervening silence, Billing quipped that he would never again be in a band with a couple.¹⁰³

Both parties decided not to pursue the argument and the rehearsal resumed. This time, they played Bowie’s song in a new minimalist arrangement in the style of the xx, before being interrupted a second time by the Stockmanns’ baby, crying in an offstage room. After Frau Stockmann had tended to the child, the couple made their peace, Stockmann kneeling before his wife and flicking cigarette ash on his head in a gesture of supplication, and rehearsal resumed a third time. Now the couple sang in harmony a version of “These Days” by Nico, a 1960s track that tempered the utopian energy of “Changes”: “These days I seem to think a lot / About the things that I forgot to do / And all the times I had the chance to”.¹⁰⁴ This nostalgia for routes not taken packed an extra political punch because Ostermeier’s team lowered a gauze screen to form a semi-transparent fourth wall, onto which they projected text from the recent anarchist manifesto *The Coming Insurrection* (2007):

“I AM WHAT I AM,” then, is not simply a lie, a simple advertising campaign, but a military campaign, a war cry directed against everything that exists between beings, against everything that circulates indistinctly, everything that invisibly links them, everything that prevents complete desolation, against everything that makes us exist, and ensures that the whole world doesn’t everywhere have the look and feel of a highway, an amusement park or a new town: pure boredom, passionless but well-ordered, empty, frozen space, where

¹⁰² From the album *Hunky Dory* (1971).

¹⁰³ “Nie wieder mit nem Pärchen in einer Band!”

¹⁰⁴ From the album *Chelsea Girl* (1967).

nothing moves apart from registered bodies, molecular automobiles, and ideal commodities. (The Invisible Committee 2009 [2007]: 32-3)

Still able to see and hear the rehearsal happening in dim light behind the screen, Berlin and then international audiences were invited to read this scathing critique of contemporary neoliberal consumer culture and its atomising premium on individualism alongside a song from a 1960s counter culture that mourned closed possibilities. The social cohesion of the rehearsal was subverted by this second document, and already the onstage signs pointed towards a difficult struggle between truth and the economy, idealism and expediency.

The band's rehearsal gradually became the transition into Act 2. Hovstad broke away to draw a radio in chalk on one of the blackboard walls that served as the set. Then the Stockmanns stopped singing to clear the table for the next scene; and as Hovstad wrote "The Next Day" in chalk below his drawing, Billing segued into a new chord sequence on his guitar to perform the music pumping out of the apartment's radio. The lavish pre-Crash domesticity of the *Nora* and *Hedda Gabler* environments had given way to a hand-drawn neo-Brechtian scenography, and as the Stockmanns began Act 2, the radio (Billing) played "Survivor" by Destiny's Child and the gauze screen lifted.¹⁰⁵

This move from Bowie to Beyoncé reflected a deeper transition from community values grounded in shared cultural experience to an assertion of radical independence – "Now that you're out of my life I'm so much better" – an illusory sense of autonomy and agency slickly packaged and lucratively marketised as pop culture confection. In their musical influences – and the line between Ibsen's characters and Ostermeier's actors is a blurred one here – these survivors truly were destiny's children; the children of utopian transformational spirit and agency that had found its streams of energy re-routed by a totalizing capitalist system of value. The sequence set up an investigation into Stockmann's impulse to make a difference in the world in difficult historical

¹⁰⁵ From the album *Survivor* (2001).

circumstances;¹⁰⁶ Ostermeier had literally superimposed his stage with a manifesto stating that creative self expression and identity politics had been transformed into advertising slogans in hypermediated late capitalism, that sources of power developed by subcultural groups had been devastatingly co-opted by cultural “capital”. And crucially, instead of triggering paralysis, these contradictions became the production’s motor.

As already mentioned, the set was formed of blackboard surfaces, with a table and a battered sofa that were literally second-hand (missing buttons) rather than shabby chic serving as the only physical props. Over these loomed the chalk outlines of objects including an Eames lounge, a TV set, and a Corbusier recliner (under which an English chalk announcement read: Available Now!). Though the luxury items of Pappelbaum’s early Ibsen designs had de-materialised, they lingered as traces on these blackboard walls, a distorted learning environment that depicted diagrams of objects to be desired. Helland (2015: 32) read them as the bourgeois middle-class aspirations (“things they do not yet possess”) of a liberal, left-wing and anti-establishment generation, which would add resonance to the choice facing the couple at the end of the production. Caught in a space between ideals and aspirations, these characters faced difficult decisions – Stockmann’s tenacious pursuit of truth and his desire to inform the town of their polluted water and politics would terminate any possibility of his family’s social rise; the writing on the wall would never materialise; but could the ghosts of material desire truly be erased? Investigating the forces that hamper political agency and revolutionary impulse, the production prompted Dirk Pilz (2012) to ask, in his *Berliner Zeitung* review, “What is right, what is better: to the barricades or the sofa?”

There are no easy answers to Pilz’s question. Ostermeier’s popularity on festival circuits demonstrates that capital thrives on critical theatre; as he told Peter M. Boenisch, “the more we articulate ourselves politically, the better we sell” (Boenisch &

¹⁰⁶ Earlier in the scene Stockmann had commented: “Während meiner Studienzeit hatte ich nie das Gefühl, etwas bewegen zu können” (*As a student, I never had the feeling that things could change*), which contrasted with his current sense that he was living in “eine wahnsinnig spannende Zeit” (*an incredibly exciting time*) in which “könnte man noch einmal alles in Frage stellen” (*one might again question everything*).

Ostermeier 2015: 20). This is why this production's most significant statement rested on its subversion of its own transformational agency, drawing attention to itself as pseudo-political theatre.

Once more, Moi's work on Ibsen is significant to this discussion. She identifies a productive tension in his ambiguous relationship to the system he critiqued; whilst Ibsen "deplored the shallow, positivistic moralism that kept harping on empty and unlovable ideals", simultaneously, Moi argues, he "clearly regretted the passing of the utopian vision of human perfectibility that was such a seductive part of idealism" (2004: 89). She therefore casts his work as attempting to maintain a precarious but active balance between "utopia and critique, between a positive and negative view of the world" (ibid: 89), and what Moi calls Ibsen's modernism might well be applied to Ostermeier. His twenty-first century theatre answers the Capitalist Realist withdrawal from the world's complexities with a modernist realism that again confronts the tension between utopia and critique.

If Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People* as a direct response to the savage reaction to *Ghosts*,¹⁰⁷ Ostermeier has used Ibsen's plays to explore his own failures and contradictions, to thematise his position as a former revolutionary working in a zone of institutional privilege rather than allow his critical edge to be blunted by his international celebrity.¹⁰⁸ Retrospectively, it is clear that such a tension already infused his early work on Ibsen, from the empty Bauhaus chairs to the Beach Boys' track that closed *Hedda* by hymning the "strong personal commitment and lasting solidarity" (Helland 2015: 29) that was nowhere to be seen onstage. Ostermeier's Ibsen productions always created

¹⁰⁷ See Ibsen [on the reaction to *Ghosts*]: "And what can be said of the attitude assumed by the so-called liberal press – of these leaders of the people who speak and write of freedom of action and thought but who at the same time make themselves the slaves of the supposed opinions of their subscribers? I receive more and more proof that there is something demoralizing in engaging in politics and in joining parties. It will never, in any case, be possible to me to join a party that has the majority on its side" (1965: 198). Letter to Georg Brandes, January 3 1882.

¹⁰⁸ Tellingly, Ostermeier called his 2001 production of *Danton's Tod* his biggest failure (La Biennale di Venezia Channel 2014). This play speaks explicitly to the concerns that have emerged as central to Ostermeier's work, functioning as a stark analysis of the ways in which revolution eats itself. At this early stage in his career, Ostermeier was yet to revise the beliefs endorsed in *Der Auftrag* one year earlier. He was also yet to stage Ibsen.

meaning through their dialogue with failed futures that they simultaneously yearned to recover.

Ein Volksfeind represents an advance because, as well as the neoliberal reality, Ostermeier turned his critical gaze onto leftist strategies of resistance – including political theatre techniques. The production’s most memorable moment arrived when Stockman addressed a large popular meeting to defend the truth and expose the corruption of the press and his brother, the Mayor. Ostermeier and Borchmeyer fashioned a new speech for Stockmann out of *The Coming Insurrection*, the same anarchist text from which the projection in Act 1 was also sourced. This was, Ostermeier felt, “fascinating in its radicality” (La Biennale di Venezia Channel 2014) but also a demonstration of the “danger of radical left meeting radical right” (ibid). Discerning a kind of “anti-modernism” and “anti-democratic” spirit in the text’s characterisation of the metropolis as the “simultaneous death of city and country” (ibid), and its advocacy of sabotage (if not terrorism)¹⁰⁹, Ostermeier chose it as a contemporary analogue for the dangerous radical thinking that Stockmann articulates at this point in Ibsen’s play.

However, the extracts used to form Stockmann’s new speech echoed statements Ostermeier himself had made earlier in his career:

Krankheit, Müdigkeit, Burnout werden als individuelle Symptome dessen betrachtet, was geheilt werden muss. Die Behandlung arbeitet an dem Erhalt der bestehenden Ordnung. (*Illness, fatigue, burnout can be considered as the individual symptoms of what needs to be healed. Their treatment works towards the preservation of the existing order.*)¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ The text calls on readers to “*Sabotage every representative authority. Spread the talk. Abolish general assemblies*” (The Invisible Committee 2009 [2007]: 121).

¹¹⁰ “Sickness, fatigue, depression can be seen as the *individual* symptoms of what needs to be cured. They contribute to the maintenance of the existing order” (The Invisible Committee 2009 [2007]: 33).

Die Familie kehrt zurück, sagt man, das Paar kehrt zurück. [Aber] ihre Rückkehr ist nur eine Vertiefung der herrschenden Vereinzelung, die sie vertuschen soll. (*People say that ‘the family’ is coming back, that ‘the couple’ is coming back. [But] their return is only a deepening of the prevailing separation that they serve to conceal.*)¹¹¹

We have already examined similar statements from Ostermeier regarding his rejection of resurgent bourgeois sensibilities, and his sense that systemic contradictions surface as physical and mental symptoms in harried citizens. On the two occasions on which I have seen this production live, Stockmann/The Invisible Committee’s assertion that “Die Wirtschaft ist nicht in der Krise, die Wirtschaft ist die Krise” (*The economy is not in crisis, the economy itself is the crisis*)¹¹² elicited cheers and applause; it matches Ostermeier’s own polemic against the erosion of democracy by the beneficiaries of globalisation that appeared in *Theater Heute* in April 2010: “National parliaments have increasingly been replaced with transnational bodies, without being democratically legitimated. This is not because more democracy was dared, but just the result of globalisation and the Chicago school” (Ostermeier 2010b: 2).

However, Stockmann’s speech culminated in a return to Ibsen’s text (in Borchmeyer’s version), and the accusation which he yelled at the illuminated auditorium (spectators were addressed as the townsfolk): “Der schlimmste Feind der Wahrheit ist diese scheißliberale Mehrheit [...] Die Mehrheit hat nie das Recht auf ihrer Seite. Nie, sage ich! Dass ist eine dieser Gesellschaftslügen, gegen die jeder frei denkende Mensch rebellieren muss” (*The worst enemy of the truth is the shit liberal majority [. . .] The majority never has the right on its side. Never, I say! That is one of the lies of this society, against which any free-thinking person must rebel*). At this point in Ostermeier’s production, the publisher Aslaksen called for a show of hands to see who supported Stockmann’s assertion. He then asked

¹¹¹ “They say that the family is coming back, the couple is coming back. [...] But] its return is nothing but a deepening of the reigning separation that it serves to mask” (The Invisible Committee 2009 [2007]: 40).

¹¹² “We have to see that the economy is not ‘in’ crisis, the economy is itself the crisis” (The Invisible Committee 2009 [2007]: 63).

spectators to justify their reactions, opening up another interval in the delivery of Ibsen's text, but one filled with the comments (and sometimes actions) of engaged spectators.

Although breaking down the fourth wall to create a discursive space that embraced both stage and auditorium might be considered the logical conclusion of Ostermeier's early impulses – generating a theatre that seeks to re-politicise its audience – this sequence actually functioned as an anarchic gesture that foregrounded conflict and antagonism. Ostermeier has frequently discussed this sequence and commented on the ways it has played out as the production has toured the globe: in relinquishing control to his audience, “it is always the majority [...] who vote for Stockman. It's always 90-85% of people raising their arm everywhere we go” (La Biennale di Venezia 2014). Ostermeier admits being unsettled by the unanimity of the support “for something which you cannot agree with” (ibid). The layers of political meaning here are complex. Here we have a director critically reflecting on his own leftist political statements, staging them pushed to an extreme that veers dangerously close to fascism (which, as we have seen, is how he reads the play), only to insist that the response of the majority of his audience (who publicly agree with the sentiment that the “liberal majority” never has right on its side) is the wrong one. Ostermeier's production becomes a critique of a neoliberal present *and* the limitations of political theatre.

The director told an audience at the Venice Biennale of a range of outcomes that this exercise in public democracy had generated, from “extreme fascist anti-semitic statements” to leftist political movements “hijacking the auditorium” and passing out anti-privatisation literature (La Biennale di Venezia Channel 2014). When the production played in Buenos Aires, some spectators refused to respect the boundary between the participatory forum and the fiction. When Hovstad and Billing began throwing paintballs at Stockmann, to cut off the debate, enraged audience members tried physically to stop them. The director looked on:

I am sitting in the back row and rejoicing, but more like a schoolboy who has managed to play a clever prank that sets his parents against his teachers. It's the joy of playing with fire, of kindling conflicts which already exist beneath the surface, and to watch them blow up and escalate. But I wouldn't say it's political because there is no consequence to it. (Boenisch & Ostermeier 2015: 24)

Are we then to despair of political theatre? Judith Sibony (2014), reviewing the production in Paris for *Le Monde's* theatre blog, explained the success of this sequence by arguing that "Ostermeier is not fooled by the myth of the 'active audience'".¹¹³ In fact, though, his statements have been contradictory. In the same 2015 interview, he concluded: "I can very well imagine that making such an experience in the theatre helps people to gather the courage [...] to get more active and involved in everyday politics" (Boenisch & Ostermeier 2015: 27). Although, when pressed, Ostermeier makes conflicting points in interviews, his productions gain their dynamism from oscillating between positive and negative, hope and despair. His theatre has become more interesting than polemical assertion.

Thomas Ostermeier's interest in antagonism – and indeed, Judith Sibony's myth of the "active viewer" – can be fruitfully linked to Claire Bishop's attempts to expose the "rhetoric of democracy and emancipation" (2004: 62) that underpins what she describes – with some scepticism – as a "social turn" in late twentieth/early twenty-first century participatory art and its attempt to "activate the viewer" (ibid: 62).¹¹⁴

¹¹³ She documented the response of Charlotte Rampling, sat behind her, when a Chinese spectator insisted on finishing a story: "When people get the microphone, they do not let it go' the great actress sadly whispered in the ear of her neighbour, while the room began to boo the speaker" (Sibony 2014).

¹¹⁴ As an art historian, Bishop positions the rising tide of participatory work in the 1990s art world in relation to Nicolas Bourriard's 1997 monograph *Relational Aesthetics*, which sought to assert the identity of such artworks as constituted by the interactions they prompted. Exploring art that has attempted to "erode the distinction between institutional and social space" (Bishop 2004: 56) – like Ostermeier's demolition of the fourth wall in *Ein Volksfeind* – through "privilege[ing] intersubjective relations over detached opticality" (ibid: 61), she has approached its "rhetoric of democracy and emancipation" (ibid: 62) with a strong degree of scepticism.

Just as Ostermeier showed conflict disrupting the rehearsal at the *Ein Volksfeind* dinner table, Bishop is interested in art exposing “that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of [...] harmony” (ibid: 79).¹¹⁵ This strategy, for her, offers “a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the work and to one another” (ibid: 79), and she draws on the concept of “antagonism” that was brought into Leftist political theory by the post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985)):

A fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate – in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased. Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order – a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy. (Bishop 2004: 65-6)

Bishop is careful to point out, though, that their theory of antagonism isn’t predicated on “a pessimistic acceptance of political deadlock” (ibid: 66) or the expulsion of utopias from the cultural imaginary. Instead, “the task is to balance the tension between imaginary ideal and pragmatic management of a social positivity without lapsing into the totalitarian” (ibid: 66). It is hopefully clear that Bishop’s exegesis of Laclau and Mouffe invokes many of the terms already cited in this chapter, and describes a tension between collectivity, consensus, authoritarianism and totalitarianism that constitutes the very dynamism of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. Their theory of antagonism actually makes

¹¹⁵ Bishop takes as one of her examples of participatory art the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, known for installation performances in which he cooks meals (vegetable curry or pad thai) for gallery visitors (see Bishop 2004: 55-8). The outward harmony of artistic events that aim to foster social interaction results, in Bishop’s estimation, in work invested in a false sense of community, with participants under the illusion that “meaning is elaborated *collectively*” (ibid: 54). The parallels with the idealised spaghetti socialism of Act 1 of Ostermeier’s *Ein Volksfeind*, in which Frau Stockmann dished out pasta from a communal pot, may be accidental, but they are meaningful.

sense of the original moment Ostermeier turned to Ibsen's plays, a decision born out of a desire to antagonise his audience.

Weaponising the Classics: Ibsen as a Trojan Horse

Two years into his career as leader of the Schaubühne, Ostermeier had to confront the problem of a rapidly dwindling audience. Having made his reputation at Die Baracke importing in-yer-face contemporary dramas, he continued in the same register by commissioning young playwrights to create large-scale contemporary works depicting the social reality of Germany's underclass. Roland Schimmelpfennig, Marius von Mayenburg, Falk Richter, David Giesemann, and Biljana Srbljanovic are some of the playwrights programmed into Ostermeier's new-writing focused repertoire, but a representative work is Lars Norén's *Personenkreis 3.1* (*Human Circle 3.1*). Directed by Ostermeier in 2000, this production of Norén's 1998 play took a sociological approach to society's outsiders, examining such issues as homelessness and unemployment, and depicting alcoholics, prostitutes, the mentally ill, and foreigners. Norén gathers his disparate characters into a large public space, weaving their fragmented biographies and personal tragedies into an epic tapestry (this eight and a half hour play was cut down to four hours in Ostermeier's version). However, in a 2012 interview, Ostermeier recalled that his inherited audience at the Schaubühne "completely disagreed that it was necessary to put that on stage [. . .] They just thought we wanted to show poverty and excluded people to provoke them" (Florin & Meidal 2012). Gerhard Jörder surmised differently, arguing that Ostermeier's early attempts to document the "margins of society" were held against him by critics as "a socio-romantic pose" (Jörder [no date]). Observing a problem that became endemic in these initial years at the Schaubühne, Nataly Bleuel (2000) reported that at the premiere of *Personenkreis 3.1*, after the interval, the auditorium was half empty.

Ostermeier's turn to Ibsen was therefore driven by a pragmatic need to engage with the demographic who attended the theatre he now ran – nestled in the heart of the

opulent West Berlin district of Charlottenberg and located at the top end of the notorious Kurfürstendamm, a boulevard crammed with designer boutiques¹¹⁶ – rather than the demographic he and his team had hoped to attract: initially, he told James Woodall, “we had a dream: to bring the working class into the theatre” (Woodall 2010: 369). However, dealing with what would inevitably remain a “very bourgeois audience,” he explained the need to “talk about the fears and anxieties of the middle class” (ibid: 369-70). The run-down aesthetic of a production like *Personenkreis 3.1* came to be replaced by the sleek interiors of Ostermeier/Pappelbaum’s Ibsen aesthetic, but, as the director noted in 2012, the urge to depict and analyse social waste and precarity remained consistent: “I was talking about the same issue. And that was a kind of Trojan Horse – using these plays but talking about the same things” (Florin & Meidal 2012).

Luring audiences into his theatre with a staple of the bourgeois canon, Ostermeier offered a sense of security, only to devise ways of frustrating expectations. Central to this strategy was the ending of *Nora*. He initially intended that Nora would stay rather than leave her family, in an attempt to recover the radical impact of Ibsen’s original social intervention. When, however, Ostermeier learned that the idea was not an original one – and indeed that Ibsen himself had adapted his play, also in Germany, to have Nora remain – he set about devising alternative solutions:

We talked about Nora killing Torvald but weren’t sure about it. So we did some previews where she stayed and one where she shot him dead. [. . .] Our ending is maybe not psychologically 100 per cent correct. But the murder provoked so much feeling from the audience and so much discussion that we chose to keep it.

(Rosenthal 2004)

¹¹⁶ In 1981, Stein oversaw the move of the Schaubühne from Halleschen Ufer into a building constructed in the 1920s by Bauhaus architect Erich Mendelsohn, originally designed as a cinema. It has a geographical resonance roughly comparable to that of the Royal Court in London, situated in the middle of Chelsea. Dominic Cooke announced a similar strategy to Ostermeier’s in 2007 when he decided to face up to the reality of his Sloane Square audience by programming work that would show the middle classes to themselves (Jury 2007).

Ostermeier found that this antagonistic intervention broke the polite distance between stage and auditorium and disrupted the habitual identificatory patterns of his audience, triggering debate and discussion. Whether spectators argued over the logic of Nora emptying a cartridge of bullets into her husband's torso (following which he toppled backwards into the fishtank), denied Ostermeier's right to transform Ibsen's heroine into a post-feminist victim, or celebrated this adaptation as a way of approximating the play's original impact, such an ending sustained relations of conflict, rather than erasing them. In this sense, *Nora* did more than expose the structural forces that determine behaviour and shine a spotlight on the devastation wrought by capital; it also solicited responses which would be unanticipated and unpredictable: "Th[is] climax [...] may be so radical that many audiences will have trouble with it. But that is exactly the effect I am hoping for. I want it to start the audience discussing the question of why such a climax is necessary" (Ostermeier 2005a).

Ein Volksfeind shows more explicitly how Ostermeier's theatre has become one of exploration and experimentation rather than assertion. Instead of developing a realism that spoke about outsiders, he found himself inventing one that spoke to elite theatregoers – there is obviously a considerable distance between the Ostermeier of *Die Baracke*, and the recipient of the Golden Lion in Venice 2013 – but what energises his later work is that through engaging with Ibsen, he has disturbed his own patterns and begun to interrogate his own positions.

At the conclusion of *Ein Volksfeind* the Stockmanns were alone on stage. Morten Kill, Stockmann's father-in-law, had left them a portfolio of shares in the spa that he had purchased using his daughter's inheritance. Now the couple had a vested interest in spinning public opinion to raise the value of the spa, rather than campaign for its closure. Textually, Stockmann resisted. He then railed against Aslaksen, who visited to persuade him that the paper could repair his reputation if he agreed to relent in his pursuit of the spa's closure (in exchange for some of the share value, in order to sustain

the newspaper). Again Stockmann refused, throwing a bucket of black paint over Aslaksen. The production concluded, however, with a long silent sequence between Thomas and his wife. Both grabbed bottles of beer, and sat beside one another on a chair, opening the share portfolio and inspecting the paperwork. Thomas and Katharina saw the sum written on the document, their eyes widened, and both took a swig of beer. Then Katharina looked at her husband, who continued to stare at the paper, pondering. He then turned his head to meet her gaze, and the lights snapped off abruptly.

Of this ending Ostermeier commented: “I doubt that we would not take the stocks which are [lying] on the table. This is what is for me the point [of] this production” (La Biennale di Venezia Channel 2014). He compared the Stockmanns’ impending capitulation with the failure of political resistance in our own world, asking, “Why was Occupy such a big failure?” (ibid). As Ibsen knew, “No man can escape the responsibilities and the guilt of the society to which he belongs” (1965: 187). Shifting his focus from neoliberal hegemony to the difficulties of leftist agitation, Ostermeier found that examining his own failed struggles to re-politicise theatre offered a way of speaking to a generation with whom, in his words, he shares the guilt of being “Left with our hearts and Right with our wallets” (Pascaud 2012).

However, rather than abandoning utopia entirely, Ostermeier allows it to live on as a desire – even if it can only articulate itself as a nostalgia for all the things “that I forgot to do / And all the times I had the chance to”. In this respect, the most significant thing about this ending was its inconclusive nature. Pushing radical left almost to breaking point, the production refused to end with an unambiguous statement of failure. Although it was likely that the Stockmanns would take the stocks, the decision was yet to be made. Possibilities remained open. The significance of *Ein Volksfeind* rested in its very open-endedness.

3.

CREATING CONTINUITY OUT OF FRAGMENTATION: KATIE MITCHELL'S LIVE CINEMA WORK

Life is fragmented; so even though the form is unusual, the content is true to life. I was confident the audience would piece it together.

—Katie Mitchell (Jackson 2008)

Introduction

At Thomas Ostermeier's invitation, Katie Mitchell staged a production of *Fräulein Julie* (2010) for the Schaubühne that was advertised as "after August Strindberg" (*frei nach August Strindberg*), apprising audiences of its debt to and distinction from Strindberg's play of the same name.¹¹⁷ Mitchell cut eighty per cent of the text and filtered its events entirely through the prism of the maid Kristin, Strindberg's marginal third character whom the author himself in his preface described as "without individuality" (1953: 111). Whilst the director's feminist interest in a female consciousness lingering in the margins of a canonical text quickly became apparent, the production's most visible innovation was its intermedial strategy.¹¹⁸ Mitchell gave form to Kristin's consciousness through techniques borrowed from cinema and radio, created live and enacted in full view of the audience. These methods provided the means of evoking the subjective perceptual field

¹¹⁷ The production is listed as *Kristin, nach Fräulein Julie* on the website of Fifty Nine Productions (Leo Warner's video and projection design company). This seems to have been the title under which the work travelled to the Avignon Festival in 2011, although its 2013 run at the Barbican used the original Schaubühne title of *Fräulein Julie*.

¹¹⁸ Intermediality has proved a useful critical term in discussions and evaluations of contemporary mixed media experimentation in live performance. As Chiel Kattenbelt theorises the term, intermediality describes "co-relations between different media that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, [...] which allows for new dimensions of perception and experience to be explored" (2008: 25). I apply it to Live Cinema because of its apt sense of an "inter" space between media, which generates new modes of perception.

of Mitchell's new protagonist through sound and live-streamed visual output projected onto a screen above the stage. For example, during the sequence when Strindberg has Kristin fall asleep on stage, Mitchell cinematised Kristin's dreams in an extended visual departure from the play's narrative. In her new narrative,¹¹⁹ what remained of Strindberg's script was wholly organised around what Kristin hears and sees, or fails to hear and see.

This production epitomises a technique that Mitchell and her frequent collaborator, video director Leo Warner, have come to call "Live Cinema".¹²⁰ The name registers the invigorating effects of theatre's temporal immediacy on their use of recording media, and how the cinematic has emerged as the main context in which to view this live performance language. It was also the first of Mitchell's productions to impact on theatre culture both at home and abroad, following an invitation from producers at London's Barbican theatre to bring the original German language production to their main stage in 2013. This chapter ends with a close analysis of *Fräulein Julie*, but in order to understand Mitchell's Live Cinema treatment of this theatre classic we have to address the genesis of the technique in her adaptation of novels. This line of enquiry began in exploratory workshops in the early 2000s and first reached audiences in the 2006 production of *Waves*. Mitchell turned to an ineffably literary modernist novel in response to what she experienced as the narrowing horizons of conventional naturalism, and, influenced in part by her exposure to techniques used by The Wooster Group in 2002, her work adapting Woolf for the stage opened up alternative representational methods. Grounded in Mitchell's search for pragmatic solutions to

¹¹⁹ Mitchell adapted *Fräulein Julie* herself, preparing the textual edit in advance of rehearsals. She also prepared the heavily condensed edits of the novels that inspired *Waves* (2006) and *...some trace of her* (2008), issuing these to actors as soon as rehearsals began. Mitchell has since delegated this work. For *Reise durch die Nacht* (Köln 2012), Lyndsey Turner acted as the dramaturg and Duncan Macmillan wrote the dialogue. Turner also adapted *Die Gelbe Tapete* (Schaubühne 2013). Macmillan adapted *Wunschloses Unglück* (Vienna 2013), and wrote and compiled text for *The Forbidden Zone* (Schaubühne/Salzburg 2014).

¹²⁰ See Oltermann (2014). See also 59 productions (2014). Although instigated and conceptualised by Mitchell, these productions are collaborations. My frequent references to "Mitchell's" Live Cinema work seek in no way to diminish the contribution of Leo Warner (or Grant Gee in those productions where he replaced Warner) as Director of Photography. They merely reflect the focus of this thesis on Mitchell's own trajectory.

theatricalising the novel form, the innovative digital and postmodern techniques she used became strategies for representing what Woolf described as the “luminous halo” of consciousness (1994 [1925]: 160). Seen from this angle, Mitchell’s work can be viewed as restoring auratic power to the stage, using the same technological tools Walter Benjamin famously characterised in 1936 as robbing art of its aura.¹²¹ Rather than reducing actors to automata, technology in Mitchell’s theatre affords a means of exploring subjective experience on two fronts – firstly, that of the character, and secondly, through inviting the spectator to participate in a perceptual encounter akin to that Woolf’s novel affords its reader.

The under-examined link between the novel form and Mitchell’s Live Cinema work is crucial to an understanding of this radical transformation in her aesthetic, which before 2006 had been associated with exquisitely detailed fourth wall naturalism. As we will see, media theorists have been quick to perceive in Mitchell’s appropriation of technological tools an impulse to splinter naturalism apart, and have duly emphasised the significance of deconstruction and a Brechtian separation of elements in their readings of this work. Some scholars have cited Mitchell’s convergence of live action and technological apparatus as an effective illustration of cyborg or posthuman innovations in the theatre, even as others have critiqued the inadequacy of her methods in relation to concerns theorised by intermedial theorists and practitioners.¹²² Far from promoting fragmentation and deconstruction, however, Mitchell obliges her audience to discover connections and associations between the work’s separated elements. In the “inter” space opened up between media, she invites spectators to assemble a coherent whole held together by “consciousness” as its operative logic. Mitchell implements technology to deepen the humanism of her work rather than wielding it as a tool of exposure, alienation and critique, with fragmentation working as a key strategy in encouraging subjectivity (however fragile, multiple, flawed or unstable) to emerge. In these

¹²¹ See Benjamin (2008 [1936]).

¹²² These topics are discussed later in this chapter in the section titled “Montage as./vs. Aura”.

intermedial projects, the site of that nascent subjectivity resides in the spectators themselves, invited to become active makers of meaning through processing connections between the disparate elements that form the theatrical-cinematic event. Indeed, Mitchell has compared this work to Cubism in its ability to show simultaneously “all the planes and the perspectives of the construction of character” (Dramaten 2012), and this chapter will draw other links between Mitchell’s practice and the dynamic and subversive strategies that energised modernist experimentation as the early technologies of cinema and radio altered the perceptual fields of its key artists. However, in stressing Live Cinema’s relation to subjectivity and consciousness, I shall argue that this technique is most meaningfully viewed as an extension of Mitchell’s work on naturalism, rather than its radical deconstruction.

Novels vs. Plays: Putting “thought” on stage

Of the twelve productions created by Mitchell (in collaboration with Fifty Nine Productions) that bring radio and film techniques into collision with live theatre practice, three have been based on dramatic literature, two have applied the technique to opera, and seven have used novels or novellas as their primary source material. These numbers reveal how constitutive novels have been to the Live Cinema format, whose emergence – as Mitchell told an interviewer in 2013 – wholly resulted from the challenge of staging Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: “We owe it to her exquisite writing. And, since then, novels have been a better source of inspiration for us” (Hogan 2013).¹²³

Novels sit at the heart of Mitchell’s investigation into the relationship between subjectivity and stage practice for a number of reasons. Selecting novels with a special focus on an individual subjectivity, or in which the author experiments with the relation between narrative and character, Mitchell has found literary material that circumvents

¹²³ Mitchell has now discontinued her intermedial experiments in opera. This is, in part, because the flexibility of the musical tempo plays havoc with the precision required in cueing live film, but also because Mitchell has learnt that the form is fundamentally “about the ear, not about the eyes” (Dramaten 2012).

drama's traditionally logocentric procedures. When I asked Mitchell what novels offered her that plays didn't, she responded, "Thought": "Perception, experience, subjectivity. [...] That's what we're in a lot of the time. We're not in language, we're in thought" (Mitchell 2012). They thus facilitate Mitchell's concentration on the internal dimensions and dynamics of character experience, prompting her to realise through tangible and technological mechanisms what she described as "facets of consciousness" (Dramaten 2012). Novels have thus proved central in re-routing Mitchell's exploratory quest away from interpersonal relationships, the basic unit of conventional dramatic literature, and allowing her to travel inwards rather than outwards. These works have focused, as we will see, on the subjective experience of those rendered silent and marginalised by the historical record, but also of those positioned outside of the canon of representational realism and its familiar logocentric strategies.¹²⁴ However, before analysing Mitchell's subjects we need to address the frustrations that prompted her turn towards the novel.

Following a string of precisely rendered naturalistic productions of classical and contemporary dramatic works through the 1990s, a restless Mitchell wanted to "find a text that would force me to make better theatre" (Jackson 2008). As early as 2001, she organised the first in a series of four workshops exploring a theatrical language capable of handling Woolf's 1931 experimental novel *The Waves* – a text she had studied at university.¹²⁵ Woolf's poetic counterpoint of the interior thoughts of six characters, structured around significant episodes in their lives spanning roughly six decades, and its resistance to the conventional dramatic habits of dialogue and action, account for its appeal. It demanded that she put "thought" on stage, giving form to supple subjectivities

¹²⁴ The main example cited in the chapter is Kristin in *Fräulein Julie*. However, Mitchell's 2014 production of *The Forbidden Zone* offers the most compelling evidence of Mitchell's desire to devote the resources of Live Cinema to the inner lives of women exiled from the public and masculinist realms of politics and history. Responding to a commission to commemorate the centenary of the First World War, she chose to focus on Clara Immerwahr – the German chemist, married to Fritz Haber, who committed suicide on the eve of her husband staging the first poison gas attack on the Russians. The Salzburg Festival (which co-produced the show with the Schaubühne), registered that the show offered a new angle from the "established canon of dramatic treatments of the conflict". See: <http://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/blog/entryid/448>

¹²⁵ See Kerbel (2006: 9).

that constantly reshape themselves around equally pliable physical, temporal, and emotional realities.

Mitchell proposed and addressed this challenge in reaction to the boredom and frustration she had begun to experience with “mainstream theatre” and its method of “organising narrative with consecutive scenes and a lot of words” (Grylls 2011a). For her, this conventionalised form failed to express subjective experience: “I knew that wasn’t how I experienced myself, or relationships, or life, and everything was slightly more chaotic” (ibid). Stage naturalism predicated on conventional dramatic writing had become too limiting, demanding the director maintain an objective perspective and containing its characters firmly within the limited horizons of spoken language. Plays required that Mitchell approach character “as a documentary film maker would,” and even in a character’s solitary onstage moments, soliloquy pressed for “everything [to be] mediated by language” in such a way that actor, director, and spectator could “never really get inside [a character’s] head” (Dramaten 2012). Mitchell had reached the limits of her exploration of a theatre whose focus on corporeality relied on the communication of a character’s inner life through outwardly expressed behaviour within a concrete social domain. In order to transcend the body’s barrier, and the tyranny of the spoken word as an index of interiority, Mitchell turned to a highly literary source material, and although her decision may appear counterintuitive, she had selected a modernist text exhibiting a similar refusal to submit to representational norms.

The reasons behind Mitchell’s interest in *The Waves* mirrored Woolf’s own frustrations with the novel form almost a century earlier. Both women sought to overcome an entrenched sense that their respective genres had found their endpoints in naturalism, or rather a form of naturalism that had congealed into a frozen aesthetic style. Mitchell’s repurposing of technologies designed to capture objective reality (i.e. digital cameras) in order to move inside the mind, to map the subjective experience of consciousness, would match Woolf’s own attempt to discover a living antidote to the Classic Realist novel (see MacCabe 2004 [1979]) – a conventionalised form that had

failed to remain in step with major social and political upheavals triggered by the modern age. Both Mitchell and Woolf saw in the deconstruction of orthodox representational strategies a way of constructing an artistic realisation of first person perception. Like Mitchell, increasingly sensing that the neatly delineated conflicts of conventional drama imposed a false order on the complexity and flux that characterised her own experience of life, Woolf responded to similar drawbacks in her own genre.

In “Modern Fiction”, a 1925 essay in which she sought to refresh prevailing literary trends, Woolf lamented the fact that “life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing” now refuses to be contained in the “ill-fitting vestments” of the British realist (or, as she termed it, “materialist”) novel (1994 [1925]: 160). Attempting to represent that “essential thing” (i.e. subjective experience) through language, Woolf described the myriad impressions continuously received by an individual mind as an “incessant shower of atoms” (ibid: 160) coming from all sides.¹²⁶ Her spatial metaphor establishes what Sarah Bay-Cheng discerns as the “modernist temporality,” a temporality “rooted in individual subjectivity” (2010: 88), where linear-successive time is displaced, or even supplanted, by the simultaneity that characterises our continuous perceptual bombardment. As we have seen, Mitchell’s interest in subjective temporality is everywhere in evidence, from her favourite poem – T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*¹²⁷ – to the temporal manipulations she has explored in her naturalistic work since *Three Sisters*, including the subjective interventions into the flow of “real” time through extreme slow-motion sequences, some of which used a wooden bellows camera (at Irina’s birthday party) as their trigger. Many media theorists link modernist investigations of subjective experience with technological disruptions of time and space – what Klemens Gruber

¹²⁶ Woolf’s image also resonates with Mitchell’s description of the Chekhovian “snowstorm” (see Chapter 1). Whereas she was seeking to marshal the blizzard of detail in his plays into something coherent, the discipline of a single character focus in Live Cinema allowed Mitchell to embrace chaos and complexity, tracing the profusion of perceptions in every moment.

¹²⁷ See Mitchell (2005). As well as including extracts of the poem in her *Three Sisters* programme, Mitchell also included a large chunk of *Four Quartets* within the final section of her 1999 staging of Ted Hughes’ version of *The Oresteia*, at the National Theatre. She worked on a staged reading of this poem with the actor Stephen Dillane in 2005, and paired it with Beethoven’s String Quartet Opus 132, which she had learned influenced Eliot as he wrote the poem.

calls “an encounter with the new conditions of the production of signs” (2010: 247) unleashed by the telephone, telegram, radio and early cinema, and reflected in scientific theories such as Einstein’s investigation of quantum mechanics, in which time and space were positioned as dynamic, flexible structures. Mitchell’s favourite film maker, Andrei Tarkovsky, titled his memoir *Sculpting in Time*, registering time’s legibility in the exposure of light onto film stock that still shaped cinematic artistry in the 1970s and 80s. The relationship between perception and representation (or artistic creation) that so fascinates Mitchell is one with a strong modernist lineage.

In fact, having established what the materialist novel lacked in “Modern Fiction”, Woolf herself identified fiction’s new task with a metaphor that depicted consciousness in terms akin to light falling on a photographic plate: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (1994 [1925]: 161). Although Woolf stressed a need to distinguish sequence, perhaps determined by the technology of written and printed text necessitating a spatial arrangement of words one after another, time itself becomes a crucial component in Woolf’s desire to reflect the “luminous halo,” the “semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (ibid: 160). Woolf also imagined that the solution to the challenge of lending literary form to subjectivity lay in crossing formal boundaries. Whilst preparing to write *The Waves*, she used her diary to ask herself, rhetorically, “Why not invent a new kind of play [...] Away from facts; free; yet concentrated; prose yet poetry; a novel and a play” (1959: 104).¹²⁸ This interplay of theatre, poetry and prose was, strikingly, only fully realised over seven decades later. As we shall see, poetry has emerged as a crucial component of Mitchell’s Live Cinema work. What is important to register here, however, is Woolf’s desire that her novel function as a space in which all of these modes freely combine,

¹²⁸ The diary entry dates from 21 February 1927.

marking the chief attraction of her text for a director keen on breaking through the limitations of a form of naturalism firmly planted in one single dimension: the external.

In theatricalising Woolf's literary experimentation, Mitchell raided disciplinary borders, absorbing the techniques of radio and cinema in order to achieve a live performance language able to move between interior thoughts, locations, and temporal zones at great speed – for example, in chapter seven of Woolf's novel the stream-of-consciousness prose flows freely between characters in locations as far removed from each other as a café in Rome, a farm in Lincolnshire, Piccadilly tube station, a London club, an attic room, and the side of a mountain in Spain. The next part of this chapter establishes the specific ways in which technology allowed Mitchell to overcome naturalism's limitations, limitations which Paul Taylor (2006) summed up, in an aptly cinematic metaphor, as “the theatre of permanent long-shot and crisply defined roles”.

Live Cinema: Origins and Development

Waves marks the inauguration of an aesthetic style that is still being developed. Every show on which Mitchell and Warner collaborate extends the form in significant ways, or deploys similar techniques under a new set of constraints.¹²⁹ Tracing the evolution of their experiments in blending live performance with recording technologies is a revealing exercise; indeed, *Waves* in and of itself registers such a development. As Mitchell stated, “if you look at the show it charts our ability to do the film stuff, which is harder. So it starts with more radio at the beginning and it gets more and more filmic” (Grylls 2012). After becoming increasingly confident in their use of live film techniques over the course of their work on *Attempts on Her Life* (2007), Mitchell and Warner, in collaboration with

¹²⁹ Mitchell and Warner refer to these events as “shows”. I adopt the term here to distinguish between Live Cinema and more “conventional” theatrical productions. Each show in this evolving genre responds to a unique challenge. *Die Ringe des Saturn* (2012) extended Mitchell's exploration of subjective sound and removed the reliance on pre-recorded acoustic elements. The entire soundscape was created live on a stage transformed into a Foley studio. The live-film aspects were relegated offstage, partially visible through glass windows in the back right hand corner of the stage. For *Reise durch die Nacht* (2012), Mitchell put creative restrictions on the team by insisting that the whole show be filmed within the confines of a stationary train carriage.

their cast, were able to achieve “sustained visual output” (Grylls 2012) by the time they returned to the Cottesloe to tackle Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot* in 2008 as ...*some trace of her*. Since then, productions including *Wunschkonzert* (2008) and *Fräulein Julie* (2010) have engaged more explicitly with the conventions of cinema, placing centre stage fully constructed interior film sets with removable elements that facilitate complex camera setups, allowing for the projection of continuous footage captured in real time on a screen suspended above the stage. As always with Mitchell’s practice, individual works gain from being seen in the context of a broader artistic trajectory.

Although this work would later refocus around the productive tension between live performance and cinematographic representation, these techniques were discovered as pragmatic solutions to the challenge of realising Woolf’s modernist text within the limited stage resources of the National Theatre’s 400-seat studio space, the Cottesloe. Mitchell, with sound designer Gareth Fry, began by investigating with actors how the live creation of complex aural soundscapes could “instantly, effectively – and economically – transport the audience from one location or historical period to the next” (Kerbel 2006: 4). This line of creative enquiry led them to the techniques of radio drama – specifically the methods of the Foley artist who creates sound during the post-production phase in order to enhance a listener’s sense of location.¹³⁰ Resonating with Woolf’s sea metaphor, the use of microphones to capture and isolate live aural effects made sound waves the dominant, fluid medium through which Mitchell transcended theatre’s fixity, and reflected the flux of perceptions, anxieties and desires caught in Woolf’s prose.¹³¹

Mitchell and her team combined literal and abstract approaches to sound, exploring methods designed to work on the intellectual and emotional responses of the audience. The actor Liz Kettle recalled experimenting with techniques following a

¹³⁰ The practice emerged in response to the challenge of joining moving pictures together with sound, and took its name from one of the original practitioners of the technique (Jack Foley), who worked in Hollywood in the early twentieth century.

¹³¹ See Halliburton (2006): “Theatre’s not a naturally fluid medium, which is why it’s so clever that Mitchell sets up a framework based on soundwaves [sic].”

rehearsal workshop led by Foley artist Jack Stew: “Peeling a potato is running a knife along the seam of a cricket ball. Tearing up a polystyrene plate is for when emotions become more jagged” (Jackson 2008). Kettle’s account reveals the dual technical and creative application of the technique, used to score realistic activity as well as emotional states, but it also suggests a surprising consequence of performing Foley artistry in a live theatrical context. Spectators constantly saw the unusual objects used to create these realist sound effects including the potato peeling, or a startled bird taking flight from a tree (achieved by flapping a leather glove away from a microphone). As Mitchell’s performers continued to raid objects from stacks of freestanding shelves either side of the playing space, these curious audio-visual combinations set up a dynamic poetic interplay between object, action and effect that simultaneously invoked and disavowed naturalism.

As actors took turns voicing extracts from Woolf’s stream of consciousness narrative directly into microphones placed on a long black table centre stage, the rest of the company moved between various Foley stations. Throughout the performance they used roving props or stationary elements like gravel trays to underscore narration. Each of the seven sections of Woolf’s novel is bookended by an italicised description of a seaside scene witnessed by an omniscient narrator at various points over the course of a single day; as an actor read out the interpolated descriptions of waves and sea a performer drew a violin bow across the rim of a bell, creating an ambient metallic scrape, layered on top of the pre-recorded audio of waves washing back and forth against the shore. Indeed, Gareth Fry’s sound design enhanced the live effects throughout with pre-recorded drones and thuds as well as period music, compiled by music director Simon Allen and used, like the Foley effects, to evoke and shift location and time. Paul Clark’s original composition provided a final acoustic element, played by an offstage string quartet and written in the style of Beethoven’s experiments with counterpoint. Having learned that Woolf listened to Beethoven’s late quartets as she wrote *The Waves*, Clark inferred the importance of counterpoint to the novel, offering Mitchell a composition whose lines of melody could separate and combine in response to

Woolf's orchestration of the six subjectivities around whom the novel is organised (Kerbel 2006: 8).

Mitchell and her team discovered film later in the process. She and designer Vicki Mortimer quickly abandoned the idea of constructing a series of masking screens on stage, with open sections through which the audience could glimpse actors' body parts (an arm or a head); nonetheless, the principle of visual fragmentation remained a central premise. The novel's fragmentary prose was, for Mitchell, suggestive of a particular manner of perceptual encounter between work and reader that she intended to replicate in her adaptation. As assistant director Lucy Kerbel recalled:

Katie discussed with the company how our imaginations do most of the work when we read novels, visualising the world of the story. The author has laid down a framework that our brains flesh out by filling in all the gaps and turning the words on the page into a living, breathing 360-degree world. (Kerbel 2006: 4)

For Mitchell, gaps invite readers (and spectators) to fill them in, raising their consciousness of entire "living, breathing" worlds that aren't limited by the tendency of external naturalism to over-signify clearly discernable referents in the objective world. Kerbel's discussion of "brains" and reader psychology also signals the penetration of attitudes inflected by neuroscience into Mitchell's rehearsal room culture, in this case mapping the cognitive mode of engagement that a novel stimulates in a reader, and using this as a basis for generating performance that replicates this cognitive mode for spectators.

Over the course of these exploratory workshops, the company settled on film as the most successful strategy for cropping and projecting visual fragments to accompany their work on the aural soundscape, leading Mitchell to invite Leo Warner to join the company as video designer. Before the eight-week rehearsal period that led up to the first

performance in 2006, Mitchell had streamlined Woolf's 228-page novel into a 40-page document (Jefferies 2011: 403).¹³² Rehearsals consisted of working methodically through the document, exploring Foley techniques, and devising visual imagery to create dynamic sections of performance that solved the challenges of Woolf's prose paragraph-by-paragraph. Like the acoustics, this visual imagery combined realist and abstract approaches. Tiny environments were quickly assembled and disassembled across the stage, at times as simple as a handheld board that provided a realistic backdrop (covered, for example, in a William Morris wallpaper). One actor would stand in front of it as his face was projected in close-up on the suspended screen, while another voiced his interior thoughts. Technology thus isolated and separated the body of the character from the various voices, both male and female, used interchangeably to narrate their stream of consciousness.

The cameras were also used to generate poetic and abstract visual imagery. Small tanks and fishbowls full of water allowed a performer-operator to capture footage through their transparent sides. Repeated visual sequences of Rhoda's (Anastasia Hille's) submerged head, her floating hair tangling with petals or blanketweed, provided a recurring visual motif. Occasionally, an abstract effect would be applied to the digital video itself; when Jinny was filmed frantically dancing after having burned the telegraph announcing Percival's death, the projected image was rendered with a halting black and white effect that caught the body of the actress (Liz Kettle) in a series of frozen jagged shapes.

Mitchell's experiments with technology were thus born out of pragmatic attempts to generate dynamic staging solutions in response to Woolf's text, rather than an avant-garde strategy aimed at deconstructing a source novel. Whilst spectators were consistently able to assess the projected output against its means of construction – just as the aural effects could be related visually to their inventive origins in mundane objects – the aim was to stimulate creative perception and to work directly on the audience's

¹³² See also Sierz (2009: 54).

emotions, rather than to unmask representational illusion. However, although Mitchell's use of technology clearly challenges the representational orthodoxies of naturalistic theatre praxis, it may seem that this new intermedial methodology has steered her away from her original intention: the representation of "facets of consciousness" (Dramaten 2012). A means of addressing this issue emerges if we analyse Mitchell's response as a spectator to the work of an experimental theatre troupe who similarly used technology to fracture their stage.

Learning from The Wooster Group

In 2002, Mitchell was invited to watch The Wooster Group's production of *To You, The Birdie!* (*Phédre*) when it played at London's LIFT festival,¹³³ and to offer her response to the show at a symposium discussing the Group's work at London's Cochrane Theatre. The symposium was titled "Working over the Classic Text – Adaptations and Interpretations," and Mitchell's reflections on The Wooster Group's multi-sensory techno-corporeal adaptation of Racine's play, which combined live with recorded elements shuttled across the stage on mobile screens, offers keen insights into the mind of a director already one year into her investigation into adapting *The Waves*. This touring production from a celebrated avant-garde New York company both inspired Mitchell and fuelled her frustration with British mainstream representational habits, as was evident in her closing remarks:

The Wooster Group is transcendently inspiring. But I do feel that it should be normal. I feel that really passionately. I feel trapped by not being able to play with the written word. (Heathfield et al. 2002)

¹³³ Elizabeth LeCompte's production visited the Riverside Studios as part of the London International Festival of Theatre from 9-23 May 2002. After eighteen months of rehearsals and work-in-progress showings, the first public performance had occurred in Paris in November 2001.

Mitchell was responding positively to the formal innovation and invention of a production in which, although Racine's text appeared largely intact, naturalism was eschewed. The Woosters revealed the possibility of escaping naturalism's external trappings whilst remaining committed to the written word in playful, and meaningful, ways. Unlike the detailed social realism of Mitchell's own work on Chekhov up to this point, the *mise en scène* of this adaptation of *Phédre* was organised around striking visual metaphors – most noticeably the badminton court on which the play was staged, demanding enormous athleticism of the actors as their characters batted a shuttlecock back and forth during key scenes. This distilled the play's emphasis on social and formal rules into a concrete situation that obliged actors – literally and metaphorically – to *play*. Most pertinent here, however, is the fact that The Wooster Group forced technology into collision with Racine's neoclassical text, using microphones and projection screens to separate voices from bodies (as well as pre-recorded projections of bodies from their live counterparts). Mitchell's response helps us clarify her attitude towards the technological separation of elements that she would go on to pursue, and offers a means of explicitly connecting this strategy with her desire to investigate facets of *character* consciousness in her intermedial work.

In *To You, The Birdie!* the actor Kate Valk was responsible for embodying Phédre, lending her a neurasthenic intensity taken to extreme limits in her consistent need to evacuate her bowels (with considerable assistance provided by numerous attendants who helped her mount a mobile commode). Valk's body, however, was divorced from Phédre's voice and thoughts, which were spoken through a microphone by a male reader (Scott Shepherd) – indeed, as Mitchell noted, “every piece of text was technically mediated, [which is] a cultural taboo in the [British] mainstream”, but “it was in the separation of word and action [...] where the deeper radicalism lay” (qtd. in Heathfield et al.). Not only was Racine's protagonist divided between two performers, the audience was invited to attend to both simultaneously in the theatrical space. Mitchell's reflections on these methods reveal the germination of ideas that visibly

emerged in her own work four years later. After watching The Wooster Group, she reflected on the implications of this separation from two points of view – the actor’s, and the character’s. In her talk, Mitchell asked Group actors directly if it was hard to be the body and be denied the voice, holding such precise psychological and physical intensity as someone else spoke their characters’ words. She also identified their technique’s propensity to help actors avoid the dangers words pose in conventional drama, suggesting that they tended to lure actors towards performances that assume characters are able to say precisely what they mean and think, thus reducing their complexity:

In theatre, words [often] tend to lead us to think of character as a fixed unchanging entity, which is certainly not how we experience ourselves as people, however much we might like to. So for me, the device of dividing the voice and the body of one character between two performers started to chip away at this simplification and approached an idea of character which is probably closer to how we experience ourselves. (Heathfield et al. 2002)

The Wooster Group, then, liberated Mitchell to conceptualise character as portrayed by multiple labourers, and also multiple techniques, within the frame of a unified production style that would accommodate different kinds of acting. Mitchell seems to suggest here that technological separation held the potential to outdo the subtlety achieved by an individual actor working in a naturalistic mode, finding alternative, and somehow more accurate, means of rendering dramatic character lifelike. Indeed, Mitchell perceived the Group’s methods to have liberated the text itself, with radical implications for spectators: “No-one owned the words and therefore we were free to play our own tunes on those words” (ibid). However, although Mitchell suggested that this fragmentation made multiple responses available for spectators, she was adamant that, for her, such openness led her deeper into character, and deeper into the play. As she asserted in the Q&A afterwards, “this production revealed Racine,” even as others

argued that it deconstructed, distanced and objectified the play and the playwright.¹³⁴ Rather than experiencing this production as a postmodern riff on a neoclassical text, Mitchell perceived in the Group's strategies the same kind of experimental modernist investigation into subjectivity as preoccupied Virginia Woolf. The question then arises, if The Wooster Group's techniques led Mitchell deeper into dramatic character, into whose particular subjectivity was Mitchell's *Waves* inviting spectators to delve?

Waves: A CCTV of the Interior

Mitchell used Woolf's autobiographical volume *Moments of Being* for additional textual source material, including an extract in the show's prologue that worked as a kind of epigraph for the whole performance.¹³⁵ An actress dressed in a period blouse and holding in her elegantly poised hand a cigarette smouldering in its holder read an abridged version of the italicised description of the sun rising over the sea that begins *The Waves*. Following this, the company set about creating an aural soundscape that both inducted audiences into the world of the novel's first section (a children's school in St Ives), and initiated them into the production's techniques. In diverse locations across the stage, actors retrieved props and positioned microphones to amplify effects conjuring various domestic activities – illuminated by anglepoise lamps, one actor used her right foot on an amplified board to generate the sound of a maid walking through a kitchen; another evoked the sound of potatoes being peeled whilst, on the other side of the stage, a different actor poured water from a bucket into a sink. Next, actors created the aural impression of dinner preparations – flapping a tablecloth, laying the table for six

¹³⁴ Another panel member responded by saying: "No, I think it objectified him. I don't think it tried to make connections, or say they're just like us. It dropkicked this stuff into the long grass. It's barbaric." (Heathfield et al. 2002)

¹³⁵ The first-person narratives Mitchell selects exhibit complex ties between author and character (or narrator). Peter Handke's 1972 novel *Wunschloses Unglück* (*A Sorrow Beyond Words*), staged by Mitchell in Vienna in 2013, blurs lines between fiction and reality in its account of the suicide of the novelist's own mother. Mitchell carefully attends to the author's biography in her preparation, often discovering details that influence her productions. After learning that Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* after a sudden onset of psychotic symptoms following childbirth, Mitchell included a young baby and a nanny in her 2013 adaptation, forging an explicit link between the protagonist's behaviour and postnatal depression.

children, whispering their names as cutlery was laid and re-laid under the same microphone. Suddenly audiences heard the sound of a door opening and giggling children (generated by adult actors) as they ran out onto a gravel path, followed by the noise of a bird's wings as, startled, it launched into flight. Although the actors remained stationary in their various zones across the stage, the soundscape they created carried audiences in a fluid movement from inside to outside. Before the production launched into the novel's first section (the inner thoughts of the six children as they played in the school grounds), Mitchell had her female narrator switch back on her desk lamp, pick up her cigarette holder, and read the following extract from Woolf's own diary:

If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions of childhood in pale yellow, silver, and green. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent. Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights. Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions. (Mitchell 2008: 7)

In fact, Mitchell had interspersed her performance edit of *The Waves* with seven extracts sampled from Woolf's diaries, which were each voiced by the same actor (Kristin Hutchinson) who read out the novel's italicised descriptions, dressed in the same blouse, holding the same cigarette, and sat behind the same period desk lamp. Woolf's narratorial voice thus became embodied and embedded as a unifying presence.¹³⁶ The associations drawn by Mitchell between the novel, its six characters, and Woolf's autobiographical writings positioned the novel's imagery and incident – even the six

¹³⁶ The company was made up of eight actors, who all doubled as technicians and camera operators throughout the production. Six of the actors embodied Woolf's six characters on screen: Liz Kettle (Jinny); Kate Duchêne (Susan); Anastasia Hille (Rhoda); Paul Ready (Neville); Sean Jackson (Louis); Michael Gould (Bernard). Jonah Russell played Percival onscreen, a character who is mentioned by all six characters but never given his own stream of consciousness. This left Kristin Hutchinson, who – in her rare appearances on screen – was dressed as “Woolf”/the narrator. Her narratorial sections were the only performance sequences not mediated by a camera. Instead, pre-recorded footage of waves was projected on the screen.

characters themselves – as facets of Woolf’s consciousness unified by a consistent literary style. Like the significant majority of Live Cinema shows that followed, *Waves* can be seen to fit the pattern of using a single (and frequently female) consciousness as the production’s organising principle.¹³⁷

More importantly, this initial extract establishes a connection between Woolf’s consciousness and her writing in a way that maps directly over Mitchell’s production and its representational methods. Woolf’s imaginative projection of childhood memory as artistic process uses synaesthetic metaphors that crash through the borders separating perception from creation, harnessing the sonic reverberations of objects as tools with which to “paint” pictures of her earliest impressions. As Evelyn Ender notes, “the text of Woolf’s early memories grants us access to a universe of sensory perceptions ‘in the making’” (2005: 51), in which perception and artistic production are fundamentally intertwined. However, as Ender also notes, the painterly style evoked by Woolf isn’t that of a realist but rather an abstract expressionist painter, creating “a universe endowed with phenomenal features that are initially devoid of clearly defined referential qualities” (ibid: 52). Like the polystyrene plates that Liz Kettle tore through in order to “score” jagged emotion, Woolf’s tuneful petals, pale colours and semi-transparent objects, despite their abstraction, resonate with aural and visual sensation, intensified through their dynamic interplay.

The force of these effects stems from their ability to render representational processes perceptible, rather than their ability to disclose clear referents.¹³⁸ Memory, in Woolf’s account, seems intimately linked to creativity, with consciousness emerging out

¹³⁷ Live Cinema productions filtered through the prism of a clearly defined subjectivity include: *Die Ringe des Saturn* (*The Rings of Saturn*), in which Sebald/the narrator recalls memories from a walking tour of Suffolk as he lies immobilised in hospital; *Reise durch die Nacht* (*Night Train*), in which Regine pieces together fragments of a submerged memory of domestic violence in her childhood home; *Die Gelbe Tapete* (*The Yellow Wallpaper*), in which a woman perceives another woman trapped in the pattern of the wallpaper of her bedroom, suffering mental health difficulties following the birth of a child; *Fräulein Julie*, filtered through Kristin’s consciousness; and *The Forbidden Zone*, which oscillates between the perspectives of Clara Immerwahr and her granddaughter Claire Haber.

¹³⁸ Alastair Macaulay’s review of *Waves* (2006b) perceptively registered that the production “pours forth meanings: we can follow it as an analysis of consciousness and as the construction of a work of art,” but he stops just short of registering how the two are fundamentally connected.

of the temporal interplay of sounds and sights, lending them a strong emotional force despite their literal abstraction. Like Woolf, Mitchell finds ways of representing “moments of being” that emphasise their processual (and thus time-based) quality. In this, both artists crystalise perception in physical artistic forms that find equivalents in the metaphors with which contemporary neuroscientists attempt to describe how consciousness operates. Mitchell refined her technique of helping actors generate past and future mental pictures – in order to affect their behaviour in the present moment of a scene – in response to Antonio Damasio’s popular writings on neuroscience. The subtitle of Damasio’s most successful book—the “Making of Consciousness” – stresses the processual quality similarly described in Woolf’s autobiographical *Moments of Being*. He writes: “Images are constructed either when we engage objects, from persons and places to toothaches, from the outside of the brain towards its inside; or when we reconstruct from memory, from the inside out as it were” (2000: 318-19). The production of images in the factory of consciousness, so Damasio argues, accompanies our real time interactions with the world, and other self-reflexive process that distinguish consciousness, such as memory – corroborating the insights of phenomenology discussed in Chapter 1. Indeed, Damasio ties memory to perception itself, arguing that a continuous slideshow of images, retrieved from a random access memory of sensory impressions, accompanies our phenomenological engagement with the world. As Ender noted, linking Damasio with Woolf one year before the premiere of Mitchell’s *Waves*, images act as “the interface between inner bodily processes and the outer world” (2005: 57). Cinema becomes a central metaphor for subjectivity itself.

In Mitchell’s staging, these descriptive metaphors of cognitive activity become literal. Microphones and screen technology are the means of materialising the interface described by Ender, giving artistic form to perceptual experiences characterised by Damasio in terms of an artistic process. For Sharon Friedman, it is exactly this emergent quality that marks the significance of Mitchell’s *Waves*. She writes that Mitchell uses technology to generate “visual and aural impressions simultaneously, and in the process,

evoke a sense of immediacy in the viewer that is integral to subjective experience” (2009: 156). Again, temporality emerges as crucial in generating a continuously renewing present tense that absorbs the audience in subjective experience. That Friedman describes this in terms of “the viewer” illustrates the ability of the technique to work at two levels – engaging spectators in their own creative and subjective encounter with the production’s representational techniques leads them further into a character subjectivity that, rather than being embodied by a unified stage presence, emerges out of visual and aural traces dispersed across a vast network of performers and technological apparatus.

For two reviewers, Mitchell’s approach resulted successfully in their total absorption in character subjectivity: John Peter (2006) found that this approach worked because “Woolf the novelist was like a CCTV of the interior,” painting with words the images that underpin consciousness. Lyn Gardner (2006) felt as if she’d “mistakenly wandered into someone else’s head,” absorbed to the extent that she described it as “an out of body experience”. Their testimonies illustrate the possibility of perceiving Mitchell’s Live Cinema technique as radically extending her work on naturalism. Whereas her Chekhov productions were aimed at facilitating the actor’s total immersion in character in order that “the audience can recognise themselves in the tiniest details of action and intonation” (Heathfield et al. 2002), this Live Cinema work allowed for a form of ultra-absorption. Encouraged to assemble the work’s fragments into a coherent whole, the spectator’s own mind becomes the stage on which the play unfolds. The invisible fourth wall that structures the objective gaze of naturalism has been traversed entirely. Its demand that a spectator gaze voyeuristically through a window onto characters situated in a fully realised three-dimensional world is superseded by techniques that allow spectators to penetrate a consciousness – in much the same way, indeed, as recent technological innovations have allowed brain science to scan and image cognitive activity. At this point, however, it is instructive to consider the criticisms of scholars for whom the use Mitchell makes of deconstructive techniques poses insurmountable challenges. As a result of their inability to locate criticality in Mitchell’s

appropriation of montage, some theorists have seen her Live Cinema work as a well-executed technical exercise that fails to fulfil montage's promise of exposure, critique and interruption. However, attempts to understand these works within established avant-garde frameworks, rather than with reference to Mitchell's own trajectory as a practitioner, inevitably obscure the intense form of neuro-realism that drives and energises her experimental techniques.

Montage vs./as Aura

Live Cinema techniques certainly invite comparisons with the radical separation of elements that characterised Brecht's Epic Theatre in the early twentieth century, formed in response to the total synthesis of a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk* that Brecht, Weill and others – for highly political reasons – aimed to break apart. In Mitchell's shows, actors become producers of sound effects, body doubles, costume fitters, stagehands, camera operators, and lighting riggers, just as the various aspects of a unified Stanislavskian approach to character (thoughts, physical actions, emotion, dialogue) are partitioned out below the screen. In describing *...some trace of her*, Aleks Sierz (2009) found the gaps between these separated elements to be filled with political resonance. Describing his reaction to seeing actors standing against an upright bed at stage level juxtaposed with the illusion that they lay horizontally in the on-screen projection, Sierz reasoned that "such effects are rarely necessary for storytelling purposes: they were there to illustrate Mitchell's point about the artificial constructions of filmic reality" (2009: 58). He identified the artificiality foregrounded by this separation as integral to Mitchell's "political point," namely her desire to remind spectators that "whatever we see, not only in theatre but in the wider media, whether it is news, a documentary or a fictional film, is a construction" (ibid: 58).

Sierz's endorsement, however, put him in a minority position. Also writing about *...some trace of her*, Peter M. Boenisch agreed with Sierz that "the difference between the screen images and the 'reality' of their production served as the central

dramaturgic node” (2010b: 166) of the production. However, for Boenisch, this resulted in an inert form of political theatre because Mitchell’s “implicit critique of ‘simulation’ could [...] eventually still be observed, fully ‘deconstructed’, understood, and cherished from the spectators’ distanced olympic position inside the darkened auditorium” (ibid: 167). Boenisch concluded that she had orchestrated a fictional scenario in which skilled actor-technicians seamlessly executed an audio-visual adaptation of a literary novel that was easily contained by the frame of the proscenium arch.¹³⁹ In this, Mitchell had failed to challenge the traditional position of the spectator “watching a perfectly timed and choreographed spectacle” (ibid: 167).

The media theorist and practitioner Johannes Birringer was similarly dissatisfied by the perceived gap between Mitchell’s methods and her outcomes. Watching *Fräulein Julie*, Birringer found “Brecht’s Epic Theatre, based on interruption” to be “side-stepped, as there is nothing that is ever interrupted in Mitchell’s production” (2014: 211). For him, the director’s orchestration of a “seamless synthesis” (ibid: 211) betrayed the potential radicalism of the tools by which it was achieved: “Mitchell never really bothers to interrogate the potential disconnection between sound and image, the irrational cut between the two” (ibid: 225). Indeed, the very “continuity” her performers achieved frustrated Birringer: there were no “glitches, slippages, or breaks” to “stimulate my imagination and illuminate the pressing question of how images can be actionable and disrupt the habituation of the sensory apparatus to technological artifice” (ibid: 225). Birringer was eager that, in addition to disrupting her spectator’s ability to achieve synthesis, Mitchell interrogate the implications of “digital embodiment” for the performer (ibid: 225); his frustration, then, emanates from the production’s use of progressive new media technology in the service of a conservative agenda that appears pursuant of merely another form of naturalism.

¹³⁹ This was literally the case in that the performers, unbeknownst to spectators, were all playing secondary fictional characters (with attendant biographies) within a detailed scenario. In *Waves*, the conceit was that a group of performers and technicians had been appointed to create a one-off radio transmission of Woolf’s novel, with accompanying visual imagery, in an event conceptualised by artist Tacita Dean.

All three critics demonstrate the tendency to position Mitchell's work within a critical framework informed by Brecht, but mediated by Guy Debord's anxieties over the *Society of the Spectacle* which proved so influential in shaping the radicalism of the contemporary avant-garde in the second half of the twentieth century. The outlines of this critical framework are easy to discern in an oft-cited essay – published just five years after Woolf's novel *The Waves* – in which Walter Benjamin evaluated the key issues raised by “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”. As a strong advocate for the political efficacy of cinema, Benjamin diagnosed technology's ability to annihilate a quality he labelled “aura” (2008 [1936]: 23), a quasi-mystical force emanating from original and unique works of art. Defining it as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (ibid: 23), Benjamin cast “aura” as a conservative force that held the reader/spectator of an artwork some distance away from the “here and now” (ibid: 21) of its original creation, thus enforcing a sense of the work's power and authenticity through granting it a unique presence in time and space (and in a conservative tradition of art). Heralding film as a liberatory technology, he argued that technological reproducibility held the politically progressive potential to cut ties between an artwork and its aura, “stripping [...] the veil from the object” (ibid: 23) and collapsing the distance between art and the masses. In endorsing the positive effects of aura's decay, Benjamin suggested that dislocating the artwork from tradition (and its past uses) meant that it might be brought into new constellations by the reader/spectator, allowing the masses to discover, for themselves, “new functions” (ibid: 25) of art.

Importantly for this study, Benjamin also linked his analysis of technological reproducibility to the radical potential of Brecht's Epic Theatre, connecting this theatrical technique directly with radio and cinematic montage.¹⁴⁰ Just as technological reproducibility dislodged the artwork from its unique location in time and space (the

¹⁴⁰ See Benjamin: “Theatre and Radio” (2008 [1932]: 395); “The Author as Producer” (2008 [1934]: 91).

“here and now” of the original), montage (and Epic Theatre) harnessed “interruption” as a strategy that forced an audience to “take up an attitude toward the events on the stage” (2008 [1932]: 395). The critical and political efficacy of film (and Brecht) emerged for Benjamin out of the visibility of the cinematic suture – Brecht’s insistence on asserting the artifice of his theatre proved symptomatic of an attitude in which gaps and disruption offer the means of jolting spectators into activity and awareness. These theories were appropriated and consolidated with renewed impetus in 1967, when the French Marxist intellectual Guy Debord theorised “spectacle” as the deceptive means of simulation and mediation by which Capitalism surreptitiously circulates repressive social relations (*Society of the Spectacle*). Brecht was quickly recruited as a guiding force in shaping the ways in which art might inspire cultural revolution, and The Situationists (the political group whose activity was both mediated by and grounded in Debord’s theories) appropriated montage as a way of cutting up Capitalist spectacle in order to render visible how hegemony is constructed.¹⁴¹ Debord left in his wake a pervasive anxiety around images as purveyors of illusory simulation, an anxiety which became all the more entrenched as live performance scholars sought to define the ontology of their own discipline in opposition to the deceptive qualities of mediation.¹⁴²

This brief overview sketches the broad outlines of a critical framework that clearly informs a large number of contemporary responses to Mitchell’s work. Boenisch and Birringer share a frustration with Mitchell’s failure to push fragmentation to the point where the ability to discern any form of totality is obliterated. What Boenisch laments as an experimental approach that ends up subsumed in a totality aligned with the deceptive effects of simulation and spectacle, Birringer dismisses as a production whose synthesis of elements renders it critically impotent. They insist on totality’s refusal;

¹⁴¹ See the 1973 film *The Society of the Spectacle* (dir. Guy Debord), in which critical montage offered a key strategy for remixing hegemonic spectacle. A contemporary version of this practice is well illustrated by the documentaries of filmmaker Adam Curtis (see, for instance, *The Century of the Self* (2002); *It Felt Like a Kiss* (2009); *Bitter Lake* (2015)).

¹⁴² Peggy Phelan, in *Unmarked* (1993), positions performance as that which becomes itself through disappearance. See also: Auslander (1999), and Chapter 6 of Dixon (2007).

Mitchell's use of montage, in the estimation of these critics, suffers from being too successful. Paradoxically, it appears that only bad montage, with its "glitches, slippages, or breaks" is able to offer the kind of awakening that Benjamin and Brecht, in anticipating the political force of new tools of mediation, posit as the goal of art in the age of its technological reproducibility.¹⁴³

What Benjamin and Brecht welcomed hopefully, Debord, some thirty years later, viewed with suspicion. Technological reproducibility could serve a potent form of criticality, but it could also be used to fabricate and duplicate spectacular images that reinforced hegemonic ideology. Debord wrote that "the spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep" (12). His striking metaphor offers another way of conceptualising the frustrations experienced by critics of Mitchell's work. For them, she concentrates her energy on cinematising dreams rather than shaking audiences awake; thus she refuses to say anything about the mediated nature of our reality, instead showing us a synthesis of elements that leave us stranded in the spectacular. The famous image on the front cover of the 1983 edition of Debord's book, derived from a photograph taken by J. R. Eyerman in 1952, offers a clear illustration of what these critics feel to be the devastating political inefficacy of Mitchell's Live Cinema shows. This photograph captures an audience of cinemagoers attending a premiere screening of *Bwana Devil* (dir. Arch Oboler) on November 26 1952, and thus experiencing the first full-length, colour 3-D ("Natural Vision") screening of a motion picture. The audience, held in rapt attention at a screen positioned somewhere behind the photographer, wear 3-D spectacles. These act as blinkers. Their red and green lenses also function to unite the separated layers projected onto the screen into a three-dimensional synthesis, in a way directly analogous with the neurological process Mitchell

¹⁴³ We should, nevertheless, remember that Benjamin is not attempting in his essay to outline the ontology, or philosophy, of film. Instead, he is describing a particular way in which technology might be used (as well as anticipating its abuses). He also resists technological determinism, arguing that new social and cultural developments trigger new uses. See, for example, his comments on Russian cinema and Hollywood (2008 [1936]: 34).

intends to stimulate in her spectator. Although Debord did not choose this image to advertise his book, it crystallised his assertion that the spectacle generates a common language of separation: “Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very centre that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them *only in their separateness*” (2004 [1967]: 16). Despite being a collective, the audience in Eyerman’s image are atomised individuals, lost in a private realm of absorption.

However, the critical framework according to which Mitchell’s experiments have mainly been assessed thus far ignores another rich lineage that makes sense of her investigation into consciousness and perception. The misconception it redresses is the insistence of critics on viewing montage in terms of distraction, schism, and disruption, and thus attempting (and failing) to diagnose the Live Cinema mode as consonant with an avant-garde trajectory of radical and revolutionary performance. It is clear from any analysis of Mitchell’s comments on film, literature and painting that she wants spectators to be completely enthralled, because that is her own experience of art. The next part of this chapter explores the strong influence of photography on Mitchell’s aesthetic, and indeed reveals Sierz’s misapprehension that she views the image with suspicion.

The strong ties already explored between Live Cinema and Virginia Woolf are symptomatic of an alternative lineage that links Mitchell directly with modernism and, more specifically, a “feminine” aesthetic that foregrounds the signifying material itself as a way of taking the reader/spectator further inside the thing being represented. Woolf stands in stark contrast to a figure like Brecht, whose strategies of montage and interruption promised the total opposite of absorption, attempting to jolt spectators into awareness of what lays *outside of* the thing being watched onstage. Because of her failure to mimic a masculinist avant-garde famed for antagonism, interruption and disturbance, Mitchell has appeared apolitical.

However, viewing her use of technological tools instead as a way of refreshing stagnant naturalist vocabularies reveals the real radicalism of this work. Whereas

Birringer finds that Mitchell interrupts nothing, we have already touched on some ways in which her productions destabilise a logocentric model of naturalism that holds the mainstream in its grip. As will be explored later in this chapter, Mitchell carefully selects the specific subjectivities that she uses technology to prise open. Form dovetails with content, opening up new areas of perception and experience that – in a deeply political move – extend the boundaries of realist praxis. Just as Ostermeier resists realism’s depreciation through his work on Ibsen, Mitchell is engaged in a similar struggle. Whilst some have sought to process Mitchell’s innovations by considering the ways in which they have reconfigured the performer as a posthuman cyborg,¹⁴⁴ not enough focus has been given to the centrality of fiction and writing to the Live Cinema enterprise. Within the terms of the fictional worlds in which Mitchell’s subjectivities are grounded, she has used the interplay of media to open up new areas of perception and experience. Through the “female” gaze framed by Mitchell’s digital cameras, facets of consciousness are revealed that have failed to emerge in previous iterations of stage realism.

Making this case involves reading Benjamin differently. Birringer, in his essay on *Fräulein Julie*, used the terms of Benjamin’s discussion of “aura” in order to characterise Mitchell’s (mis)appropriation of technology as triggering a second failure. “Live-theatre film,” writes Birringer, “weakens the theatricality of the physical body” (2014: 225) and “dispossess[es] the live theatre of some of its particular strengths of physical, emotional, kinetic energies and resonances” (ibid: 225). In this, Birringer invests in live performance as a site of auratic presence that technology eviscerates. He regretfully detailed how, in Mitchell’s staging, “repression and effacement of physical, energetic and political theatre” (ibid: 224) as mediated through the screen is parodied by

¹⁴⁴ See Lepage: “[*Waves*] refuses common expectations (of a play and of the human subject)” (2008: 146); “By such methods of technologically mediated disunification of human embodiment into separate parts, the comprehension of subjectivity is changed, as formerly ‘natural’ bodily coherence is ruptured into pieces at the same time as these pieces cross ontological borders from the organic to the technological. As such, the human form loses its borders, its uniqueness, and is opened up to hybridity and shared ontology: rendered a posthuman cyborg.” (2008: 143). See also Parker-Starbuck (2011: 126-133). However, it always remains easy to distinguish between the various components of character subjectivity – visual image/memory; pov shot; subjective sound – the non-representational objects used to create them, and the performer/technicians who create those effects vs. their role as bodies within the fictional world.

the kinetic stage-level activity. Watching actors dash about in order to achieve Mitchell's "hypermediated" scenography, Birringer found their onscreen work "emotionally cold, removed, inconsequential" (ibid: 224). He concluded that, despite their frenetic work as technicians, "these acting bodies do not resonate" (ibid: 224).

What if we reconsider the assumption that technology, reproducibility, and mediation shatter aura and we view Mitchell's use of these tools as, paradoxically, a route towards aura's reinstatement? What if, instead of using separation to tear through spectacle, or to dismantle habitual representations of character in "naturalistic theatre", Live Cinema pursues new auratic modes of giving form to character consciousness? Dan Rebellato's review of *Fräulein Julie* at the Barbican contains a remark that points towards how Live Cinema engineers a reversal of Benjamin's organising premise in his "Work of Art" essay: "It struck me watching it that this would be a show that would lose everything if broadcast live to cinemas in a way that purely 'theatrical' shows would not" (Rebellato 2013). Despite the fact that technology mediates every aspect of "naturalistic" performance that the show fragments at stage level, Rebellato's response reveals how, in a world where mediation has become commonplace,¹⁴⁵ Mitchell's technique finds technological means of rejuvenating Peggy Phelan's promise that "performance's only life is in the present" (1993: 146). As Steve Dixon points out, and as Mitchell's work demonstrates, "liveness has nothing to do with the media form but at core concerns temporality" (2007: 129). The next section illustrates how crucial "liveness" is to this technique, confirming critical montage as a flawed evaluative criteria. Mitchell's interplay of media releases a "continuous present" that reinstates "aura" and realises "facets of consciousness". Through understanding the digital substructure to this work, it becomes inevitable that we link Mitchell with another modernist literary experimenter for whom cinema played an influential role: Gertrude Stein.

Living in Looking: The Continuous Present

¹⁴⁵ See Auslander (1999).

Discussing the “liveness” of Mitchell’s Live Cinema work necessitates careful scrutiny of the digital methods on which these productions are predicated. Feeding multiple digital inputs, captured by microphones and digital cameras, through a media server, rendering them, and composing the live edit in real time as it is instantaneously projected onto a screen above the stage is, as Mitchell attests, “pushing at the edge of what the technology can do” (Dramaten 2012). Her theatricalisation of cinematic processes makes production, post-production, projection and reception all become simultaneously available for spectatorial scrutiny.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, this very simultaneity is what renders the digital substructure of these shows visible. The ability to combine camera and microphone outputs in real time is contingent on digital technologies that convert image and sound input into code, which is fed instantaneously through a computer media server where any additional processing occurs. In response to the cueing of an offstage programmer, that aggregated digital content is sampled from and routed through a projector and speakers according to a pre-determined cueing sequence – nothing is *recorded*; rather, it is *streamed*.

From this it is apparent how Mitchell’s instrumentalisation of technology intersects with the major debates around the implications of media (old and new) for perception. The link between her digital tools and their ability to facilitate a “modernist temporality” (Bay-Cheng 2010: 88) allows us to perceive Live Cinema as fulfilling Lev Manovich’s promise that, through the language of new media, “directions that were closed off at the turn of the century when [cinematic realism] came to dominate the modern moving-image culture are now again beginning to be explored” (2001: 308).¹⁴⁷

In exploring those closed off directions, Sarah Bay-Cheng’s work on Gertrude Stein offers material for a fascinating comparison between Mitchell and a key modernist literary experimenter for whom early cinema and literary strategies of representing

¹⁴⁶ See also Hadjioannou & Rodosthenous (describing ...*some trace of her*): “The experience of time, that is, is refashioned in the intermedial in-between of theatrical presence and cinematic pastness” (2011: 49).

¹⁴⁷ This addresses the criticism, implicit in Birringer’s analysis, that Mitchell’s work is merely a conservative practice that ignores the major preoccupations of the digital age.

subjectivity became deeply aligned. Bay-Cheng foregrounds the importance of a “continuous present” (2004: 30) in Stein’s modernist experiments with linguistic repetition, particularly with reference to her “early textual portraits” of friends, which “attempted to capture the essence of a person in language,” both “as an individual and as the product of artistic creation” (ibid: 29). Crucially for the present study, Bay-Cheng demonstrates the link between Stein’s “continuous present” and the cinema: “Stein recognised that in film the eye has no memory of the individual frame, seeing only the images run together in movement” (ibid: 30). Repetition was, as Stein expressed in her deliberately naïve style, a linguistic strategy that replicated the temporal quality of cinema where “by a continuously moving picture of any one there is no memory of any other thing and there is that thing existing” (cited in Bay-Cheng 2004: 29). The quick succession of stills running through a projector, each subtly different from the one it follows, gave Stein direct access to the subject in what Woolf might have described as its very moment of being.

“Liveness” thus becomes crucial in foregrounding Mitchell’s representational strategies so as to, like cinema for Stein, lead spectators further into the “thing existing”. In this work, technology does not join with humans to create new forms; rather, it becomes a means of manifesting the temporal symbiosis of perception and creation: seeing the *making of* releases the *meaning of* this work. However, although Stein, as spectator of the archetypal film she described, remained temporally and spatially distant from the persons or objects represented in the light dancing on a cinema’s projection screen, Mitchell finds digital means of bringing all elements – including the spectator – into a single moment of temporal simultaneity. The “thing existing” merges with the thing looking.

Of course, live digital streaming has radically reformed the very process of still projection that inspired Stein’s literary strategy. More so than cinema, early photography offers a template for understanding Mitchell’s technique, and offers the means of connecting Stein’s interest in cinema with the auratic effects produced on

Mitchell's stage. Interestingly, Walter Benjamin provides the theoretical tools for braiding all these strands together. Benjamin's very interest in "aura" signals the generative ambiguity that lends his work longevity – even though his "Work of Art" essay was the most materialistic of his writings, the centrality of aura to the discussion betrays his interest in the numinous, and thus signals his usefulness in a reading of Mitchell's work. Indeed, despite Benjamin's endorsement of his montage techniques, Brecht himself was less generous towards what we might view as Benjamin's productive ambivalence; Brecht called the "Work of Art" essay "all mysticism, under the guise of anti-mysticism" (Wolin 1994: 141).

In his essay, Benjamin stopped short of claiming that all forms of technological reproduction drive a wedge between subject and aura, describing how, in certain photographs, the "human countenance" acts as aura's "last entrenchment".¹⁴⁸ Discussing the history of the portrait he described how "in the fleeting expression of a human face, the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. This is what gives them their melancholy and incomparable beauty" (2008 [1936]: 27).¹⁴⁹ In part, Benjamin attributed this to technology. In his "Little History of Photography" (1931), he had described the effects of the long exposure times – determined by the daguerreotype and salted paper printing – as "the way light struggles out of darkness," or the "breathy halo" (2008 [1931]: 283). These "breathy halos" that Benjamin perceived in early photography's soft and luxurious portraits correspond with the way Stein saw consciousness emerge in a succession of individual stills. Although they are writing about technologies belonging to different eras, both are interested in the powerful effect of

¹⁴⁸ To be clear, Benjamin does suggest that the living person captured on *film* foregoes their aura: "For the aura is bound to his presence in the here and now. There is no facsimile of the aura. The aura surrounding Macbeth on the stage cannot be divorced from the aura which, for the living spectators, surrounds the actor who plays him" (2008 [1936]: 31). Mitchell has worked free of this limitation by making production and reception simultaneous in a situation where all parties share the same space. Rather than substitute the audience for the camera, Mitchell enjoins the participation of both.

¹⁴⁹ He dates the death of photographic aura to the pictures of deserted Paris streets taken by Atget at the turn of the century (27; see also "Little History" 285). Benjamin has pointed towards the historical variability of the aura: as technology and historical and social context alter, the conditions for aura's emergence may realign, as they do in Mitchell's work.

something existing in front of a lens, and the crucial role of temporality in creating that effect. Although a photograph is a fixed physical artefact (rather than a moving image), individual moments of the “thing existing” superimposed to form a highly auratic image.

In a revealing exchange with the film critic Mark Kermode, Mitchell explained how the visual inspiration for the video output in *...some trace of her* came from the early photographs of Lady Clementina Hawarden, who was active in the 1840s and 1850s. Mitchell suggested that through these photographs “you really get a sense in which you cross a threshold [...] You feel you can stretch your hand through and touch that period” (Kermode 2008). Her comments chime with those of Roland Barthes, who also sits comfortably inside this alternative critical context for Live Cinema, and his concept of the *punctum*. Based on his discovery (shortly after her death) of a photograph of his mother as a child, Barthes developed the *punctum* as a way of making sense of this photograph’s peculiar ability to evoke in his mind “*the impossible science of the unique being*” (2000 [1980]: 71).¹⁵⁰ Often locating it in an object discernable somewhere within the image’s representational field, Barthes conceived of the *punctum* as a trigger that would cause the viewer to add to the photograph, but which remained grounded in what was already there (ibid: 55). For him, the *punctum* was a gateway into a “subtle *beyond*,” gesturing towards “*the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together*” (ibid: 59). Although Brecht was hostile towards photography for its lack of critical power, Barthes preferred photography to film, where images moved so fast that “I don’t have time: in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes” (ibid: 55). A photograph with a *punctum*, on the other hand, causes a whole field to develop in the mind of the viewer; describing another photograph, Barthes wrote: “On account of her necklace, the black woman in her Sunday best has had, for me, a whole life external to her portrait” (ibid: 57).

¹⁵⁰ According to Barthes not all photographs possess this ability, nor can one manufacture *puncta*. This corresponds with a detail in Woolf’s *Moments of Being*. Regarding the image of her own (long dead) mother, she writes: “If one could give a sense of my mother’s personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cézanne” (1985: 85).

Mitchell spoke to Kermode using similar terms, describing Hawarden's portraits as "tak[ing] us back into the 19th century," to the extent that Mitchell and her team could "feel, taste, smell the period" (Kermode 2008). His response that ...*some trace of her* was best described as "an animated still photograph rather than a film" is perceptive and also answers Birringer's charge that Mitchell's actors are too still on camera. From *Waves* onwards, the director has predominantly used cameras to isolate immobile actors (often their faces) in extreme close-up. The high magnification of their faces, often projected in tandem with stream of consciousness narration and soundscapes, meant that even the tiniest movements were perceptible over the course of lengthy, locked-off "exposures". Ben Whishaw (playing Myshkin) reported that, during ...*some trace of her* rehearsals, Mitchell gave him the note: "you're going to have to try and think of something very interesting [during this close-up]. Just have a thought going on in your head so that there's some trace of something in your eyes" (Grylls 2011b).

Birringer, then, is right to point out that Mitchell's actors do inhabit a different tempo on screen to their frenetic activity as stage technicians, but this is the result of the intermedial exploration of photography through film. Minute alterations in the physiognomy, following on in quick succession, generate an auratic presence that combines Stein's repetition of minor-differences with the ghostly exposures of early photography. Although Birringer finds that these acting bodies "do not resonate," their screen close-ups – especially in tandem with thoughts and subjective sound – resonate strongly. However, although facial close-ups are a consistent component of these Live Cinema shows, the ability of technology to generate aura isn't limited to the involvement of a "human countenance".

Importantly, Stein attempted to capture objects, as well as people, in a moment of consciousness. She saw her poem *Tender Buttons* (1914) – which used alienating syntax, unusual rhythms and surprising word juxtapositions to describe mundane objects – as a new form of realism in which the optical register was privileged: "I was trying to live in

looking, and looking was not to mix itself up with remembering” (Frost 2003: 23). Once again, Stein’s formal strategy seeks to bring “existing” into focus.

It is one of Mitchell’s major visual influences – Francesca Woodman – who links together the various theoretical and artistic concerns of this chapter thus far. Like Hawarden’s images, Woodman’s black and white photographs (mainly taken in the 1970s) inspired the visual imagery of *...some trace of her*, and have been a consistent reference point for Mitchell and her team across both naturalistic and Live Cinema modes – most visibly *On Being an Angel #1* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1977) provided the poster for Mitchell’s *A Dream Play* (2005). Although Woodman committed suicide at the age of 22, she left behind a vast body of work including over 10,000 negatives. Most of these are self-portraits; Woodman favoured long exposure times that frequently resulted in the photographer’s body blending with the derelict surroundings in which she chose to shoot. Woodman admired Stein, and played with language herself, forming “pirouettes of speech” that she carried everywhere and referred to as “Steinwriting”. Kris Somerville describes that “The yellowed pages of her journals are filled with oddly turned phrases: ‘just-breath summer,’ ‘sand thoughts all from the sea’ and ‘I get immersed in fog and grey monotoness’” (2010: 80).

In a 1973 diary entry Woodman noted: “I think when I get home I should take pictures of objects: purse, hand, etc. ‘clues to a lost woman.’” (Somerville 2010: 82). Her instruction could function as the title for the five final shots of Mitchell’s *Wunschkonzert* (2008). She kept her camera running after Kroetz’s text ran out. Whereas his play ends with Fräulein Rasch, having swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills, sitting “quietly and thoughtfully” (Kroetz 1978: 36), Mitchell appended five minutes of extra imagery, created live. The extreme close-up on Fräulein Rasch projected above the stage cut out abruptly, and the screen stayed black for thirty seconds. When it went live again, it was clear that time had passed. A camera was positioned to capture a shot of the dining table. As this still life was projected onto the screen, and over the course of two minutes, a slowly dawning light illuminated the objects left strewn on the table – empty boxes of

pills, the wine bottle whose contents had been used to wash them down, and an empty glass, positioned next to a bowl where two goldfish circled. Other cameras were positioned to capture establishing shots of empty rooms. The video output cut next to Rasch's empty kitchen, then thirty seconds later an overhead shot focused on her shoes, left empty in the hallway. It then cut to a shot of the empty bathroom, before giving way to the final composition – a close-up on a ticking alarm clock approaching 6 a.m. Suddenly the alarm went off, its shrill and violent ring cutting through the powerful silence that had accompanied this last sequence. Once it had stopped ringing the clock remained in focus a few moments longer, with the sound of birds faintly singing in the dawn. Then the screen cut to black and the show ended.

As in Mitchell's naturalistic work, props became highly charged auratic objects or, in the language of Barthes, functioned as *puncta* that evoked a whole *lost* life external to the frame. Like Woodman's "clues to a lost woman", Mitchell's use of technology to isolate, frame, and enlarge these objects, and to hold our focus on them for an excruciating length of time, meant that, despite her absence, Fräulein Rasch's presence was strongly felt. Somerville writes that in Woodman's photographs where the female subject blurs into objects and spaces, or leaves the frame altogether, the images are nonetheless haunted by "a felt presence in her absence" (2010: 82). As in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*, which Mitchell staged in 1999 and 2007, the failure of a central protagonist to materialise doesn't stop us imagining her.¹⁵¹

Barthes' entry into the discussion moves us towards the psychoanalytical realm. The associations he documents, triggered by his mother's image, invoke a peculiar blending of lens-based media and psychoanalysis that, as Margaret Iversen (1994) suggests, is productively read in relation to Lacan. In fact, Lacan's theory of the mirror-

¹⁵¹ The protean figure of Anne/Annie/Any/Anoushka could never, of course resolve into a single being (indeed, Mitchell asked Crimp to cut the first scene – a series of answer phone messages suggestive of a woman standing at the nexus of these various "attempts" – when she staged the play in 1999). Nevertheless, it triggers evocative associations that link to our reality. In the late 1990s, the allusions to an artist who had committed suicide – one speaker says should have been in a psychiatric unit rather than an art school – would likely invoke thoughts of Sarah Kane.

stage shines clarifying light on the obsessive attention paid to mirrors in Mitchell's *Live Cinema* work, and on the theory of subjectivity that it animates.

The Mirror Stage

Laura Mulvey noted, in her seminal 1975 essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", the "extraneous similarities between screen and mirror" (1999 [1975]: 836), and fused the site of cinematic representation with a trope of identity formation common to the theories of both Freud and Lacan. Mulvey's purpose was to reveal how "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (ibid: 833), using one of patriarchy's own tools – the language of psychoanalytical theory – against itself. She showed how mainstream narrative cinema used its female subjects as the catalysts of a phallogentric identificatory process that helped to define an ego ideal that Mulvey characterised as active and male. Lacan had famously theorised the mirror-stage of development as a young child's formative gaze into a reflective surface in which the fragments of a nascent consciousness gained integrity and wholeness, recognising and identifying an active physical totality as an ideal ego – a process Mulvey described as "the first articulation of the 'I,' of subjectivity" (ibid: 836). Like Lacan's mirror, the screen of mainstream narrative cinema reflected the male ego ideal, but it did so by positioning women as passive objects alternately used to arouse, and help constitute, a subject whose active gaze garnered visual pleasure and achieved a sense of selfhood. Mulvey feared that, without becoming cognisant of this undeclared structural bias, female subjectivity would never emerge as the subject of cinematic exploration.

In Mitchell's *Live Cinema*, mirrors possess a Lacanian ability to reflect more than merely external reality. A technology of reproduction that predates all of those discussed thus far, the mirror often mediates between Mitchell's actors and the digital eyes that track their movements. Its varied uses bring many of Mitchell's key concerns into focus. Like Mulvey and Lacan, Mitchell sees that mirrors play a crucial role in identity formation, but a brief analysis of an extended mirror sequence in *Waves*

demonstrates how much more (or less) comes to life in these primitive representational frames.

Mitchell extracted three short sections of text from part two of Woolf's novel as the basis of a live sequence in which Jinny, Susan and Rhoda stared into the "small looking glass on the stairs" of their boarding school. She also chose to include Kristin Hutchinson's "narrator" as a fourth woman to join this line up, accompanied by text sourced from Woolf's diaries.¹⁵² A freestanding board with a mounted two-way mirror was positioned on a table at stage level. Jinny (Liz Kettle) knelt before it, lit by angled floor lamps, and a camera was positioned behind her, its output streamed directly to the projection screen above, where Jinny appeared to be standing before a mirror hanging on a wall. She examined her face as her thoughts were voiced by another: "I hate the small looking glass on the stairs [...] It shows our heads only. And my lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together" (Mitchell 2008: 31). Once Jinny had passed on to experience the comforts of the full-length mirror on the landing, Susan (Kate Duchêne) took up Jinny's former position; but as her stream of consciousness voiced nostalgic memories of an idyllic country home and her father leaning upon a stile smoking, another actor moved the light source from in front of the mirror to reveal Susan's father interposed between this freestanding board and a second covered in replica wallpaper. The mirror suddenly became transparent, but the effect on screen was of Susan's reflection giving way to the memory that, as her stream of consciousness announced, "I always see, as I pass the looking-glass on the landing, with Jinny in front and Rhoda lagging behind" (ibid: 31). Next came Rhoda (Anastasia Hille). As she focused intently on her reflection the same trick was repeated; this time, however, nobody knelt in the void between mirror and replica wall. As Rhoda's thoughts ran on ("I am not here. I have no face" (ibid: 32)), the video effect was of a girl eerily unable to locate her own image in the mirrored surface before which she stood. Finally, Hutchinson knelt before

¹⁵² See Appendix for a full transcript of this sequence, including references to its sources in Woolf's novel.

the two-way mirror, walking her fingers up the inner rim of its wooden frame. This time a light source shone both in front of and behind the glass, resulting in her face appearing superimposed on that of the actor playing Percival (Jonah Russell), who knelt in the gap. Someone read aloud a diary entry describing Woolf's deceased brother Thoby: "I think of death sometimes as the end of an excursion which I went on when he died" (ibid: 33). Like the effect generated on screen, Woolf's biography became superimposed on her fiction here, seemingly corroborating a dominant critical view that Percival's sudden and devastating death in *The Waves* closely mimics that of Woolf's own brother.

More than merely a reflective surface, Mitchell's mirror is a window onto the psychology, memory and fantasy structures forming the foundation of the subjectivity that stands before it.¹⁵³ In its surface, protagonists temporarily perceive persons and objects triggered by the neurodynamics that constitute selfhood. A matrix of mental processes (imagination, recognition, misrecognition, identification) determine that which is articulated in Mitchell's mirror on the wall (and, indeed, on her screen). Even selfhood's failure, paradoxically, generates a strong sense of an identity, albeit experienced by the character as fragmentation. In the case of Rhoda, for instance, unable to identify a self, Mitchell literally stages the invisibility which Mulvey's essay on cinematic representation sought to render visible. For Rhoda, the mirror-stage literally and metaphorically doesn't function; her inability to achieve identification, wholeness and selfhood actually makes her fractured subjectivity the very subject of the representation (and in this differs from the repressive tendencies of narrative cinema). Despite Rhoda's inability to grasp the 'I' of subjectivity, its presence is constituted by its lack. Rather than flattening women out into spectacle, Mitchell honours the female subject's compromised identity by making her into a protagonist.

¹⁵³ In *Reise durch die Nacht*, Regine sees her abused mother in the mirror; in *Die Gelbe Tapete*, the wallpaper itself functions as a distorted version of a mirror, in which the protagonist sees her own psychosis. She eventually recognises the woman in the wallpaper as herself, and scratches it off in an effort to release her.

The mirror, then, is Mitchell's screen in metaphorical guise, registering a reflexive interplay of representational surface and subjectivity. It foregrounds the relationship between representation, the body, and the gaze. Unlike the male gaze that, for Mulvey, structured mainstream narrative cinema, Mitchell shows her audience women gazing at themselves – often dramatizing the inability of a female gaze to constitute a self. The similarity between this and Ostermeier's view that subjectivity asserts itself in suffering is pointed. In his refusal to acquiesce to the theoretical unravelling of subjectivity consolidated by postmodern, poststructural, and postdramatic theories, Ostermeier insists that both characters and audiences “feel and find themselves in injury and destruction” (1999: 8). In Mitchell's theatre also, forms of psychic injury and destruction experienced by the protagonists force the spectator to feel and find the suffering self, even when that self eludes the protagonist's own grasp.¹⁵⁴

Francesca Woodman's photography once again helps us pinpoint the crucial relationship between subjectivity and representation in Mitchell's theatre. Using her self as her primary subject, Woodman's photographs – full of literal and metaphorical mirrors – work to displace presence in elusive images that, nevertheless, “seem revelatory of a dark, complex inner life” (Somerville 2010: 86). Many of her images, like Mitchell's mirrors, bisect and segment the body. A series of photographs titled *Portrait of a Reputation* (1976-7) show her body gradually disappearing frame by frame.¹⁵⁵ For art historian Harriet Riches, Woodman's extraordinary personal trove of self-representations both “conceals and reveals the subject” (2004: 113).

¹⁵⁴ Gertrude Stein's drama was interested in subjectivity constituted by fragmentation. As Bay-Cheng notes in her study of Stein's work, “the concept of self in the avant-garde is viewed as fundamentally fragmented” (2004: 24); “In the avant-garde, psychologically as well as physiologically, the idea of the complete person became an antiquated myth” (ibid: 24). In contrast to the anxiety this prompted in the early twentieth century, Mitchell isn't worried about a lack of a centre. She prescribes to the “Bundle Theory” of identity, stemming from Buddhist teaching but also developed by David Hume in the eighteenth century. Mitchell told Shevtsova, “We are a constantly changing bundle of people, always reconfiguring ourselves in response to external stimuli. Many scientists think this is how the brain functions. The Bundle Theory suits me” (Shevtsova 2009: 200).

¹⁵⁵ For an illustration of this style see *House* series, Providence, Rhode Island (1976). See also Riches for a thorough discussion of this series, which she refers to as the “staging of an absent self” (2004: 112).

There is one particular Woodman image, *Untitled* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1976), that crystalises the fusion of form and content in Mitchell's practice. Visible in the top right-hand corner is the lower half of a near-naked woman (she wears black shoes) sat on a chair, with the top of the frame cutting through her body at the waist. The central and largest area of the image, however, is focused on a layer of bleach-white dust strewn across the floorboards, in which the black imprint of a body leaves a trace. This "hazy bodily form" was the result of Woodman "imprinting her body onto light-sensitive powder sprinkled over the floorboards, fixing a penumbral image on the whiteness of the ground" (Riches 2004: 111). The seated figure seems positioned in a similar relation to the black human stain as a body to its reflection in a mirror. The light-sensitive powder foregrounds the role of technological reproduction in fixing the traces of the subject. Yet, the partial absence of the half-visible woman centralises Woodman's focus on her residual traces, which, captured through the unusual implementation of artistic tools, resonate with evocative and auratic life. Strong parallels emerge with Mitchell's practice.

Woodman's emphasis on traces (cf. Mitchell's *...some trace of her*) returns us to the representational politics and stakes of Mitchell's rejection of mainstream naturalism that began this chapter. The director's frustration with narrative drama, where active procedures of language, conflict, story – and a focus on external reality – obliterate the undulations of a subjectivity in flux, help us identify Live Cinema's basis in an indirect approach to character, focusing on residual traces that, paradoxically, speak more eloquently than familiar logocentric strategies asking us to encounter the subject head-on. In this, Mitchell's work maps directly over the terms generated by Mulvey's dissection of mainstream narrative cinema, where an active (male) gaze pacifies the female subject.¹⁵⁶ Mitchell's techniques activate that passive subject, but without forcing

¹⁵⁶ Indeed, women take control of image making in Live Cinema, often walking into the frame of a camera they have focused and positioned. In *...some trace of her* Nastasya (Hattie Morahan) took her own self-portraits in a devised sequence based on a pose – disappearing behind wallpaper – taken from a 1977 image from Francesca Woodman's *Space²* series, but the tools she used – a bellows camera – invoked the technology of Lady Hawarden.

her into patterns of action determined by the male gaze. As we have seen, there is also a link to be made with Barthes' *punctum*. Barthes chose literally to focus on his mother's residual traces, searching out photographs that might reveal "the truth of the face I had loved" (2000 [1980]: 67). However, Barthes did not find her in the familiar images that presented her likeness. In these, he recognised her only in fragments, "partially true, and therefore totally false" (ibid: 66); these dumb familiar images "were merely analogical, provoking only her identity, not her truth" (ibid: 70-1). It was a photograph taken of her as a child – before Barthes had ever known her – that took him into "*the impossible science of the unique being*" (ibid: 71).

Barthes warned, however, that it is impossible for an artist to manufacture a *punctum*. Rather than undermine Mitchell's project, this clarifies her creative practice. As a trainee director in 2008, I participated in a workshop delivered by the stage designer Vicki Mortimer, a close collaborator with Mitchell since the two met at Oxford University in the 1980s. Mortimer's session was designed to give us an insight into the director-designer relationship, but it was clear this was heavily mediated by her particular relationship with Mitchell – which remained foundational if no longer exclusive. As we worked on design projects based on plays of our choice, Mortimer advised us to create a "subjective visual bible," a "library of pictures which are your private response to the play. Don't filter." She revealed that, together with Mitchell, she would consult fine art images (in which there is "already a subjective veil") as she began work on a production, encouraging us in turn to "allow unexplainable influences and ideas in. Don't be mistrustful of a purely subjective response". During our sessions, Mortimer revealed that "Katie Mitchell has an encyclopaedia of objects which mean something to her onstage," as an illustration of her conviction that the resonance of every object should be carefully examined by the creative team, even if only "ten percent of audiences will get it." Rather than creating *puncta*, Mitchell *allows them in* to her process. Mitchell, like Barthes, shares in public her response to a personal iconography that resonates strongly. From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, then, her body

of work can be viewed as revelatory of her own subjectivity as much as those of the characters she depicts.

Mitchell's Live Cinema contends that mainstream representational languages are no longer able to realise the chaos of experience that really constitutes subjectivity. Using her screen to hold a mirror up to subjectivity in flux, she invites a comparison with the final theorist to enter this discussion, who – as a filmmaker – also doubles as Mitchell's most profound influence.¹⁵⁷ Andrey Tarkovsky's 1975 film *Mirror* is characterised by a non-linear associative structure that demonstrates his view of montage as a poetic, rather than a critical, device – a way of joining together material which “works above all to lay open the logic of a person's thought” (2003 [1986]: 20). It is in this confluence of poetry and psychology that we return to the terms that began this chapter, and thus arrive full circle. An analysis of Mitchell's *Fräulein Julie* shows us how the technique brings together cinema and the written word in order to author a poetic montage revelatory of inner thought.

Poetry in Motion (*Fräulein Julie*)

Following *Waves*, Mitchell has included poetry in the majority of her Live Cinema productions; for ...*some trace of her*, the actor Pandora Colin wrote the poetic list of “I wants” that opened and closed the production, and woven in elsewhere were verses by Emily Dickinson; in *Wunschkonzert*, Fräulein Rasch's stream of consciousness was formed out of poems by Anne Sexton; for *The Forbidden Zone*, poems written by war nurse Mary Borden provided text and the title, alongside writings by other feminist authors from the period including Woolf, Emma Goldman, Hannah Arendt, and Simone de Beauvoir. This chapter concludes by arguing that, although the aesthetic was founded on novels, poetry distils all of the issues thus far investigated, arising out of Mitchell's montage of writing, character, live performance and cinema. Poetry brings together issues of

¹⁵⁷ Asked to name her favourite film, Mitchell chose “Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* from 1975. It comes very close to showing how we actually experience memory” (Barnett, L 2008).

creation (laying open thought processes of a character) and underpins a theory of reception, functioning for Mitchell as an aesthetic methodology that doubles as a theory of mind. As Tarkovsky wrote, in celebration of “poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema” (2003 [1986]: 18) – encouraging his memoir’s reader not to limit their understanding of poetry to a literary form but to use it instead to constitute cinema’s fundamental laws – poetry describes “a particular way of relating to reality” (ibid: 21).

Mitchell’s *Fräulein Julie* opened with a shot of Kristin’s hands (Cathlen Gawlich) picking flowers. Julie Böwe, who was Kristin’s onscreen face, sat gently humming in a sound-proof booth. Her powerfully amplified melody made the auditorium resonate as if we were inside Kristin’s humming head. Over at a Foley station, Lisa Guth and Maria Aschauer used props to create the noise of the flowers being picked, as depicted on screen, and the sound of Kristin’s footsteps over gravel and on grass. Over the course of a leisurely paced introductory sequence, these various women, tracked by a series of camera operators, moved Kristin from outside into the kitchen of a large nineteenth-century manor house, where she hung the flowers from a hook to dry, and turned to scrutinise her reflection in the kitchen mirror. For the first time, Kristin’s face (Julie Böwe) appeared on screen – mediated by both camera and mirror. Mitchell playfully suggested the futility of seeking Platonic original forms amid this series of reflections within reflections, not least because Julie Böwe herself was well clear of the kitchen set that occupied centre stage. Positioned instead in the foreground, with a replica mirror and a freestanding camera capturing her reflection in close-up, the “real” Kristin was displaced by a stand-in (Cathlen Gawlich), who stood at the mirror in the “real” kitchen. Gawlich’s back was filmed for an in-context establishing shot with which Böwe’s close-up was intercut. Although the consistent use of Böwe’s face on screen lent helpful continuity for spectators, it became clear that no one element (aural, visual, corporeal) was the privileged site of authenticity. Rather, Kristin’s consciousness would emerge out of the interplay of all of these elements, generated by a multiplicity of stage labourers.

As Kristin examined her features in the mirror, in the sound-proof booth Laura Tratnik¹⁵⁸ read a poem that functioned as Kristin’s stream of consciousness – the first four sections of Inger Christensen’s poem *Alfabet* (1981). On screen, Böwe scrutinised her reflection and slowly touched her features with her hands as we heard Tratnik’s voice-over:

Apricot trees exist; Apricot trees exist

bracken exists; and blackberries, blackberries;

bromine exists; and hydrogen, hydrogen

cicadas exist; chicory, chromium,

citrus trees; cicadas exist;

cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum

doves exist; dreamers, dolls

killers exist; doves, doves;

haze, dioxin and day; day

exists; death day; and poems

exist; poems, day, death

(2012 [1981]: 132-5)¹⁵⁹

Inger Christensen locates the metaphysical in commonplace objects, using the Fibonacci sequence as a formal engine, and so mirrors Stein’s use of repetition, association, and

¹⁵⁸ Tratnik also played Fräulein Julie on screen. I refer to her throughout because, although Luise Wolfram took on this role subsequently (and for the production’s tour to the Barbican), it was Tratnik who I first saw in Berlin, and who appears on the theatre’s archive recording.

¹⁵⁹ This is Susanna Nied’s English translation of Christensen’s Norwegian original, which was spoken in German in Mitchell’s production. Christensen’s poem, based on the Fibonacci sequence, contains fourteen sections each based on one letter of the alphabet (a-n). The words for “day” “death” and “poetry”, for instance, all begin with the letter “d” in Norwegian.

surprising juxtapositions to reveal the thing existing. Out of tight formal constraints, a personal consciousness of the world is disclosed. Importantly, this modern Scandinavian poet acted as a counterweight to Strindberg and his casual nineteenth-century misogyny, evoking a complex inner life for a character whose emotions and processes of decision-making are given scant attention in the play.¹⁶⁰

This opening section also introduced audiences to all of the dominant visual imagery that would recur throughout. As Tratnik continued reading other sections of Christensen's poem, Kristin went about preparing the abortion potion that, as we would later discover, Fräulein Julie had requested for her pregnant bitch. The screen showed Kristin lighting a candle with a match; passing a vase of yellow flowers on the kitchen table; pouring water into a basin and staring at her reflection as the water settled; and making the potion itself in a saucepan (using dried flowers hanging on the wall, as well as chopped offal), then pouring the distillation into a small brown glass bottle that she uncorked with a "pop". As well as this visual imagery, the sequence also established dominant sounds that would be used to creative effect throughout. Kristin wound a clock on the wall with a key, foregrounding the ticking that underscored this whole sequence, and the sound of running water featured prominently – from the jug pouring its contents into the basin to the gushing tap under which Kristin washed a dirty cloth.

Mitchell's adaptation thus opened with 15 minutes of action that occurs before Strindberg's play, but emerges out of its logic – a visualisation of Kristin's Given Circumstances. In this sequence, which ended with more poetry from Christensen¹⁶¹ as Kristin stared intently at the brown corked bottle and its deathly contents, Mitchell included all of the visual and aural impressions that would swirl together to form the subjective matter from which Kristin's three dreams would be fashioned. The screen went dark, and time moved forward (matched by the sound of a clock ticking at double

¹⁶⁰ In his preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg describes Kristin as "a female slave" and a "subordinate figure" who only receives abstract characterisation because of her position in a servile class who are "without individuality, showing only one side of themselves while at work" (1953: 111).

¹⁶¹ The 'h' section of her poem *Alfabet*.

speed), leaving morning behind and bringing audiences to the evening, the starting point of Strindberg's play.

The potion bottle, sounds of water running and dripping, reflections (in water, in windows, in mirrors, in the contents of a spilled vase) – these became the associative landmarks that would organise and propel Mitchell's exploration of Kristin's consciousness. As in Christensen's poetry (indeed, poetry in general), a subjective logic supplanted linear temporality. Tarkovsky shows how this organisational strategy links with Mitchell's rejection of mainstream naturalism. He argues in favour of poetic links over "traditional theatrical writing which links images through the linear, rigidly logical development of the plot" (2003 [1986]: 18-20) and thus "rest on a facile interpretation of life's complexities" (ibid: 20).¹⁶² Poetry is positioned here as the ultimate distillation of the techniques explored throughout this chapter, designed to probe a modernist, subjective, temporality. Dream logic, in this production, became a synecdoche for these strategies.

Kristin's first dream occurred during what Strindberg scripted as her onstage sleep as Jean and Julie talk. The kitchen – now suffused with a ghostly white light – is suddenly inhabited by Kristin alone. She sees herself in the window onto the garden, reflected in a pane of glass. Water drips down its reflective surface and it seems to be lightly raining. This image gives way to a shot of hands on a wet mirror. Cutting back to the window, that camera now shows Kristin positioned outside, taking the place of her reflection and peering inside. A vase has fallen over on the table, leaving a pool of spreading water across its surface in which the yellow flowers are strewn. Kristin now appears back in the kitchen again and picks up one of the stems, but a POV shot establishes that it pricks her fingers and she bleeds. Gradually, muffled snatches of Jean and Julie's dialogue (mediated by microphones) and blurred visual distortions on camera

¹⁶² Although Tarkovsky rejects linearity, he does so in order to achieve a deeper realism. As Sitney argues, he "saw cinema as a means for the acute observation of a complex temporality that fluidly spanned duration, memory, and dreams; for him, to 'sculpt in time' was to unveil the truth of lived time, not to invent imaginatively new temporal structures" (2014: 211).

create the impression of Kristin rising out of the deep sleep, and the dream in which she's been lost, and the kitchen set is returned to its pre-dream state. From the vantage point of Kristin's sleeping head, a camera finally settles on Julie picking petals from one of the yellow flowers. Then, just as Julie moves to kiss Jean, Kristin stands up, alerting the pair that she's now awake.

Even in the "naturalistic" episodes of this adaptation, these associative images continued to proliferate. Following an agonised journey in which a pained Kristin found her way through a warren of corridors to reach her bedroom, Christensen's poetry was used again as voiceover and Kristin was shown staring at reflections in her bedroom mirror and the water bowl of her wash station as she prepared for bed. Once she lay down, a second dream was enacted for the camera. As the theatre swelled with ambient drones and metallic scraping, a set up was created on the stage's foreground that facilitated a dream-shot of Kristin's bare legs, kneeling on grass and bending over a pool to see her face reflected. She runs her hands through her image, and when the water settles again, Jean's reflection stares back. A close-up shot then shows Kristin removing the bung from the small brown bottle, pouring its contents into the water. A tight close-up on Kristin's left eye, with light reflected from the water dancing across her skin, suddenly gives way to a shot of Julie leaving a bedroom with a candle in her hand. The image itself is filmed reflected in a tray of water, and Julie's ephemeral shape (blurred like a double exposure) dances across its ripples. Julie crouches and appears to use her candle to set the bottom of the screen alight, as an actor technician lights combustible material concealed along one edge of the water tray, and on screen Julie's physical shape is consumed by fire and water. The screen cuts back to a tight close-up on Kristin's eye, this time lit by dancing flames. Tillman Strauß (who plays Jean on screen) reads more poetry by Christensen in the sound-proof booth.¹⁶³ The shot returns to the bedroom

¹⁶³ *Butterfly Valley: A Requiem* is a meditation on mortality and transformation written as a sonnet sequence. The line of the poem quoted at this point stated "At night I dream of death".

doorway, but Julie has disappeared. The dream ends, and Kristin gets up from her bed, putting a glass to the floor to amplify the sound of Jean and Julie arguing downstairs.¹⁶⁴

What these dreams reveal is that, although in Strindberg's play Kristin is contained by the limitations the playwright writes, here Mitchell exposes and explores the gaps and absences. Just as Kristin strove to make sense of the shards of Strindberg's play available to her – based on her limited visual and aural access to Jean and Julie – Mitchell's audience were invited to connect images, sounds and events whose relationships were not immediately apparent. As spectators witnessed Kristin working hard to gather and process information, similar demands were placed on us as interpreters of meaning. In presenting its audience with such fragments, Mitchell's work enacts a theory of spectatorship articulated eloquently by Tarkovsky, for whom associative linking invites the spectator's "affective as well as rational appraisal" (2003 [1986]: 20). For him, such an approach shows great respect for spectators,¹⁶⁵ inviting them to become participants "in the process of discovering life," sharing in the "misery and joy of bringing an image into being" (ibid: 20). As we saw earlier, Mitchell conceives of the creative relationship between a novel and its reader in similar terms. As Ben Brantley (2008) saw when Mitchell's first Live Cinema show toured to New York, and in line with Tarkovsky's levelling of producer and receiver, "*Waves* turns us all into everyday artists, accompanying Woolf as she puts the pieces together once again".

Through Live Cinema, then, Mitchell invites her audience into the artist's studio. Technology allows her to select and frame the various tools she uses as a practitioner. Instead of telling her actors to go and read poetry, or to consult images that will inform their construction of character, she includes these elements as parts of the production itself. Offstage spaces, instead of backstage constructions that facilitate total

¹⁶⁴ Strauss and Tratnik performed their dialogue in the sound-proof booth, and an offstage technician applied effects to distort and clarify their speech in response to Kristin's efforts to hear through the floorboards. The effect in the auditorium was that spectators experienced Strindberg's dialogue as subjective sound, mediated by Kristin's experience.

¹⁶⁵ See Tarkovsky: "The method whereby the artist obliges the audience to build the separate parts into a whole, and to think on, further than has been stated, is the only one that puts the audience on a par with the artist in their perception of the film" (2003 [1986]: 21).

actor immersion, are explored and revealed to audiences using Live Cinema – focused by each production being filtered through a single subjectivity. In technology, Mitchell has found a metaphor for her own perceptual process. It focuses and frames her increasingly selective interest in subjective perspectives and the feminist statements they facilitate. Rather than deconstructing naturalism, technology allows Mitchell to juxtapose naturalism’s interest in inner and outer, objectivity and interiority, a delicate balancing act that, as we saw in Chapter 1, caused some dispute between Stanislavsky and Chekhov.¹⁶⁶

Writing has been crucial to this whole endeavour. Consistent to all of the novels and poems that Mitchell selects as raw material is their desire to forge new links between words and things existing – which is the goal of the linguistic strategy known as “metaphor”. Writing has been crucial to this endeavour because, since language itself emerged, words have been used to make allusive, associative links with the things they describe as a way of communicating and sharing aspects of subjective experience. The linguist Mark Turner recently went so far as to claim that metaphor itself constitutes consciousness, asserting the centrality of metaphor not only to language, but also to mental life in general. He seeks to substantiate Eve Sweetser’s assertion that “the mind is a body moving through space” (Turner 1996: 43) by showing that metaphors illustrate corporeal, physical experience intertwining with mental activity, allowing us to process the world in relation to our own experience of movement and action.¹⁶⁷ The claims made by Turner, crashing together literature and cognitive science, are borne out by the fact that all the novelists, theorists, neuroscientists and practitioners examined throughout this chapter quickly fall back on metaphors in order, metaphorically speaking, to shine light onto consciousness itself. P. Adams Sitney’s analysis of Tarkovsky

¹⁶⁶ Compare, for instance, Stanislavsky’s tendency to over-produce realistic background sound effects such as crickets and trains with Chekhov’s careful and selective poetic distillation of aural effects (e.g. the breaking string in *The Cherry Orchard*).

¹⁶⁷ In analysing writers as diverse as Homer, Dante and Oliver Sacks, Turner finds many examples of “parabolic stories of mental events”: from Odysseus’s descent to the Underworld to the voices of travel in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* (1996: 44).

makes this point explicit. He writes that, in Tarkovsky's cinema, "poetry is more than an associative psychology; it is ontology" (2014: 209); through poetic links, we come to discern "the indiscernible movement of Being" (ibid: 210).

The confluence of theorists drawn on in this chapter has seen consciousness explored in relation to poetic, psychoanalytical, neuroscientific and psychological methodologies. Mitchell montages all these approaches. It is too easy to say that in her theatre the boundaries between poetry, psychology, cognitive science and the unconscious break down; rather, Mitchell's spectators are invited to draw their own inferences about, for example, the concrete stage poetry of a polystyrene plate being ripped apart next to a microphone and its precise relation to the subjectivity being evoked. Regardless of the specific understandings of these relations generated by a spectator, Live Cinema concretises a theory of mind. In doing so, it penetrates not only the glass window of naturalism's fourth wall, but also the skull of the characters it depicts.

At the end of Mitchell's *Fräulein Julie*, a third dream was depicted. As in Strindberg's text, Kristin last saw Jean and Julie as she left for church on Sunday morning. As she walked out, she overheard Julie asking Jean to show her a way out of her predicament. This overheard exchange didn't, as in conventional naturalist theatre, cue blackout; rather it triggered a replay. Mitchell took her audience back into Kristin's first dream, although with some significant differences. This time, the light drizzle outside was transformed into heavy rainfall, and the auditorium filled with its harsh sound, like nails falling onto a corrugated tin roof.¹⁶⁸ Kristin stands outside the window, looking into the kitchen. The table is covered with water spilt from the vase – but this time the water flows over the table's edge, and more water drips into its pool from an undisclosed source. A camera, in a slow-pan, shows the brown glass bottle lying

¹⁶⁸ My metaphor here is the linguistic version of what Mitchell achieves by transforming Foley into a live performance strategy. Rather than making the difference between reality and artificiality pointed, the use of unusual objects to represent familiar and recognisable sounds actually materialises metaphor.

uncorked in the pool of water. It continues panning, revealing Kristin, now in the kitchen, picking up from the soaked table a yellow flower which once again pricks her finger. This time, however, the dream runs on. Kristin drops the stem back into the pool of bloody water, and places her hands on the back of a kitchen chair. A camera captures her face in a tight close up from below, and Kristin tilts her head down to look directly into the camera's lens. For the first time, she is looking directly at us, the audience, through the screen. The screen itself, hanging above the stage, has suddenly transformed into a giant mirror. As Böwe's eyes confront us directly, we as spectators find ourselves positioned as Kristin, staring straight back as if at our own reflection. It's as if our identification with this woman is complete. We are in her head, seeing through her eyes. Böwe's eyes widen and the screen flares white.

Rather than mapping a traditional narrative trajectory, this Live Cinema event culminated in the experience of identification. When I asked Mitchell what kind of impact theatre could have, one of her answers was to get people "imagining other people a bit more generously" (2012). Regardless of whether this was her aim in *Fräulein Julie*, Live Cinema's invitation to spectators to inhabit the very mind of its subject makes us finally unable to dismiss a woman such as Kristin as "without individuality".

4.

A SYNAESTHESIA OF EYE AND EAR: SENSE AND SENSUALITY IN THOMAS OSTERMEIER'S SHAKESPEARES

Shakespeare is more intelligent than I am, and I trust he will provide me with the answers through three-dimensional thinking—which is theatre.

—Thomas Ostermeier (Pearson 2015)

Shakespeare is a god, and Ostermeier is his prophet.

—Fabienne Darge (2011)

Introduction

Recently named artistic director of the Schaubühne, the 30-year-old Thomas Ostermeier was asked in 1999 if Shakespeare would feature in his forthcoming repertoire. In his prescient reply, he suggested that it would be better to wait until he was 40 before tackling this challenge: “I see no pressure. I have a great reverence for [Shakespeare] – and do not flatter myself to be able to control it already” (Jörder 1999). Ostermeier’s *Hamlet* (2008) premiered at the Schaubühne 14 days after the director’s fortieth birthday. Its conspicuous global success paved the way for productions of *Othello* (2010), *Maß für Maß* (*Measure for Measure*, 2011), and a *Richard III* (2015) staged in the smallest of the Schaubühne’s three auditoria, reconfigured at great expense to imitate the actor-audience relationship yielded by the original Globe theatre.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ See Wildermann (2015) who put the cost of the construction at six figures, largely financed by private donors (including Friends of the Theatre). Discounted from this chronology is Ostermeier’s 2006 collaboration with Constanza Macras – a dynamic dance-theatre piece inspired by *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). This production used short extracts from Shakespeare’s text alongside Jan Kott’s writings, among other sources. The main focus, however, was on a choreographic exploration of couples uniting and separating. Ostermeier:

As Ostermeier's repertoire has expanded, so has the historical consciousness of a theatre that makes contemporaneity its trademark.¹⁷⁰ André Murmot (2015) celebrated Ostermeier's *Richard III* as a clear progression from his riotous and contemporary *Hamlet*, praising the director's avoidance of political updates or "convulsive struggle[s] for symbolic links" and deeming him to have "staged an almost old-master evening of Shakespeare, with only actors and text at its centre".¹⁷¹ Murmot's appraisal is consonant with Ostermeier's own deference to Shakespeare's dramaturgical skill, and sets his Shakespeare productions at the nexus of tensions between excessive directorial interventions and fidelity to text – inevitably complicated by working on these plays in and through translation. Most crucially, however, Ostermeier's engagement with Shakespeare – paralleling the results of Mitchell's encounter with Chekhov analysed in Chapter 1 – thrust three-dimensionality to the fore of his thinking about theatre. His statements concerning Shakespearean text are riddled with spatial metaphors that have in turn triggered embodied means of exploring questions of identity and perception, questions which have energised and re-focused Ostermeier's most recent theatre.

This director thus took a new turn roughly contemporaneously with Mitchell who, as we have seen, reinvigorated her practice by staging novels mediated through the early technologies of modernism (and facilitated by twenty-first century digital tools). Ostermeier reached further backwards into history, shifting period rather than literary form. Having established his career at Die Baracke with a physically dynamic performance idiom stimulated by new writing, and following the consolidation of his

"Constanza completely ignored text and completely was not interested in serving the writer, and this created a great freedom and great liberty in working on Shakespeare" (Dickson 2013).

¹⁷⁰ This is literally the case in that the theatre's slogan "Zeit.Genossen" puns on "enjoyable times" and "contemporaries". See: <http://www.studioadhoc.de/projekt/schaubuhne-am-lehniner-platz/>

¹⁷¹ If we include the Ostermeier/Macras *Ein Sommernachtstraum* an even clearer trajectory emerges. *Richard III* demonstrates Ostermeier's move beyond the trendy nightclub vibe of this dance theatre piece towards something far more historically engaged, and less obviously transgressive. Following the pop-culture references that littered Ostermeier's *Hamlet*, the Venetian polychoral music used in *Maß für Maß* illustrated Ostermeier's growing interest in a historicised approach to Shakespeare, leading ultimately to the physical construction of the Berlin Globe built to house *Richard III*. See also Becker (2015), who described Mayenburg's version and Ostermeier's production of *Maß für Maß* as "a beautiful contemporary reading" that was "read out of the text and not loaded on top of it".

success at the Schaubühne through key naturalist dramas, he entered a third clearly discernable phase shaped by this early modern material he newly encountered. Fascinatingly, his proposal for maintaining the Schaubühne's recently constructed Globe-inspired auditorium as a space in which to stage "not only classical work" (Wildermann 2015) signals a director coming full circle. Nevertheless, for both Ostermeier and Mitchell, engaging with new textual stimuli prompted them to revise their work with actors, reshape their rehearsal processes, and reconfigure (literally and metaphorically) the relationship between stage and auditorium. As a result of these manoeuvres, and with a new kind of clarity, consciousness emerged as the pivotal concern for both practitioners, although in starkly contrasting ways.

This chapter explores the practical and ideological implications of Shakespeare for Ostermeier's approach, and his persistent interest in the Renaissance male protagonist whose consciousness is defined by his sense of alienation from the world. Although he felt ill-equipped to control this material in his thirties, his eventual embrace of Shakespeare's drama reveals a practitioner learning to be less controlling of the productions that ensued, their potential meanings, and the possibilities of their reception. The results of this work are also detectable in the physical violation of the fourth wall that occurred in Ostermeier's *Ein Volksfeind* (2012), analysed in Chapter 2. His post-Shakespeare traversal of that threshold complements Mitchell's use of technology and the novel form to force a similar breach.

After having established in Part I what Ostermeier uses Shakespeare to generate – an innovative performance language founded on complex and productive interactions with both an English source text and its German translation – Part II takes a different approach and explores what Shakespeare reveals about Ostermeier through the patterns to be perceived in the director's choices. His admiration of Shakespeare is a selective admiration, and the plays and characters on which he has thus far focused illuminate specific concerns that dominated the most recent decade of his practice. To date, he has chosen from amongst the plays that – whether History, Comedy or Tragedy – are driven

by a male protagonist. In each case this protagonist embodies, emotionally and/or physically, literally or metaphorically, a twisted form whose experience is fundamentally “out of joint” with the surrounding world.¹⁷² Richard III, the Duke in *Maß*, Iago in *Othello*, and Hamlet are all characters who live through soliloquy, communicating their feelings of alienation directly to the audience; in Ostermeier’s stagings they have each enjoyed special focus, and been given control of the spatial, technological and temporal dynamics of the productions that house them. Using these protagonists to knock through the wall that separates actor and character, as well as stage and auditorium, Ostermeier has fed a growing fascination with theatre as a shared laboratory (for actor, director and spectator), which depends upon “play” as its key method.

PART I

Bilingual Bardolatry

Speaking in English and in London, Ostermeier chose to address the audience at the first international conference held in his honour with a keynote titled “‘Totus mundus agit histrionem’: Staging and Playing Shakespeare”. He circulated photocopies of an extract from 3.1 of *Hamlet* – beginning with ‘To be or not to be’, and including most of the Nunnery scene between Hamlet and Ophelia¹⁷³ – and discussed the problematic nature of a piece of text that “has no answers, but [raises] many questions” (Ostermeier 2014). Ostermeier thus revealed his interest in “Old” British writing as well as New, demonstrating his capacity to think about this text in (early modern) English alongside his practical investigation of the play with German actors, mediated by a translation.¹⁷⁴ It soon transpired that the director’s knowledge of the text went far beyond the modern

¹⁷² Some of these characteristics distinguish the Shakespearean protagonists Ostermeier has indicated he’d like to direct next – King Lear and Shylock (Pearson 2015) – but intriguingly they do not control the dramatic structures or breach the fourth wall in the same way.

¹⁷³ Ostermeier’s discussion of this soliloquy did not engage with the critical debate surrounding the placement of this famous speech, located earlier in the first Quarto.

¹⁷⁴ Ostermeier is fluent in English, French and German. McGinn (2011), interviewing him for *Time Out*, found him to be “more precise in his second language than many native English speakers”. In contrast, Mitchell relies on translators not only to converse with German actors but also to provide English versions of scripted material in German (and vice versa).

German versions prepared for him by the playwright and dramaturg Marius von Mayenburg.

More surprisingly, the disposition of Ostermeier's keynote resembled that of a prominent Shakespeare scholar. Six months earlier Professor Ann Thompson – editor of *Hamlet Arden III* – circulated photocopies of the full 3.1 scene among her audience at the third Annual London Shakespeare Lecture. She began by arguing that this famous scene “is in fact very strange and raises a number of difficult questions that pervade the whole of what is in fact a deeply unsettling and problematic text” (Thompson 2014).

These dissimilar speakers at totally unconnected events both used exactly the same tactic in order to express their fascination with the difficulties raised by Shakespearean text, having each spent years going word-by-word through the play (either on the page or in rehearsal). Whereas Thompson drew on her experience of sifting through discrepancies between its Q1, Q2, and Folio variations, Ostermeier considered the practical demands of the scene in its most frequently produced version (Q2); both, however, concentrated their attention on the question of “Who's there?” which, as each of them noted, constitutes the play's first utterance.¹⁷⁵

Thompson's insistence that, regardless of its placement, “To be or not to be” is “not strictly speaking a soliloquy in any of the three texts” (2014) captured an important aspect of Shakespeare's non-verbal dramaturgy – his choreography of bodies in space. Having highlighted the onstage presence of other players, she left implicit the repercussions for Hamlet's “soliloquy” and its potential meanings. This was an issue that Ostermeier explored explicitly. He set out the various levels of awareness and surveillance governing each character's experience of this famous speech (occurring, in his version, midway through 3.1). In elucidating the ways in which “the characters themselves have multiple perspectives on the situation” – Polonius and Claudius overhearing it in hiding, Ophelia preparing for confrontation – he positioned Hamlet in

¹⁷⁵ This is the case in Q2 and the Folio, although in Q1 (the “bad quarto”) the opening line reads: “Stand. Who is that?”.

a “triple theatrical situation”, aware of the “double situation” of Ophelia and the hidden listeners lurking in the vicinity (Ostermeier 2014). Just as Thompson argued that “there is nothing straightforward about *Hamlet*” (2014), Ostermeier similarly embraced the generative potential of its metatheatrical complexity, contending that Shakespeare’s multiplication of theatrical situations “liberates the actor” because “there is no right or wrong” (2014). Instead of excavating the “truth” of a scene, speech, or character, he encouraged his auditors to perceive in Shakespeare’s writing “multiple ‘I’s who deal with the situations [they] are confronted with by playing” (ibid).

These striking echoes corroborate the response a colleague shared with me following Ostermeier’s keynote, which was one of surprise that this German iconoclast had delivered a speech suited to an English literature lecture hall. Rather than fleshing out his own artistic vision, concept, or interpretation of Shakespeare, Ostermeier had asked his audience to look at a scene and think about it – as indeed had Thompson.¹⁷⁶ It should come as no surprise that his choice of topic and method puzzled some at the symposium, shattering the reverence for a radical non-conformist that some who had gathered hoped to feel; Ostermeier’s keynote replaced the figure of the subversive director with the notion of the supreme Shakespeare – and the English text.

Indeed, in an English-language context, his keen interest in Shakespeare’s written word seems paradoxical, especially given the reception of his *Hamlet* in London in 2011;¹⁷⁷ *The Independent* reviewer Kate Bassett (2011) found that “the diehard avant-gardist Thomas Ostermeier [...] play[ed] fast and loose with the script,” and readers of a feature on Ostermeier in *The Guardian* (Dickson 2011b), appearing in the same week, had their attention caught by a headline in which the director of this “radical production” proclaimed, “The play’s a mess!” – qualified in the article itself as a response to its enormous length, its unruly plot lines, and the need to carve a manageable amount of

¹⁷⁶ Ostermeier had been discussing 3.1 of *Hamlet* in these terms for a number of years at public discussions, including an interview with Ian Rickson at the Goethe Institut in 2011.

¹⁷⁷ See also Bowie-Sell (2011): “Thomas Ostermeier and his Schaubühne theatre company from Berlin like to tear open classic plays, mash together their innards and reassemble them”; Kellaway (2011): “This is a ripping-up of the rule book.”

material out of its plentiful possibilities. Those that read on discovered that, despite – or perhaps because of – not being “a well-made play”, Ostermeier still found *Hamlet* to be “genius”. Interviewing the “famously iconoclastic director” on the occasion of his *Hamlet* touring to Dublin, Peter Crawley (2014) found him to be “disappointingly reverential” about Shakespeare. However, although early modern English text accompanied his *Hamlet* at the Barbican in 2011 on surtitles, Aneta Mancewicz argued that its “striking contrast” with the “German lines spoken on stage (at times simple and vulgar)” was palpable, even for British critics (2014: 99).

From these assessments, it seems that there is a discrepancy between the director’s public statements and his work. The gulf between performance and playtext that Mancewicz argues was materialised by the Barbican surtitles contradicts Ostermeier’s avowed interest in the Shakespearean script. One way of resolving this difficulty is to surmise that Ostermeier’s bardolatry extends only as far as his admiration for Shakespeare’s construction of situations, circumventing the difficulties (and rewards) of intricate and often archaic poetic language. As he told the *Financial Times*:

In a translation you can make it more modern, you can rewrite how people talk. English people have to deal with the fact that it is probably the most beautiful literature that was ever written but at the same time it sounds a bit awkward and dated, and even some English audiences don’t understand when they hear the lines on stage for the first time. (Hogan 2011)

Ostensibly, his statement lends credence to the assumption that he finds Shakespeare’s antiquated language of secondary interest – even that it needs to be re-written in order to allow contemporary audiences access to a supplementary, and more interesting, aspect of Shakespeare’s practical craft.¹⁷⁸ Certainly the keynotes of both Ostermeier and

¹⁷⁸ Yet Ostermeier himself recognises that, despite gains, there are also losses: “A lot of British directors who are friends of mine envy us for the necessity of having to translate Shakespeare

Thompson supported the notion of a dual text, which they characterised as simultaneously a playtext centred on the spoken word and as a performance text that gestures towards (rather than prescribes) somatic, sensual and embodied dimensions.

However, this explanation falls short of articulating the complex relationship between playtext and performance text in Ostermeier's theatre. His work challenges the over-simplified notion of a performance text as a blueprint that can be followed in isolation from the spoken word. The most literal illustration of a counterpoint between Shakespeare's early modern language and the German performance that Ostermeier crafts is the gradual intrusion of English into his Shakespeare productions. Lars Eidinger's Hamlet deliberately communicated "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.581-2)¹⁷⁹ as the only line in English (in Berlin and on tour) – a tentative first-step towards speaking Shakespeare's language which, as a tool of special emphasis, also served to underline the production's interest in theatricality's ability to disclose, rather than disguise, reality.¹⁸⁰ By the time of their latest collaboration on Shakespeare, Ostermeier and Eidinger decided to repeat Richard III's entire first and last speeches in Shakespeare's own words following Mayenburg's modern German translations. Shakespeare's language, as well as his dramaturgy, preoccupies the director, his translator, his designer, and his actors. To develop this claim, the treatment of Shakespeare's playtext (or the spoken word) in Ostermeier's theatre must first be explored. Perhaps counterintuitively, it transpires that translation doesn't cut ties between German performance and Shakespearean text – instead it allows the director to devise new links between the early modern page and the Schaubühne's visual stage.¹⁸¹

because then you can create a new world. But then I envy you for having the beauty of the language in English" (Pearson 2015).

¹⁷⁹ All quotations from Shakespeare's works referenced in this chapter refer to the following edition: Shakespeare, William (1997) *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., New York: W. W. Norton.

¹⁸⁰ In Ostermeier's *Othello*, Stephan Stern (Iago) offered up the single English line: "I ha't. It is engendered. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.3.385-6).

¹⁸¹ The theatre's German name can be literally translated as visual (*schau*) stage (*bühne*).

Translation: “Going deep inside the text”

The Shakespearean scholar James C. Bulman suggests that acts of translation inevitably “subvert the authority of Shakespeare’s text” in that they do “ideological, ethnological, and cultural work that can only be achieved extra-linguistically in productions which remain faithful to the authorized text” (1996: 8). However, it must be noted that Bulman is actually encouraging native speakers to take their lead from “foreign” theatrical styles. These, in his view, serve to “revitalize the plays for contemporary audiences” – and thus overcome stagnant conventions of Shakespeare production that remain not only overly beholden to an “authorized” text, but subject to its “tyranny” (1996: 8).¹⁸² His comments also imply that translation itself might be understood as a form of performance, where creative choices are brought to bear on a text in much the same way as occurs when a director and a group of actors put on a production.

Bulman’s analysis of translation offers a useful guide to Ostermeier and Mayenburg’s approach. The director has characterised their process as un-German; he told Andrew Dickson (2013a) that German directors of Shakespeare are typically more interested in painting striking stage-pictures around the text (the example he used was asking actors to piss in buckets) than “going deep inside the text”. According to Ostermeier, he and Mayenburg are not interested in “stupid, modernized versions, using street slang” but instead strive “to be as truthful as possible to the meaning” of Shakespeare’s original lines (Modreanu 2010). As a result, they reject blank verse: Ostermeier has variously insisted that, because the German language uses far more syllables than English, attempting to preserve the poetry often distorts the sense (Modreanu 2010); that “[Marius] doesn’t respect the verse because he wants to have the thought” (Dickson 2013); and that he and Mayenburg endeavour to translate, in their German versions, “content against the form” (Easterman 2013). Positing such aims

¹⁸² Lyn Gardner made the same appeal to British directors in a *Guardian* blog, asking them to learn from their foreign counterparts and “set classic texts free” (Gardner 2012). Fascinatingly, she cited Ostermeier’s work on Ibsen and Katie Mitchell’s production of *The Seagull* (2006) as positive examples of directors approaching classic texts with new ideas.

(content, meaning, sense, thought), Ostermeier seemingly masks subjective valuations with terms that smack of objective clarity. However, he is also the first to acknowledge that the meanings they perceive in the text are contingent and limited, claiming “Every generation writes its own Shakespeare” (Modreanu 2010). The “sense” he and Mayenburg perceive in (and create from) the language of these plays is a product of, to use Bulman’s term, their own “revitalising” gazes.¹⁸³

An example from *Hamlet* serves to clarify their approach. Seeking to discover possible meanings behind Hamlet’s response to Claudius, “I am too much i’t’h’ sun” (1.2.67), Ostermeier told Dickson (2013) that at least three interpretations immediately sprang to mind. He insisted that, although impossible to distil every meaning into a single German phrase, Mayenburg tries to get close to some of them as “it is worth trying to make the audience understand this complexity of thinking”. Hamlet’s words two lines later, “A little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.65), fed into the meaning director and translator perceived in “I am too much i’t’h’ sun” (i.e. of the new king, who attempts to name me as his son, and I don’t want to be this close to him and his corrupted kingdom¹⁸⁴). In Mayenburg’s version, both lines were concentrated into a single German sentence. In response to Claudius’s “Und nun zu dir, mein Neffe Hamlet, und mein Sohn – ” (*And now to you, my nephew Hamlet, and my son –*), Hamlet cut him off with “Näher verwandt, als mir lieb ist” (*[We are] closer related than suits me*). As the line was slightly muffled (Eidinger churlishly scoffed chicken from a take-away carton as he was being addressed), Claudius asked him to repeat what he had said. Sacrificing the pun in the original, this example shows how Mayenburg’s translation fixes what an emotional *realist* production might communicate “extra-linguistically” – form, wordplay, rhythm

¹⁸³ Although Mayenburg is credited as the author of these adaptations, he works closely with Ostermeier. At the beginning of the translation process for *Hamlet*, for example, they discussed the adaptation together for ten days in Cuba, where Mayenburg had been invited to receive an award. Exploring key lines of Shakespeare’s play in English, they also generated ideas for the production’s visual aesthetic alongside the translation (Dickson 2013).

¹⁸⁴ This is a paraphrase of Ostermeier’s reading of the line in Dickson (2013).

and imagery are understood by these practitioners as revelatory of a process of thinking, and they probe the psychology behind the poetry.

This approach to translation, however, has elicited criticism in Germany. Reviewing *Hamlet*, Hartmut Krug (2008) argued, “Although Mayenburg seeks to discover a functionalist language, which in its neutrality and sobriety should express the impression of the characters and the relationships of the court, one misses the poetic barbs of Schlegel’s translation or the sensual power of the translation by Erich Fried”. Reinhard Wengierek (2010), reviewing *Othello*, similarly mourned the fact that Mayenburg’s version in no way captured the fall from the heights of “the sublime to the wretched, from sweet to sour, from purity to muck”.¹⁸⁵ These critics perceive the promotion of sense over sound and poetry as problematic. Manuel Brug (2008), regarding Ostermeier’s *Hamlet*, went so far as to warn off literary purists: “Anyone looking for the author Shakespeare will find instead the director’s bag of popular tricks.”

What these critics fail to address, however, is that none of these German translations – from Schlegel to Fried – are Shakespeare. For example, Schlegel’s poetry encourages the listener or reader to see images, but often less precise ones than their English counterparts, using words with fewer or different resonances to those they translate. Schlegel’s version of “A little more than kin and less than kind” (*Mehr als befreundet, weniger als Freund*), when converted back into English, reads as “More than close friends, less than friend”. Similarly his version of “I am too much i’t’h’ sun” (*Ich habe zuviel Sonne*) means, literally, “I have too much sun”. In pursuing poetry, Schlegel invites us to hear Hamlet thinking about Claudius in terms of friendship rather than family, and his sun is limited to the one that shines; unlike the English equivalent whose status as a homophone doubles its meaning, son in German (*Sohn*) is pronounced differently from sun (*Sonne*). Despite the deep-seated admiration for these nineteenth-century Schlegel

¹⁸⁵ Reviewing *Maß für Maß*, Dirk Schümers (2011) found it unfortunate that Ostermeier had chosen a modern prose version, by Marius von Mayenburg, rather than the blank verse of Schlegel-Tieck: “Ostermeier’s routine, sparsely furnished, cool Regietheater cannot counteract this de-boning of the drama to a fast-food meal, this disenchantment of action that is only tolerable as a medieval fairy tale”.

and Tieck versions in German culture, Ostermeier finds them to be stranded in the gap between two cultures. He described these popular translations as written in “a strange language no one ever spoke [...] a false German, with blank verse, with rhyme, with a loss of content and sense, and with a loss of rhythm and truthfulness to proper German” (Dickson 2011a).

Although Mayenburg’s versions are written in a recognisable modern idiom, in pursuing “sense” they inevitably impose choices on Shakespeare’s texts that limit their potential meanings; there is no possibility, for instance, of interpreting Lars Eidinger’s “Näher verwandt, als mir lieb ist” as a reference to the sun and light of the marriage celebration and its unwonted illumination of his own spiritual dolour. Tom Mustroph (2008), in his *Hamlet* review, therefore described the “modern, fresh, fast” translation as “flat, [having] lost a dimension of hidden significance”. Some have interpreted this linguistic loss as a sign of Regietheater trumping writer’s theatre. Reviewing *Othello*, Michael Shane Boyle found that “the shelving of Shakespeare’s rich and elegant language” signalled a director “adapt[ing] Shakespeare to his style” rather than his style to Shakespeare (Boyle 2012: 83). What these assessments fall short of indicating, however, is that Ostermeier doesn’t limit the text’s generative capabilities to verbal expression.

Shakespeare’s language is defiantly present on Ostermeier’s stage, serving to generate a multi-sensory form of scenic writing. Whilst doing their “extra-linguistic” work verbally, his productions find non-verbal means of staging Shakespeare’s original words. In harnessing writing to do sensory and sensual work in the theatre, these productions radically recast common definitions of textuality as a distinct ontological category from performance, exposing the intellectual and artistic limitations of binaries that hold in opposition page and stage, writer and director, words and sensuality, language (or text) and performance. At this juncture, it is therefore necessary to explore the line persistently drawn in the sand between performance and textuality in order to perceive how, perhaps unknowingly, Ostermeier’s productions ride roughshod across it.

The Gulf between Page and Stage: “textuality” vs. “performativity”

Arguments about text and its relation to performance are well rehearsed regarding English speaking theatre, and have found a foothold in Shakespeare scholarship since the rise of “stage-centred criticism” in the 1970s.¹⁸⁶ The position of “Shakespeare” at the intersection of literary and performance studies – what W. B. Worthen describes as “reading and the criticism of texts” and “performance and the staging of scripts” (1997: 2-3) – has provoked border wars, prompting scholars to divine, defend or traduce the boundaries that separate literary and performative perspectives on Shakespeare. Whilst some claim Shakespeare for one exclusive realm, others have sought to position his texts at the interface of both. As a fresh intervention amid these complex historical layers of negotiation, Ostermeier’s work on Shakespeare reveals the fundamental flaw in arguments founded on perceived ontological distinctions that are oblivious to theatre’s material textuality.

Worthen’s extensive explorations of this terrain have sought to “restore the contributory force of the discourse of drama to performance theory” (2008a: 13), and his project needs to be contextualised in relation to the persistent literary bias that scholars of Shakespeare in performance in the mid-to-late twentieth century had to overcome. His desire to contribute a “corrective” to the “New Critical obsession with close readings that turned plays into poems” (2011: 316) has seen Worthen position dramatic writing as a distinct literary form that, unlike others, cannot be wholly digested by definitions of textuality, and impels affective and forceful performance that escapes semiotic and hermeneutic constraints.

¹⁸⁶ See Hodgdon (2005) for a succinct overview of the tussle between performance and literary minded scholars that has followed in the wake of “stage-centred criticism”, introduced into the field by J L Styan in the 1970s. See also Erne (2003: 21). It should also be mentioned that the 1970s witnessed the explosion of theoretical criticism in Performance studies, led by Richard Schechner, which invoked similar binaries between text and performance in order to distinguish its approach.

Indeed, Worthen has made reference to theorists of drama who derive its force from the “mutually constitutive commerce” (Michael Goldman, cited in Worthen 2008a: 17) it registers between text and performance. Worthen builds on Goldman’s insistence that literature cannot overdetermine performance in theatre, because drama triggers an “element in excess of what can be semiotically extracted” (ibid: 17). Benjamin Bennett makes the same claim when he stresses that the actor’s body is a “semiotic explosive” (2005: 180), poised to blast through the “there and then” of the text by arbitrarily asserting its “emphatic materiality” in the “here and now” (2005: 211) of performance. These dramatic theorists thus set textuality and sensuality in opposition, claiming that although performance invites us to view it as an *interpretation* of a “governing text”¹⁸⁷, theatre’s sensual materiality sabotages the smooth running of that textual (what Bennett calls “hermeneutic”) activity.¹⁸⁸ Live theatre, in contrast, exposes textuality’s hermeneutic impulse as a brutal limitation, as it refuses to let its sensual and corporeal abundance be contained within the horizons of language and clearly defined meanings.

These arguments are alluring. They are often true. However, the same can be said of their inverse; as Bulman’s comments on translation reveal, the “extra-linguistic” work of an English language Shakespeare production can easily serve to fix ideological, cultural, and/or ethnographical interpretations that limit the spoken words they accompany. Words themselves can perform far more than hermeneutics, a point the RSC voice coach Cicely Berry makes regarding Ophelia’s “O what a noble mind” speech: “It is the openness of the vowels here that is so revealing – how those vowels are coming from the dark of her soul” (Berry 2001: 233). The force of Shakespeare’s words, as Berry’s exercises reveal, often emerges from their stitching together of sense and sensuality. Semiotics and affect, or hermeneutis and sensuality, are in constant crossfade,

¹⁸⁷ Whether a script produced by a playwright, or even just a set of rules structuring an improvisation. Bennett thus argues that sensuality punctures text – or, more precisely, the conceptual, creative, imaginative effort evoked by that text, when it is read or spoken, as it conjures into being objects and people and situations (2005: 210) – an argument that Shakespeare immediately complicates as the multiple versions of his plays (in folio, in quarto, in diverse states of revision or “corruption”) challenge the very stability of a “governing text”. On this matter see Bulman (1996); Stern (2004).

¹⁸⁸ That is why Bennett argues, as his title provocatively states, that *All Theatre Is Revolutionary Theatre*, whereas hermeneutics, in its most extreme and persuasive forms, breeds totalitarianism (184).

and neither are the privileged or exclusive domain of textuality *or* performance. As we have seen, Ostermeier and Mitchell ignore divisions between literary forms (the novel, drama, poetry, the manifesto), subverting the status of dramatic literature as a unique form.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, poststructuralists showed, in the 1960s and 70s, how different notions of “textuality” might release all kinds of written works from their “literary” and representational fetters to do other performative and presentational forms of labour, gathering the work up as “play, activity, production, practice” (Barthes 1977: 162).¹⁹⁰ Lada Čale-Feldman relates this point explicitly to Worthen’s work, in which she finds that “‘literarity’ and ‘textuality’ are here conceived in strict connection to ‘forms of literary representation’, as if poststructuralist theories of the text [...] which severely criticised the notion of literature as representation, never existed” (2011: 99).

Contextualising Ostermeier’s work on Shakespeare in relation to these debates adds depth to a discussion of his approach to artistic creation and to the reappraisal of the director-text relationship at the heart of this thesis. Although, as Barbara Hodgdon explains, Worthen’s intervention in the field showed how “fidelity to a textual Shakespeare [...] constrains the work of performance” (2005: 5) – a response to the tenacity of literary critical frameworks in Shakespeare scholarship – Ostermeier’s (and, indeed, Mitchell’s) lack of anxiety about this issue reflects the fact that, in their practice, deference to and respect for a textual authority serves to *generate* forceful performance, rather than hamper it. They don’t share in Worthen’s sense of a “cultural anxiety about the persistent incommensurability of writing and theatre” (2011: 338). Instead they develop creative methods that construe innovative forms of “fidelity” to text for, as we have begun to see, Ostermeier talks of his work on Shakespeare in terms of its close

¹⁸⁹ See also Erne (2003), in which he attempts to distinguish between Shakespeare’s literary and theatrical writing. But as literary and theatrical modes alter so too do valuations of how text registers the imprint of its intended use. These are not ontological or transhistorical properties.

¹⁹⁰ Barthes repeatedly asserted that texts, even when maintaining stable materiality, alter when you read them—see “The Death of the Author”, 1967; “From Work to Text”, 1977. In this respect, texts self-modify as much as bodies do, whereas Bennett argues this condition as a unique property of the human body, and thus of the actor—able to ‘stick in the craw’ of hermeneutic space/textuality (2005: 181).

affiliation with its source text and author. His is a far gentler, more consensual attitude to Shakespeare's "authority" than many of his iconoclast forebears.

The scholarly analysis of "authority" (see Worthen 1997) carried out in Shakespeare studies in the late twentieth century proves useful in making sense of the these directors' insistence that their work engages with text, and critics' perceptions that they displace an "authorised" text with a heavily "authored" directorial event.¹⁹¹ Unmasking "authority" as contingent and laden with ideological baggage helps us subvert the logic of Krug's assertion that Ostermeier's *Hamlet* shows the results of a tussle between director and playwright in which the director triumphs. It cracks wide open the assumption that identifying a production's authority in relation to its textual raw material is a straightforward and transparent act, quickly recognisable according to the self-evident standards that govern "fidelity". As Abigail Rokison recently illustrated, "Claims to authenticity, have pervaded the sphere of Shakespearean performance since the late 1600s. A proximity to the Shakespearean text, the Shakespearean stage or even the man himself has been cited as a measure of authority and seen as providing a stamp of validation" (2014: 359). This sheer historical variety of measures of "authority" exposes their protean responsiveness to the ideological pressures of the day. Although this knowledge prompted Worthen to reject "authority" completely, seeking to liberate performance from the fetters of a restrictive textuality (see Worthen 2003), Ostermeier and Mitchell continuously invoke it, maintaining strong links to the texts and the authors that impel their performance work.

Indeed, both Ostermeier and Mitchell ground their processes in textual authority, tracing their innovations back to firmly established roots in the texts themselves, and as such complicate the notion of an "auteur". An "auteur" logic relies on a stable standard of "authority" whose contingency has yet to be unmasked. Embracing its contingency, however, allows limitless forms of authority to be devised,

¹⁹¹ Such criticisms are frequently leveled at Mitchell (for a representative sample see Billington 2007; Kettle 2006), and, as we have seen, have also surfaced in German reviews of Ostermeier's work on Shakespeare.

and new links between text and practice to be forged. Ostermeier's work on Shakespeare shows that having an actor speak a playwright's words is but one among many of the ways in which text might author(ise) performance. For those of us interested in text, the new ways Ostermeier and Mitchell discover of relating to it are vital and urgent. In Bulman's sense of the word, they are revitalising, and blast right through persistent definitions of textuality as a limiting agency tied tightly to hermeneusis. Turning from this discussion, we can now examine the concrete ways in which Ostermeier achieves this in his work, showing how the sensual and performative force of his "director's theatre" is grounded in a careful engagement with the literary material on which it is founded, rather than being predicated on its break from the written word.

Setting the play inside the text

The designs of Ostermeier's Shakespeare productions signify how his practice erases the binary between text and performance. The use actors made of the soil covering the stage for *Hamlet* literalised the director's own insistence that he "dig[s] down deep in the text" (Dickson 2013) for, although designers traditionally conceive of a stage world in which to situate the playtext, Ostermeier's designer Jan Pappelbaum turned the text itself into the setting. More than this, Pappelbaum's settings – like the text – offer actors and director the raw materials for creation. The crockery in Mitchell's *Three Sisters*, although it meant different things to different characters, had a clear representational currency in and of itself; but the soil, water and sand that are Pappelbaum's central elements require interaction in order to begin signifying – for instance, as the literal and metaphorical mud that Hamlet physically and verbally slung at Ophelia in 3.1, or as all that is "rank and gross" (1.2.136) under the surface of the Court's glossy "seeming" that nevertheless contaminated Claudius from the outset, as he slipped and slid in the wet soil during Old Hamlet's rain-drenched funeral.

It is important to acknowledge that, in contrast to the economic infrastructure of British theatre, the state subsidy apportioned to city theatres in Germany provides the

money and the resources to install a fully constructed set in the rehearsal room before the actors arrive to work on the play.¹⁹² Ostermeier stresses the benefits of this arrangement, recalling an early *Hamlet* rehearsal where Lars Eidinger and Judith Rosmair (Ophelia) walked onto the earth floor and began an unprompted 45-minute improvisation “because they enjoy it so much, to play with the earth and throw it at each other and bury the other one under it” (Dickson 2013). With these scenic elements in place before rehearsals start, they more readily become the actor’s partner in creation.

More than illustrative metaphors, Pappelbaum’s dynamic playrooms are the product of an integrated approach to translation and design.¹⁹³ When Ostermeier and Mayenburg began work on their *Hamlet* text, a discussion of Shakespeare’s line “The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.179-80) quickly inspired Ostermeier to open his production by staging both events. This led him and Pappelbaum to the idea of a field of mud with a sunken grave: “I wanted to have the marriage on the grave” (McGinn 2011). This simple decision determined everything that followed. A single line of early modern dialogue became the inspirational starting point for a generative and collaborative stage poetry.

Pappelbaum’s soil-covered stage provided actors and director with a non-literal context that foregrounded the play’s philosophical interest in mortality and death, but that also served practically as a graveyard and a battlefield in the final act. Ostermeier even argued that scenes he had cut – for instance, the gravedigger scene and Yorick’s skull – left traces in the production because of the set: “It’s all there, as long as you have this opening with the funeral, and the permanent presence of the grave” (Dickson 2011a). In addition, Shakespeare’s consistent metatheatrical references, and the need for a means of concealing on-stage characters who observe and overhear key scenes, led director and designer to add a giant mobile chain curtain that could travel upstage and

¹⁹² See Barnett (2010) for an outline of the key economic and infrastructural factors that impact not just practically, but also ideologically, on theatre making and reception.

¹⁹³ Mayenburg: “With his intelligent positions [Pappelbaum] has become something of a shadow dramaturge for the Schaubühne over the years, one whose opinion carries weight in all artistic decisions” (Pappelbaum 2006: 225).

downstage over the earth floor. Doubling as a projection screen, the curtain foregrounded theatricality as a central, mobile metaphor in a Court where the boundaries between reality and performance kept shifting. For instance, as Hamlet spoke his “Sein oder Nichtsein” (*To be or not to be*) monologue for a second time,¹⁹⁴ staged as an antic disposition for the benefit of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he literally became entangled in the theatricality of his feigned madness, flailing and catching at the chains of the curtain as they wrapped around his limbs.

Pappelbaum’s set for *Othello* only began making sense once the actors walked onto it. As they found their seats, spectators saw onstage a highly reflective black floor on which were positioned 14 black chairs along the sides and back. Vertical bars of white neon light mounted on transparent screens, which would double as projection surfaces, stood at the rear of the stage. A double bed was positioned centre stage, decked in crisp white sheets. It wasn’t until the actors entered, their ankles rippling through a shallow pool of black water, that the floor’s actual materiality was revealed, and the reflections of the white neon bars started dancing in the black ripples. Like the earth in *Hamlet*, the water provided actors with creative opportunities. In 1.1, Roderigo repeatedly threw Iago into it as they fought, foreshadowing how Othello would hold Iago’s head under as he shrieked, “Wenn du sie verleumdest und mich folterst, dann bete nie wieder” (*If you slander her and torture me, never pray again*)¹⁹⁵, keeping him there until he’d almost drowned.

In *Maß für Maß*, Angelo blasted every surface of the set with a high-pressure water hose after taking up office in Vienna, washing crude charcoal drawings of naked women from the lavish gold surfaces boxing him in on all sides bar one (the fourth wall). Consequently, during Angelo and Isabella’s first interview, the set was slippery. Isabella literally cornered Angelo in her emotional response to the news that her brother’s execution was scheduled for tomorrow. Unable to reply for almost 30 lines, before exclaiming “Warum kommst du mit deinen Sprüchen zu mir?” (*Why do you put these*

¹⁹⁴ Its various placements are discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁹⁵ “If thou dost slander her and torture me, Never pray more” (3.3.373-4).

sayings on me? 2.2.136), Eidinger's Angelo evaded Isabella, running along the raised platform edging the set, and frequently slipping in the very water he'd used to wash corruption away. Like Claudius slipping in the mud, this moment reveals how the elements Pappelbaum uses cause a certain amount of stress for actors, proving resistant or obstructive in ways that interact with the text's themes.

These walls, the floor and the ceiling all radiated with warm and luscious light, their gold-leaf surfaces blazing like fire when lit, but not long into the production this shimmering and luminous gold chamber also doubled as an abattoir. A baroque chandelier hanging centre stage became the hook from which one half of a real pig carcass, neatly sawn from nose to tail, was strung and butchered as the disguised Duke advised Claudio in 3.1 to value spirit over flesh. He prepared the condemned man for his impending execution by reasoning with life: "Wenn ich dich verliere, dann verliere ich etwas, das nur Schwachköpfe behalten wollen" (*If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing / That none but fools would keep*, 3.1.7-8). At this point in Ostermeier's production, the Duke (Gert Voss) made Claudio (Bernardo Arrias Porras) thrust his hands into the innards of the pig – indeed, this pig eventually provided a substitute head (instead of Ragusin's)¹⁹⁶ to "authenticate" Claudio's execution, which the overseer (Franz Hartwig) severed with a chainsaw and dressed with a mop-head before placing it in a carrier bag. Just like the blood that splattered the walls of Pappelbaum's bourgeois Berlin apartments, created for Ostermeier's work on Ibsen, this dripping carcass gained its force from its opulent surroundings. Like Shakespeare's play itself, Ostermeier's production investigated the relationship between beauty and ugliness, with murder and harassment sharing a space with grace and love just as blood and water trickled across the golden floor. In a similar vein, Stephan Stern's Lucio masturbated into a can at the top of 1.2 whilst a singer sang a beautiful aria, highlighting once more how the production traded in striking contrasts, physically, visually and aurally.

¹⁹⁶ The Barnadine subplot was cut, and its dramaturgical function was only one among many of the functions that this carcass served.

For Ostermeier, Shakespeare's plays reflect a Renaissance sensibility whereby the beauty of enlightened thinking, art and philosophy is juxtaposed with plague, pestilence and mortality: "[Shakespeare is] dirt, blood, murder, revenge, betrayal, horror, *and the complete opposite*" (Dickson 2013 [italics added]). This production began with the cast assembling in a line, facing out to the audience, and singing a vocal arrangement of late 16th century Venetian polychoral music, accompanied by a trumpet and a guitar. Throughout, these rich vocal harmonies worked in counterpoint to the base corruption and brutality of key scenes.

Rather than communicating a single and stable interpretation of the text, Ostermeier uses contrast and counterpoint to make these productions open to *spectatorial* interpretation – replicating the same plurality and possibility he perceives in Shakespeare's writing. Similarly, Pappelbaum's scenic elements have prompted critics the world over to author their own metaphors, proving themselves more than visual illustrations of verbal imagery sourced from a few lines of dialogue. Among the complex responses to the generative potential of the soil in *Hamlet*, McGinn (2011) called it "the organising concept for the Beckettian riff on 'Hamlet' that follows, where the Prince, his sexy mother, his girlfriend and his sleazy avuncular rival are dragged down into the damp earth of the grave on which it is staged". Manuel Brug (2008) found that the set released a Freudian meaning during the Closet scene between Hamlet and Gertrude, revealing him as a "mummy's boy and Oedipal little sausage, raping Queen Gertrude on Papa's burial mound". Fabienne Darge (2011) poetically doubled the meaning of the flooded *Othello* stage, describing it as "the canals of Venice at night, or the unfathomable regions of the soul" on which the white double bed "floats as if it were a blessed island". For Hartmut Krug (2010), "The water might metaphorically mean the Mediterranean, or something more diffuse: 'the flood of the heart'." Michael Laages (2011) remarked that, in *Maß für Maß*, Angelo used his water hose to wash away human waste as well as decades of dirt from the walls: Claudio was pursued by "state power and hydropower,"

as Angelo aimed his water cannon at the skinny actor (Bernardo Arrias Porras), huddled and shivering, dressed only in white underpants.

Pappelbuam's settings begin to suggest that, if Shakespeare's writing *is* sensational, Ostermeier's sensational theatrics *are* a form of writing.¹⁹⁷ Sensuality and textuality are intertwined in this work, rather than belonging to separate literary and performative domains. Instead of sensuality exceeding the text (cf. Worthen), or interrupting hermeneusis (cf. Bennett), or being forced into subordination by a hermeneutic process (Ostermeier's "interpretation"), the two are made to dance together in a process that makes Shakespeare speak rather than making it mean. Once more, these concerns trace back to Meyerhold and his system of Biomechanics. Ronald Levaco describes the Meyerholdian concept of the actor's body as a "word-equivalent" (1974: 7); Meyerhold himself named "every movement a hieroglyph with its own peculiar meaning" (Braun 1969: 199); Robert Leach claims that, in his productions, Meyerhold even "knew how to make a costume speak" (1989: 70). These synaesthetic operations communicate the physical and sensual articulacy of Ostermeier's work, too. Through non-verbal means, Shakespeare's text is made to speak, rather than mean.

Sensate Prologues

Ostermeier's *Othello* began with what Darge (2010) described as "a dazzling opening sequence of incredible sensuality" – ten minutes of performance in which no dialogue was spoken, but which nevertheless articulated the problematic nature of Shakespeare's play and the fraught stakes of the representational strategies it demands. Instead of offering an interpretation of these issues, Ostermeier invited his audience to formulate their own responses.

¹⁹⁷ In this, Ostermeier's practice reinvests what Bruce R. Smith describes as a Renaissance understanding of vision, which recognised "the evanescent relationship between sensations and words" (2010: 64) that twentieth-century logos-driven hermeneutic systems (genre theory, Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory) have suppressed, opposing word and sight.

Once the entire cast of 14 actors and musicians had waded onstage and taken their seats in chairs arranged along the sides and back of the playing space, they began creating what sounded like a jazz improvisation. Contrapuntal lines of trumpet and saxophone melody layered over a thickly textured percussive composition reminiscent of the movie *All Night Long* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1962), which transposed *Othello* into the contemporary London jazz scene. As the music grew frenetic, it invoked the undulating rhythms of Moroccan Chaabi music, and at one point aural arabesques that sounded like a Muezzin's call to prayer were introduced.¹⁹⁸ This counterpoint of instruments and influences seemed to invoke blackness, becoming frenzied as the scene it underscored reached its erotic intensity.¹⁹⁹ Five minutes into this gradually building composition, Othello (played by the white actor Sebastien Nakajew) rose from his seat and took off his white sailor uniform until he stood naked, facing the audience, standing behind the white bed centre-stage. White static was projected across the stage, throwing fuzzy light onto the reflective water, Nakajew's naked form, and the transparent screens. Eva Meckbach (Desdemona) put down her instrument and joined Nakajew behind the bed. She laid her head on his shoulder, and then crouched down, submerging her arms in the water and picking up a thick black stain. As she sensually caressed Nakajew's naked white body, this Desdemona smeared her Othello with blackness. The projected static gradually formed into a close-up of Nakajew's face in a grainy black and white treatment, captured side-on by a camera in the wings but superimposed on their bodies, magnifying the blackening work of Desdemona's hands as she traced them across Othello's face. Then Stephan Stern (Iago) joined the pair, crouching down to pick up the stain, and smeared it over Nakajew's penis. Slipping off her black dress, Desdemona dragged Othello down

¹⁹⁸ The band *Polydelic Souls* created the live music for this production, and trumpeter Nils Ostendorf has scored all of Ostermeier's work on Shakespeare. For each production he devises customised sound (often using the same instruments) particular to the world of the play – his trumpet, for instance, accompanied the Venetian polychoral music in *Maß für Maß*.

¹⁹⁹ A similar logic underpinned the video design (Sebastien Dupouey) projected during scene changes that propelled spectators through a series of menacing images. Illustrated in flashing fluorescent tubes, these images included palm trees, an oasis sign, deserts, the circus, African masks – a psychedelic swirl of ominous casino imagery.

to the bed where they passionately embraced under the white sheets. The music sped up, and a montage of scratchy images of black and white bodies locked together in sexual poses, interspersed with grainy abstract forms, was projected onto the stage. Ten minutes into the production, the bed was pushed upstage through the water and disappeared behind the parted neon bars, which came back together to conceal it. 1.1 then began, allowing spectators to retrospectively realise that the wedding night of Desdemona and Othello, to which Iago and Roderigo referred, had been staged before their eyes.

In his analysis of this prologue, Michael Shane Boyle found it “a provocative refusal to ignore the play’s unsettling and racist production history,” answering accusations that casting a white Othello was “an avoidance of Othello’s otherness” (2012: 84). For Boyle, and addressing a tradition of blackface in Germany,²⁰⁰ “this stirring introduction replaced a performance of race based on attempted dissimulation with one of explicit performative denotation” (84) – here Othello was *constructed* as “other” by both Desdemona’s sensual caress and Iago’s sexual jealousy. As Darge (2011) concluded, “the man who sees himself as white on the inside is black in the eyes of others”. However, Boyle found that, in reducing race to an act of marking, Ostermeier’s intentions “remained entirely unclear” (ibid: 85). Following this prologue, Nakajew’s flesh remained obdurately white from his next entrance onwards.

Boyle’s critical uncertainty is the consequence of what *Hamlet* had released in Ostermeier – the ability to resist representational notions of performance that typically accompany realism. In the playful theatrical processes of these productions, white can play black and, as we will see, thin can play fat and men can play women; representation itself becomes a means of inviting spectators to engage in their own explorations of thematic issues. In *Othello*, cameras were frequently used to capture close-ups of Othello’s

²⁰⁰ Blackface performance stirred controversy as recently as 2012, when the director of a production of *I’m not Rappaport* at the Schlosspark Theatre in Berlin cast 76-year-old white actor Joachim Bliese in the role of Midge Carter. Director Thomas Schendel told the media: “When we couldn’t find an elderly black actor who fit the role and could speak with a perfect German accent, we opted for blackface make-up.” See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16492222>.

face from the side of the stage, which were graded using a photo-negative treatment and projected onto the transparent screens. Najakew's white face, in negative, appeared black in these simultaneous projections. Darge (2011) identified the question at the heart of this production as, "What is the true face of Othello?" As is true of Shakespeare himself, this is a question that – although he raised – Ostermeier adamantly refused to answer.

Like his *Othello*, Ostermeier's *Hamlet* began with a close-up. Eidinger's face was projected in giant proportions onto the chain curtain behind which the company stood assembled. The production prefigured its own invented prologue (and immediately wrong-footed its audience) with the first ten lines of "Sein oder Nichtsein" (*To be or not to be*, 3.1.58). Lars Eidinger's Hamlet began this soliloquy sat on the edge of the illuminated platform, floating over an ocean of mud – one of six actors, dressed for a funeral, held in a frozen tableau around a dramatically under-lit banquet table. He spoke to a handheld camcorder pointing at his own face, flipping its viewfinder to frame the shot. His digital image loomed spectral and monochrome in an analogue treatment, overexposed, decaying and distorting. An eerie soundscape (low drones and dissonant metallic noises) flooded the auditorium as Eidinger spoke in a flat, monotone voice, eventually getting stuck on "villeicht träumen" (*perchance to dream*, 3.1.67). Eidinger looped this phrase as a refrain, turning his camera around to animate the still figures populating this Denmark, inducting us into his nightmare.

His camera first lingered on Gertrude, sat behind the table and masked by dark sunglasses. She rose, shying away from Hamlet's digital gaze as if the lens might expose more than her outward image, as did the other courtiers in this Denmark, warding off his penetrating cinematography with out-turned palms. As Hamlet moved on, each figure parted the chain curtain, stepping through an image, breeching *Hamlet's* projection screen and moving forwards onto the deep forestage of peat to form another tableau around Old Hamlet's open grave. Hamlet dropped his camera; another actor stood pointing a hosepipe into the air, spraying the scene with rain as the mourners

shielded themselves with umbrellas; and Stefan Stern’s gravedigger spent the next ten minutes trying to single-handedly sink a coffin that refused to go down – a solo slapstick routine carefully choreographed to the crescendos and diminuendos of an ear-blistering soundtrack (“raw, angry, dissonant, epic instrumental rock”)²⁰¹ by Canadian band Godspeed You! Black Emperor. Its wailing guitar, underscored by a snare-driven crescendo, tonally jarred with – as it rhythmically directed – Stern’s farcical choreography, his body slipping in the wet mud, tumbling into the open grave.

Hamlet alone refused to keep his distance from the mud, using his hands instead of a shovel to crumble earth over the casket. As the mourners receded, Gertrude stumbled through the earth in sinking heels, whilst Claudius fell into it three times over, a moment of serious play that showed a man engaged in struggle with the world around him – in 1.2, he would trip himself up on a chair leg and respond with violent aggression.

An abrupt shift in music – as the Balkan stomp of Beirut’s “Bratislava” and its Eastern European trills cut through the funeral²⁰² – transported spectators to the wedding. The metal curtain parted as the banquet table trucked forwards, floating over the graveyard conveying Gertrude and Claudius’s wedding feast so that the funeral baked meats did, quite literally, “coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.180). Gertrude danced under a veil while Claudius and his male guests clutched beer cans and ate chicken legs from take away cartons. On a cue from Claudius, Laertes cut through the Balkan-brass cacophony with a sub-machine gun, creating silence for the King (the

²⁰¹ As described by the band in a cardboard insert to the album *Yanqui U.X.O* (2002). Ostermeier used the track “rocket falls on Rocket Falls”.

²⁰² From the album *Gulag Orchestra* (2006) – For those in-the-know, Claudius’s court was saturated in the sounds of an Eastern European soviet regime. And yet, all is not as it seems (or sounds). Pitchfork reviewer Larry Fitzmaurice described Beirut’s frontman, Zach Condon, as distilling, musically, his “nostalgia for experiences not necessarily known first-hand”, mining “dreams of old Europe” as the source of a twenty-first century pastiche created in his bedroom in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This is music whose aural identity sounds authentic to a specific historical and cultural genre, although its provenance troubles that identification – participating in the complex metaphor of seeming/being that proved central in this production. (see Fitzmaurice’s review of *The Rip Tide*, 8 Aug 2011, accessed on 11 Jan 2014, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15715-the-rip-tide/>)

first silence of the production), and clearing a space for dialogue to begin, with Claudius's speech in 1.2.

These extended, non-verbal performance sequences, delaying the productions' "textual" beginnings for up to 10 minutes, confronted audiences with something more akin to dance than drama – elaborate choreographic episodes that challenged conventional modes of reading. Unable to merely listen to the words, spectators were inducted into a performance style that asked them to look and to infer from what they were seeing. As the choral singing that opened *Maß für Maß* reveals, music also played a crucial role in these devised beginnings – generating affective resonances capable of triggering visceral and emotional reactions rather than eliciting language-based modes of analysis. Although initially focusing on the body rather than the word, Ostermeier set up complex scopic economies, foregrounding concerns central to the plays themselves. Indeed, digital tools would prove crucial in working through the interplay of sight and sound in Shakespeare's texts, complicating the spectator's trust in the "ocular proof" (3.3.365) that Othello so craves, and so fatally misreads.

Digital writing

In *Hamlet*, Ostermeier used intermediality to adapt Shakespeare's linguistic play into a physical interplay of live actor and technologically mediated representation, rendering sensually perceptible a complex constellation of actor, character, performing, seeming and being. Hamlet's use of a video camera, for instance, invited Ostermeier's audience to consider bodies in relation to their simulacra. From its opening request for aural confirmation (the sentry's challenge, "Who's there?"), the play unsettles the Aristotelian understanding of sight still dominant in the Renaissance. This held that *species* (copies of an outward form) would literally travel into the eye of the onlooker, guaranteeing representational accuracy; to see something was to know it.²⁰³ Having that within which "passeth show" (1.2.85), Hamlet himself discerns the radical potential of "seeming" to

²⁰³ See Chapter 1 of Clark (2007).

destabilise representational guarantees, in this production grabbing a fistful of mud as he proclaimed “Nein, es ist so” (*Nay, it is so*) and slamming it down on the white tablecloth in front of Gertrude with the assertion that doubled as an accusation: “Ich kenn kein ‘scheint’” (*I know not ‘seems’*, 1.2.76). His camera, drawing forth his inner monologue, penetrated outward forms; during Hamlet’s “too too solid flesh” (1.2.129) soliloquy, Eidinger aimed it at Gertrude and Claudius (the wedding party continued behind him in slow motion) for “Schwäche, dein Name ist Frau!” (*Frailty, thy name is woman!*), revealing a customarily lurid display (she licked her fingers and Claudius’s head) that his aperture generated whenever it located his mother.

As Evelyn Tribble asserts, modern cognitive science shows us how “seeing is always a creative, constructionist act” (2013: 237). Did Hamlet’s digital vision winnow away “seeming”, or was his fevered imagination constructing a dream reality? Visual technologies (digital camera/projection), juxtaposed with live theatre, layered in complexity: the double-exposures of these superficial, two-dimensional images, split apart from their onstage bodies, hovered ethereally on the transparent curtain, as fragile and ghostly as the soundscape backing the action. The camera drew forth ghosts too; Claudius (having planted his face in a tray of food on the banquet table) lifted his head to confront Hamlet’s lens, transformed into Old Hamlet’s blood-stained spirit. The materiality of video technology thus created a form of visual, spatial writing, materialising the complexity and ambivalence that Shakespeare’s play constructs around the “certainty” of sight.

Eidinger’s Hamlet began certain in his rejection of theatricality as deception, then embraced it and became lost in it; perturbed by the ghost, he abandoned the camcorder, moving from operator to performer. He even chose to play the queen himself in *The Mousetrap*, mobilising performance in a failed attempt to understand his mother, his asides to her both accusations and revelations of his inability to compute her actions. As Hamlet tangled with the chain curtain, becoming literally enmeshed in the shifting boundary between seeming and being when he performed “Sein oder Nichtsein”

a second time, questions were raised for spectators as much as for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – was Eidinger/Hamlet merely seeming, or really being, mad?

Following this speech, technology intervened again, raising more questions rather than answering them. Hamlet explained his madness to his friends by confiding that “Ich habe in letzter Zeit, warum weiß ich nicht, all meine Freude verloren” (*I have recently, I don't know why, lost all my joy*)²⁰⁴, adjusting to an incredibly subdued and realist performance style. However, he delivered the speech through a microphone. The production repeated this trick a number of times – when Hamlet was ostensibly being “real” his performance was technologically amplified, his words split from his body just as the projections split bodies from their simulacra. Eidinger then began singing extracts from Katja Ebstein's 1980 Eurovision entry ‘Theater’, pulling his own knees up in the air by imaginary strings, before segueing into a scene with Horatio in which he explained his plan. After Hamlet described that he had heard “daß Verbrecher, die im Theater saßen” (*that criminals sitting in a theatre*)²⁰⁵ could be exposed by a well-knit plot, Eidinger asked the DSM at the back of the auditorium to bring the lights up on the real audience, seemingly dropping his role. The production broke through into our reality as it discussed theatricality, and Eidinger/Hamlet (the distinction was wholly ambiguous) pointedly announced: “The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.581-2) in English as another actor filmed the faces of embarrassed spectators in the auditorium, which were projected onto the set. Eidinger then circled the stage advertising, in Cabaret fashion, that “Alles ist theater, und doch Wirklichkeit” (*This is all only theatre, and this is also truth*), instructing the DSM to open the chain curtain, and directing Claudius to begin his text which led effectively into 3.2 and the staging of *The Mousetrap*.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth” (2.2.287).

²⁰⁵ “That guilty creatures sitting at a play” (2.2.566).

²⁰⁶ As this description suggests, the scenes were significantly re-ordered, and the visiting players were cut entirely, resulting in a hugely condensed 2.2. Hamlet and Horatio became the players, and Hamlet's discovery of the conceit (to catch the King's conscience) emerged out of his own experiments in theatricality.

Technology, then, served not to circumscribe the text within the limiting horizons of a directorial concept – evidenced, for example, in the similar approaches taken by Gregory Doran (RSC, 2008) and Nick Hytner (NT, 2010) in their “surveillance state” *Hamlets*, positioning CCTV cameras in their sets to substantiate Hamlet’s claim that “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.239). Instead, it sought to further entangle spectators in the production’s meta-representational ambiguities, prompting them to scrutinise their own act of perception, provoking a sense of bewilderment that some may have experienced as analogous with Hamlet’s mistrust of the surrounding world. Ostermeier’s form of scenic writing sought to exacerbate contradictions rather than straighten them out. Indeed, technology wasn’t the only means of drawing attention to theatricality; single bodies substituted multiple roles so that, although Eidingen remained consistently Hamlet (even when “performing” the Player Queen), the other five performers changed character constantly. This strategy worked particularly effectively in *Maß für Maß*, a play full of substitutions (leaders, heads, sexual partners) that were multiplied by Ostermeier’s casting strategies (Bernardo Arrias Porras played Claudio and Mariana, for instance). These worked on the level of playful and pragmatic necessity, but they also suggested new angles from which to perceive these plays: as we will see, the unusual doubling that Porras enacted – in one reading of this complicated and ambiguous decision – created an association between two characters used as “puppets” in the Duke’s master plan.

Plays as cubes

Rejecting the podium sets that distinguished Pappelbaum and Ostermeier’s work on Ibsen, each of these Shakespeare productions played out in a cube-like space. This reflects the fact the Ostermeier (2011b) conceives of Shakespeare’s plays as multi-dimensional objects in space: “Shakespeare’s scenes are 3D, like a cube of glass; you can look through each side and find a play that makes sense”. The set for *Hamlet*, for instance, deconstructed the elements of a cube: the chain curtain and illuminated platform functioned as roving planes that manipulated depth of field to give audiences

different views on the action. These mobile elements kept changing the patterns between figure and ground and the metaphors distilled in the set's moving parts (Table – Court, Family, Civility; Curtain - Theatricality, Surveillance; Soil – Mortality, Sin, Lust). Their kaleidoscopic arrangements offered one means of shifting the audience's perspective, giving them different views through the edges of Shakespeare's cube.

Resembling Chekhov's influence on Mitchell, Ostermeier's sense of a close link between Shakespeare's writing and three-dimensional space led him to construct his own physical structure in which to reveal the play. When asked to explain the rationale behind the replica Globe space built to house his *Richard III* (2015), he told an interviewer: "Come downstairs and see the theatre, and you will be able to tell me why we made it. You will not need any other explanation: no words" (Pearson 2015). For Ostermeier, his belief that Shakespearean form worked hand-in-glove with theatrical architecture speaks clearest when experienced physically. Both directors, then, connect the work of these dramatists (Chekhov and Shakespeare) with a form of dramaturgy that articulates *behaviour* in three-dimensions:

I think Shakespeare invented a three-dimensional view on what is a human being [...] like they did in painting at the time. Inventing central perspective and putting the body in a three-dimensional relationship to what is around it.
(Dickson 2013)²⁰⁷

Because of the crucial role of three-dimensions, sensual embodiment comes *before* recognition in Ostermeier's practice; what is banal on the page becomes complex when played. He told Erid Derney (2010): "As you rehearse, you realise how close

²⁰⁷ Jacalyn Royce makes a similar claim in her work on early modern acting styles. She perceives the three-dimensionality of Shakespeare's writing as a literary manifestation of how theatrical "space inspired the technique" (2009: 495). For her, the innovative depth of the Globe stage, in comparison to the shallow acting platform at the Rose, foregrounded bodies and movement in three dimensions, inaugurating "a new possibility for 'truth' in the visibility – or visible body – of a character" (ibid: 495).

[Shakespeare] was to the stage, and what you couldn't understand when you only read it, you understand on the stage." Not only does Shakespeare's writing animate sensuality – it only makes sense as and through sensuality. The sense that Ostermeier comprehends through physicalizing the scene, however, doesn't pertain to a definitive meaning that lies behind the spoken word. Indeed, he is stimulated by the constant deferral of absolute answers: "Many authors will let you into an entrance room, but with Shakespeare, you find out there is a second then a third room, and it never ends" (Derney 2010). Leading actors and director through a tactile experience of infinite rooms, Shakespeare's writing – in Ostermeier's rehearsals – serves as a stimulus for rhythmic, embodied, sensational investigation. However, rather than fixing results in advance of public presentation, the performance that Ostermeier and his collaborators seek to create invites the spectator to engage in their own exploratory encounter.

Just as Mitchell, in her work on Chekhov, kept her actors immersed in the play-world, Ostermeier keeps his actors onstage beyond their textual presence, but to different effect. In *Othello*, for instance, actors often sat on the chairs at the edges of the stage in between their scenes. Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, Iago and Othello all remained throughout 3.3, and would physically refer to "offstage" characters when they mentioned them in their dialogue, but these offstage characters would also "watch" the action. A striking example occurred in *Maß für Maß*. After molesting Isabella on top of the bloody pig carcass, now lying on the floor as a macabre bed, Angelo stood up, retreated to a corner of the set, and sat huddled like a child with eyes averted as Isabella asked spectators, "Bei wem soll ich Anklage erheben?" (*To whom should I bring a charge?*).²⁰⁸ For the next hour, Angelo stalked the stage – a constant, silent presence until his re-entry into the play in 4.4. Taking his cue from *Hamlet* 3.1, and the "multiple theatrical situations" of onstage characters during Hamlet's "soliloquy," Ostermeier keeps multiple pairs of eyes onstage, looking at the scenes from different angles. This, in turn, invites the audience to consistently see the dramatic world as a relational network, where the

²⁰⁸ "To whom should I complain?" (2.4.171).

presence of those who are textually absent works to suggest unexpected and unanticipated points of connection.

Shakespeare offers Ostermeier, as Chekhov offered Mitchell, a methodology. Critics are right to perceive a conceptual deficiency in these productions, for Ostermeier intends to keep possibilities open rather than closed, carrying the exploratory mood of rehearsal through into production. As he told Andrew Dickson:

I'm trying to communicate with the material, with the actors, with the text, with the space, with the music, the costumes [...] I'm not trying to give you any right idea about *Hamlet*. It's research. (Dickson 2011a)

His statement is corroborated by an intriguing accident regarding the archival preservation of *Othello*. In the performance I saw at the Schaubühne (Berlin, 2010), the prologue referred to earlier in this chapter was the only part of the performance during which Nakajew's skin was painted black. However, the theatre's archive recording of this production captures something very different. Following the prologue in this version, every inch of Nakajew's visible flesh is painted black on his subsequent entrance, and for the rest of the performance this make-up gradually rubs off, in the water, on his uniform, and on other actors. It is only when he returns for the final scene (5.2) that Nakajew is white again, dressed in a pristine sailor's uniform. When I asked the theatre about this version (nowhere mentioned in reviews), I was told that no one had been conscious that this performance was being filmed for the archive, and it unfortunately captured an "experiment". The fact that Luise Wolfram replaces Laura Tratnik as Emilia on the recording places this performance after Tratnik left the ensemble, and therefore some months on from the production's premiere – an indication of the company's commitment to exploration, even well into the life of these long-running and well-travelled productions.

Eidinger's repetition of "Sein oder Nichtsein" in *Hamlet* offers further testimony of this practice-as-research approach within the frame of a single performance. In the festival programme for the production's presentation at the 2011 Venice Biennale, Ostermeier asserted: "Everybody knows or thinks they know this monologue, but I am not sure I really understand its meanings. This is why we treat it as a piece of music played on different instruments: drums, electric guitar, violin" (La Biennale di Venezia 2011). Musical analogies help us understand Ostermeier's rehearsal methods, which he has described elsewhere in terms of "jamming" (Dickson 2013). Orchestrating the conditions in which actors and musicians can "play" with the written text, he strives to engineer communication and collaboration, rather than establish a striking directorial concept.

The director has also referred to "sampling" (McGinn 2011) as another key method. Allusions to contemporary culture are often woven in to these works, creating a tissue of associations that resonate in provocative ways. Through Eidinger, as already mentioned, Ostermeier sampled from Katja Ebstein's Eurovision entry 'Theater', working it into the production at key moments. After Hamlet's confrontation with Ophelia in 3.1 when he orders her to a Nunnery, Lars Eidinger sang a verse and a chorus of Ebstein's song, connecting the production to a living and humorous contemporary reference that simultaneously allowed Eidinger to investigate his character's anxiety about the discrepancy between seeming and being. He sang the song at Ophelia as an admonishment of actors who "setzen jeden Abend deine Maske auf / und sie spielen wie die Rolle es verlangt" (*put on their mask every night and play as the role demands*) –accusing her of having sold her heart to the theatre.

The sheer variety of sampled materials in these productions subverts any clearly discernable conceptual framework through which Ostermeier communicates his reading of the play. Instead, the intrusion of these elements invites spectators to find their own coherence, making sense of any fleeting connections with contemporary society that they manage to grasp. Particularly well catered to by the director, the French have proved

adroit in forging links between Ostermeier's Shakespeares (which have all played at Avignon) and their own experience. Dressed in a veil, Gertrude sang a French chanson to her newlywed during 1.2 ("Claudius, you are my drug") that parodied Carla Bruni's "Tu Es Ma Came", released in the same year.²⁰⁹ The romance of this supermodel/musician and the incumbent French president Nicolas Sarkozy was the subject of tabloid gossip at the time of the production's presentation. Singing her song didn't add depth to Gertrude, but it made her into a current presence. When *Maß für Maß* toured to Paris in 2011, some read the Angelo and Isabella scenes as an analogue for the Dominique Strauss-Kahn sexual harassment tribunal (that had yet to collapse); most reviewers saw Angelo's use of the high-pressure hose to clean up Vienna as a reaction to Nicolas Sarkozy's declaration, in response to the 2005 French riots, that he would clean out the *banlieues* with a Kärcher (a well-known brand of high-pressure water cleaner).

What McGinn (2011) referred to as Ostermeier's strategy of the "ludic remix" articulates how readily Ostermeier's playrooms become echo chambers for contemporary moral and mental situations, inviting audiences to play and discover as the actors do. Although the references discussed above were deliberately plotted by the director and his actors, the openness of the form Ostermeier has developed allows unanticipated parallels to emerge. Reviewing *Maß für Maß*, Peter von Becker (2011) concluded that many things are combined in the mind of the spectator after having watched the production: "Sharia, Fundamentalism, Brainwashing, and many other modern monsters. The play continues on." Whereas Ostermeier's early Ibsens made their meanings very legible, these productions seemed to give spectators more liberty in their responses.

PART II

Politics

²⁰⁹ From the album *Comme si de rien n'était* (2008).

For Ostermeier, Shakespeare has triggered development and change. He has moved from shocking the middle classes with polemical and antagonistic statements to embracing a writer whose work he sees as truly democratic, pursuing an inclusive and resonant dramaturgy that stimulates the creativity of actor and spectator. Aneta Mancewicz, in her analysis of *Hamlet*, situated Ostermeier in a line of postmodern directors “who continue to interrogate aesthetic forms and political assumptions with an openness that leaves room for the spectators to bring their own interpretations” (2014: 86). He has pursued such openness by edging further and further away from his previous strategy of bringing classics into firmly situated contemporary contexts; when asked how he would make the War of the Roses intelligible to a German public in his production of *Richard III*, Ostermeier rejected what he termed “easy solutions” along the lines of the 1995 McKellen film which turned Richard into a fascist: “You cannot boil *Richard III* down to some issue play” (Pearson 2015).²¹⁰

There are, however, problems raised by this analysis that must be addressed. The dominant responses to these productions either position them within a “postmodern culture of citation and pastiche” (Mancewicz 2014: 94), or else critique them, as a number of German reviewers have done, as “cumbersome” collections of ideas that lack the precision of a “convincing overall concept” (Pauly 2010).²¹¹ Both analyses stress a lack of overt political engagement, and they contradict our understanding of the director’s resistance to postmodern and postdramatic aesthetics, as we witnessed in Chapter 2. Interpreting Ostermeier’s Shakespeares as the fruits of a quest for a free and open theatrical form only goes so far.

The first step to take in extending this analysis is a political one. In contrast to Mancewicz’s argument that Ostermeier’s “postmodern pastiche” signals his withdrawal from a “disappointing and disorientating” sociological and historical moment (2014 :86),

²¹⁰ Ostermeier thus distanced his work on Shakespeare from his treatment of Ibsen: “There’s no contemporary context on the political level. This is completely different from my production of Ibsen’s *Ein Volksfeind*” (Pearson 2015).

²¹¹ See also Regine Müller on *Othello*: “There isn’t quite a clear concept” (2010); Hartmut Krug on *Othello*: “directorially, it’s still unfinished” (2010).

Ostermeier has discussed his *Hamlet* as a *reflection on* such a moment, rather than a means of its escape or evasion. Explaining that some German sociologists refer to his as the Hamlet-generation, because of its inactivity in the face of complex global problems, Ostermeier argued: “This is the essence of why this story nowadays is important” (2011a). Discussing the various meanings of the earth in his production, he made reference to “dead ancestors” that rise up and “give us missions,” connecting Old Hamlet’s ghost with what Derrida referred to as the *Spectres of Marx* (1993): “The whole twentieth-century is screaming at us – think of what we agreed on, don’t let yourself be corrupted by wrong political ideas” (Dickson 2011a). Such comments reveal a director who still offers in his public statements specific ways of reading his works, despite declaring their openness. They also disclose the extent to which Ostermeier’s work on *Hamlet* shaped new directions in his political theatre in *Ein Volksfeind* (2012), after having explored through Shakespeare what he saw in himself – the inertia of a generation (Occupy manqué).

Indeed, Ostermeier has found in these texts a generative ambivalence, adding subtlety and nuance to his politics. Referring to *Hamlet* as the play that invents the “modern human being,” Ostermeier understands the protagonist’s urge to think and ask questions before taking action as “good and bad at the same time” (Dickson 2013). In the same interview he described such hesitation as tragically absent during the unchecked rise to power of the Nazis, but also as hampering contemporary practical efforts to counteract global warming. In these works, Ostermeier is constantly exploring such ambiguities. Joseph Pearson (2015) saw in his *Richard III* that the audience was “brought close not only to watch but also to judge – not just the characters, but themselves, and how far they might allow themselves to be seduced.” In a similar fashion, Michael Shane Boyle noted the “massive charisma” of Stephan Stern’s Iago, which “overwhelmed the wills of other characters” (2012: 86) – registering Ostermeier’s

insistence on maximising the seductive appeal of his twisted protagonists.²¹² Investigating through Shakespeare the impulses that divert human beings from moral missions, Ostermeier took an interest in – if not unravelling – at least examining what it is that prompts us all to choose the stocks on the table, as Stockman and his wife seem poised to do in *Ein Volksfeind*'s concluding moments.

By positioning his *Hamlet* as a forerunner to his *Ein Volksfeind*, we can see that Ostermeier's decision to reject a reading of Hamlet as a romantic hero – what he termed “the cliché of the last pure soul in a bad world” (2011b) – is a clear political statement. Rather than heroise a protagonist who might release a generation from the guilt of its own political inactivity, Ostermeier wanted to analyse a consciousness that was “as mediocre as the world around him, as corrupted, as rotten as the rest of Denmark” (2011a). Shakespeare prompted the director to outgrow his idealistic vision of a theatre capable of *changing* the world (see Ostermeier 1999), coming to view it instead as “a means of understanding” (Pascaud 2012) the dilemmas facing modern man – whose emergence, as we have seen, Ostermeier now dates to the Renaissance. As he has become less certain of the answers to social problems, he has shifted his views on theatre's capabilities, perhaps too quickly dismissing the politics of his practice-as-research approach.

Despite insinuating theatre's *inefficacy* in this regard, the director's actions betray an ongoing desire to articulate himself politically. Although Ostermeier cancelled his plans to take *Hamlet* to the Freedom Theatre (in the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin) when funding for the visit fell through, things changed when events took a devastating and tragic turn. Juliano Mer-Khamis, the Freedom Theatre's director – and a close friend of Ostermeier's – was shot outside his theatre in April 2011 on the very weekend, had all gone to plan, that Ostermeier would have arrived with *Hamlet*. Explaining his reaction to this news, and having revealed that Juliano's last email had

²¹² See, for instance, Ostermeier: “I like the idea of having a very charming Richard, with whom people can sympathize. He's so awesome. I love him” (Pearson 2015).

warned him not to travel to Jerusalem, Ostermeier declared: “What the fuck can I do? I went. And I made a speech dedicating the show to Juliano” (McGinn 2011).²¹³

Now in Jenin with a play that begins with a funeral and a ghost passing on a mission, the director was overwhelmed by *Hamlet’s* resonance with its new audience. The spectre of Marx referred to above became the spectre of Mer-Khamis who, as an Israeli running a theatre in occupied Palestinian territory, remained committed to art as a force for social change in the face of hostility from both communities. Ostermeier recalled constant interaction between the stage and the auditorium at this performance, with a young spectator proclaiming, “This is not theatre, this is reality” (Dickson 2013a).²¹⁴ Despite Ostermeier’s recent claim, “I don’t believe for a second [...] that any political event could take place in the theatre” (Boenisch & Ostermeier 2014: 22), his *Hamlet* in Jenin clearly demonstrated its ability to transcend fictional and political limitations and touch the spectator’s reality.

Autopsy & Anatomy

Ostermeier’s work has begun, therefore, to reveal things beyond its director’s own statements. Indeed, if we apply close analysis to this body of work, it is possible to expose a very specific preoccupation that has gone unpublicised by the director himself. Although these productions emerged from a collaborative spirit of improvisation and playful experimentation, they can also be viewed in a very pointed way as autopsies on living beings. Ostermeier’s recreation of an early modern playing space for *Richard III*

²¹³ Ostermeier has also articulated himself politically in Russia in recent years. Rehearsing his production of *Miss Julie* (2011) for Moscow’s Theatre of Nations, his visit overlapped with the most intense period of protest since the 1990s. Many suspected that the recent parliamentary elections had been rigged, triggering significant unrest. The director gave the student actors involved in the production the day off rehearsals to coincide with the first mass demonstration, “On the condition that they go out onto the streets” (Ostermeier cited in Vosswinkel 2011). When he toured his production of *Death in Venice* to St Petersburg in 2013, he took to the stage during the curtain call and explained that the company had almost decided not to attend the festival in protest at Russia’s new anti-gay laws. Instead, “to applause and cheers from the audience,” he dedicated the performance to the country’s gay community (Dickson 2013b).

²¹⁴ When Ostermeier took *Hamlet* back to Ramallah in September 2012, he also made a documentary with film director Nicolas Klotz, filming several workshops based on the play with local communities. *Hamlet in Palestine* (2012), which screened at the Avignon Festival in 2013, shows Ostermeier asking everyone he encounters: “Who killed Juliano?”

betrays this idea; far more than the Globe that it imitates, this construction resembles an operating theatre, with metal rows of standing galleries bolted onto the theatre's semi-circular wall from which spectators crane down to scrutinise the director's centre-stage dissection. A new focus of interest is revealed: the male self, explored in bodily terms through grotesque physicality, and also in his oscillation between vulnerability and violence engendered by a sense of having experienced injustice. With remarkable consistency, Ostermeier has used Shakespeare to create and examine figures of male dominance who, when threatened, seek to oppress not only other characters but also Ostermeier's audience. This chapter concludes by sketching the outlines of these current, and still evolving, preoccupations, and offering some reflections on their implications.

Returning to *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (2006), whose form as a dance-theatre piece ostensibly places it outside of this trajectory, it is possible to perceive concerns that have remained remarkably consistent. With choreographer Constanza Macras, Ostermeier was already negotiating verbal theatre's relationship with dynamic physicality. The actor/audience relationship was also reconfigured – spectators entered this performance from backstage, joining a party in Jan Pappelbaum's large apartment set where they were offered punch in plastic cups by cast members, before taking their seats in the auditorium. The production's most notorious moment, however, strongly resonates with what soon became the dominant trope in Ostermeier's Shakespeares.

Once the audience had taken their seats, a band of onstage musicians increased the volume and tempo of their synth-pop improvisation. Lars Eidinger started dancing, gradually pulling focus until he was surrounded by other actors and dancers who began egging him on. What followed was a ten-minute strip routine. Eidinger cast off layers of clothing, venturing into the audience to dance erotic routines in front of embarrassed spectators. Returning to the stage almost naked, Eidinger turned upstage to remove his underwear and, at the climax of the music, jumped around to reveal his penis thrust through the mouth of a dramatic mask. As he jiggled it up and down – and to the audience's great amusement – Eidinger ventriloquized a voice for this outlandish

spectacle, introducing the Ostermeier/Macras production with Peter Quince's prologue to the Rude Mechanicals' entertainment: "Wenn wir mißfallen, es ist unser Wille" (*If we displease, it is our will*).²¹⁵ In a book on Lars Eidingen published in Germany, Ostermeier recalled this moment's genesis in an anarchic rehearsal prank, "when [Eidingen], out of sheer arrogance, pushed his penis through the open mouth of a mask lying on the prop table, so that it looked like this masked face had a grotesquely long tongue" (Eberth 2011: 7). Although this puppetry of the penis was an innovation instigated by Eidingen, confronting audiences with the grotesque male body has since become a crucial aspect of Ostermeier's own fascination.

Framing his interest in the Renaissance in terms of its exploration of man in three-dimensions, Ostermeier's focus on the (often naked) male body invites comparison with da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c.1490). This iconic image used the male form to model ideal proportions, and reflects the intimate connection between art and anatomy that runs through da Vinci's work, founded on extensive dissections of dead bodies in hospitals and medical schools. In Ostermeier's *Maß für Maß*, the pig carcass hanging from the chandelier was, as we have seen, literally dissected by the Duke as he advised Claudio to value spirit over flesh. What followed this section of 3.1, in Mayenburg's reordered sequence of events, was Angelo's 2.4 soliloquy. Crossing to the chandelier, Eidingen hauled his body up alongside the carcass, hooking his legs over the bar of the chandelier, and letting his torso fall so that he hung upside down. He unhooked the dead pig, which dropped to the floor, and literally replaced it. The production seemed to ask if and how humans differed from animals. Trying not to give his sensual race the rein and failing – "Mein Hirn, das nicht auf meine Zunge hört, bei Isabella Anker wirft" (*My brain, not listening to my tongue, casts its anchor at Isabella*)²¹⁶ – this Angelo was reduced to flesh ("Blood, thou art blood" 2.4.15), his bare torso exposed and his arms stretched out to the sides like *Vitruvian Man* upended.

²¹⁵ "If we offend, it is with our good will" (5.1.108).

²¹⁶ "My invention, hearing not my [praying] tongue, Anchors on Isabel" (2.4.3-4).

These productions frequently exposed the male form – Eidinger’s Richard III stripped naked in 1.2, revealing his vulnerability to Lady Anne in the wooing scene; Clarence was murdered naked in his cell; Claudio in *Maß* wore only white underpants and was frequently drenched by Angelo’s hose; Othello began the production, as we have seen, stripping naked and being blackened by Desdemona. But, strikingly, Ostermeier is also interested in bodily modification, strapping on elements that distort the human form. Eidinger’s Richard wore a neck brace and a protective leather head cap, his fingers taped together and, even when he stripped naked, removing the corset that adjusted his curved body, a black hump remained visibly strapped to his upper back. Eidinger’s Hamlet wore a fat suit under his costume, which he removed offstage to play the Player Queen in 3.2 (in stockings, suspenders, and little else).²¹⁷ This only registered when he put it back on in the gap between the Player Queen’s exit and Lucianus’s entrance. As Hamlet zipped up the fat suit, Claudius asked him if he was sure there was nothing offensive in the play’s content, to which he replied, “Nein, nein, das ist nur gespielt” (*No, no, this is just play acting*). At the very moment Hamlet deployed performance to catch the King’s conscience, Eidinger showed Ostermeier’s spectators that they had been convinced by something wholly theatrical. Performance was speaking (rather than making meaning), telling spectators that we both can and can’t believe our eyes. But it was also playfully probing the relationship between perception and interiority; Hamlet genuinely had that within “which passeth show”, whilst Richard, from the outside, “look[ed] ugly enough to have been recently unearthed” (Pearson 2015). Prosthetics prised further open the gap between perception and reality.

Stripping-off and strapping-on tropes Ostermeier’s entire aesthetic in these Shakespeare productions; as if conducting a forensic anatomy class, he takes bodies and text, cuts them open, pulls them apart, and straps them back together or, as described by

²¹⁷ It’s tempting to see this as a joke about Gertrude’s description of Hamlet as “fat and scant of breath” in 5.2 of the Folio, often replaced with “hot” by editors who see “fat” as too reductive (i.e. related to Richard Burbage’s reported corpulence). Mayenburg’s translation sidestepped the debate by using “nassgeschwitz” (*dripping with sweat*).

one of *Hamlet's* London reviewers, Ostermeier likes to “tear open classic plays, mash together their innards and reassemble them” (Bowie-Sell 2011).²¹⁸ Significantly, all of these autopsies focus on men who have been wronged by the world, fitting into the Hamlet pattern in striking ways. Iago, the Duke in *Maß*, and Richard all embody a consciousness that feels itself to be alienated or misjudged by the surrounding world. They each break through the fictional frame to communicate with the audience directly (physically invading the auditorium in these productions), and react to their alienation by creating complex theatrical scenarios that oppress those around them. In this, they also have a model in Hamlet for, despite his inactivity, he creates chaos. Interestingly, Ostermeier himself discussed this production as “a performance which is seen through the eyes of Hamlet,” calling it a very “dream-like” perspective (2011). The production was indeed framed by the protagonist’s subjectivity (having begun with “Sein oder Nichtsein”, it ended with Hamlet’s line “Der Rest ist Schweigen”)²¹⁹, and it thus set the precedent for the Shakespeares that followed. All of these productions short-circuit at the point where the male consciousness in question shuts down.

Iago’s refusal to speak signalled the end of Ostermeier’s *Othello*. His line, “Was Sie wissen, wissen Sie. Ich werde von jetzt an kein Wort mehr sagen” (*What you know you know. From now on I will not say another word*)²²⁰, was the logical conclusion of a production that he had wholly controlled, even determining the tempo and dynamics of the jazz band at the side of the stage.²²¹ The last lines of the Duke in *Maß* corresponded with those of Shakespeare, but Ostermeier’s version was heavily cut. After the Duke instructed Isabella to “Gib mir die Hand und sag, daß du meine Frau wirst” (*Give me your*

²¹⁸ Intriguingly, Alastair Macauley used a similar metaphor when describing Mitchell’s treatment of *The Seagull*: “She lays out a play on a slab like an anatomy lesson and makes performance art with its entrails” (2006).

²¹⁹ “The rest is silence” (5.2.300).

²²⁰ “What you know you know, From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.309-10).

²²¹ At points, these musicians seemed to express Iago’s internal state. When Iago confided in the audience that he thought Othello had been between his sheets with Emilia, the jazz underscore became frenzied – Iago had to run over to the band and get them to quieten down so that he could think.

hand and say you will be my wife)²²², the other characters remained motionless for the rest of the scene. His final speech was deleted, including the Duke's adjustment to Isabella: "If you'll a willing ear incline" (5.1.529). Instead, he ordered Isabella, Claudio, Angelo and Escalus to join hands and walk downstage, cuing the final blackout. *Richard III* ended with its protagonist haunted by nightmares, fighting shadows in his tent, fencing with invisible forms. Seemingly free of what had been a severely pronounced infirmity up to this point, Eidinger danced through the sand that served as the set's floor, and was finally stabbed in the back by an invisible assassin, collapsing onto a table centre stage that doubled as a mortuary slab. Grabbing the microphone that was suspended from the ceiling, his Richard implored (in English), "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse" (5.7.13) as he expired. Then, his foot caught in the microphone's wiring, his dead body was raised, suspended upside down, his bare torso twirling mid-air in the harsh white light for two or three seconds before a snap blackout – a powerful replay of Eidinger's Angelo, in 2.4 of *Maß*, hanging from the chandelier like a hunk of meat.

These abortive endings exclude the concept of political resolution or collective understanding of what has happened. Instead, they reveal the status of these productions as studies of a character's processes of thinking, which end when they end. Strong parallels thus emerge with Mitchell's Live Cinema technique. Taking his cue from the first line of *Hamlet*, Ostermeier sees the basic question of Shakespeare's writing as: "Who's there?" in the sense of 'who are we?' and 'what is a human being?'" (Pearson 2015). Mitchell's Live Cinema work poses a similar question, but whereas she seeks to materialise the mind of her female protagonists, Ostermeier explores consciousness from the outside. Corporeality is central to this investigation, and the human being in Ostermeier's theatre is insistently male. Even being female is male, revealed by the number of characters (Mistress Overdone, Mariana, Margaret) who are played by men in these productions. Mitchell invites spectators to think about representation and its relationship to perception; Ostermeier presents bodies for their attention. Because of this

²²² "Give me your hand and say you will be mine" (5.1.486).

external focus, and in contrast to the reading of these works as a democratic form that gives freedom to its viewing subjects, it may appear that there is more in these productions for male than female viewers.

Performance, Oppression & Domination

During Ostermeier's talk on Shakespeare at the international symposium celebrating his work, he expressed his interest in Shakespeare's exploration of the gap between "what we want to be and what we are allowed to be" (2014). He outlined how performance becomes a key strategy for the characters in Shakespeare who experience the pain of this gap, citing the Duke in *Maß* as having to "pretend to be someone else because his 'I' can't respond in the way the world wants". Having let slip Vienna's strict statutes, and now "more mocked" than "feared" (1.3.27), the Duke abdicates responsibility to his deputy, Angelo, and dons a Friar's disguise in order to monitor proceedings. He thus joins Hamlet and Iago in a line of figures who "act", using performance to set up "complex situations" in what Ostermeier described as a "conscious strategy [...] to find out who we are and who the other is" (2014). He also stressed that performance is wielded as a tool by the bad guys as well as the good in these plays, drawing attention to Claudius and Polonius (who used to be an actor) engineering their own theatricals in 3.1 of *Hamlet*, thrusting Ophelia forth to confront her former lover, and watching their encounter as concealed spectators.

Performance thus becomes crucial to the male project of self-definition and self-exploration in Ostermeier's theatre, and his comments suggest a clear parallel between Hamlet and Claudius, which was powerfully communicated in the theatre. Indeed, the distance between what Hamlet sees and what those around him see is smallest in the case of Claudius, since both share a knowledge of the secret crime that has poisoned the kingdom, and each manoeuvres against the other throughout the play. It was significant that Claudius broke through the fourth wall during his 3.3 soliloquy in this production,

confiding in spectators, “Mein Verbrechen ist ekelhaft” (*My crime is disgusting*).²²³ Railing against his ensnarement in a criminal body – “Armseliger Zustand! Innerlich schwarz wie der Tod! Die Seele in der Falle, und je mehr sie zappelt, um sich zu befreien, desto mehr verfängt sie sich” (*Wretched state! Insides black as death! The soul is in a trap, and the more it struggles to free itself, the more it gets caught*)²²⁴ – and given special license to investigate his problems with the audience, this Claudius can be seen as a precursor to the Angelo who, three years later, engaged in a similar battle between flesh and spirit as he hung upside down from the chandelier in Ostermeier’s *Maß*.

Just as Hamlet and Claudius used performance to find things out, Ostermeier considered Iago and Othello in terms of their parallel situation: both react to their sense of alienation by devising performative situations which lead to the repression of other characters. Iago (Stephan Stern), in one of the productions major insights, began more like a conventional Roderigo – in a reverse power-dynamic of how the scene is normally played, he was entirely dominated by the man who he ended up ensnaring in 1.1. Roderigo repeatedly knocked Iago down into the water, causing him to play the scene soaked through. As a loser who grabbed opportunities, his achievements at least as accidental as they were a product of cold calculation, Iago’s resentment grew with every humiliation. Presenting Iago as a character who feels wronged and inadequate opened up the play, and connected this production to concerns that have preoccupied Ostermeier in his other Shakespeare productions.²²⁵

Similarly, the Duke’s sense of alienation quickly lead him to devise “complex situations” in *Maß für Maß*, but these soon became systems of repression. He began this

²²³ “My offence is rank” (3.3.36).

²²⁴ “O wretched state, O bosom black as death, O limed soul that struggling to be free Art more engaged” (3.3.67-69).

²²⁵ Ostermeier: “For me, the biggest jealousy in this play is not Othello’s, it’s Iago’s. Indeed, he reacts like a man spurned in a relationship. I really believe he is in love with Othello. But [Othello] chooses Cassio as officer, probably because Iago is a foreigner too: he is Spanish. There is a real betrayal in the social struggle for power and the result of an insidious racism” (Derney 2010). Fascinatingly, in Ostermeier’s reading, Iago is positioned as Othello – the victim of prejudice. Ostermeier’s productions constantly establish these doubles – Iago/Othello; the Duke/Angelo; Hamlet/Claudio - characters who are all in situations which are the same, but different.

production by conducting the ensemble in a beautiful choral performance – then, cutting off this rich polyphony, he transformed into a sinister director of destinies. Mayenburg’s version swapped 1.2 and 1.3, so Gert Voss’s Duke, immediately after “departing” Vienna, established for Ostermeier’s audience his plan to observe events from the perspective of a Friar, descending from the stage to take up a seat on the auditorium’s front row to watch the play along with Ostermeier’s spectators. For these characters, however, performance quickly morphs from a strategy for survival into a tool for advancement and control.

It is perhaps for this reason that Ostermeier has started to introduce puppets onto his stage. They were implied in *Hamlet*, where Act 5’s fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes descended into a fragmented dream sequence, the other characters becoming grotesque, stuttering marionettes, looping the choreography of their grisly ends. Judith Rosmair’s Gertrude poured a cup of blood over her veiled head and twirled like a broken doll. Stern’s Laertes repeatedly pointed up to heaven, puppet-like, punching his fist in the air and collapsing his body at the hips. All remained stuck behind the banquet table as it was sucked upstage into darkness, leaving Hamlet alone, forced to the front of the stage by the advancing metal curtain. The investigation reached its end as he did, and the other actors began deactivating, revealing that they had been props in Eidinger’s investigation of male selfhood.

In *Othello*, the actors left onstage between scenes became props manipulated by Iago. While Othello waited patiently for his cues, Iago dominated theatrically. In *Maß* this was taken a step further. Claudio literally doubled as the puppet figure of Mariana, a bow-legged, masked and disarticulated doll, who became a central prop in the plan devised by the Duke to ensnare Angelo. In *Richard III*, full puppets were introduced, each manipulated by actors in black clothing. These represented the Princes who Richard would send to the Tower. Used as his props in a staged piece of political theatre, they were literally manipulated by the angry male protagonist as he performed charm and courtesy, crouching his crippled form to sit them on his knee.

Indeed, this last production offered the most extreme case of a thought experiment, controlled by the director, which was filtered through a central male protagonist. Reviewing *Richard III*, Eva Biringer (2015) argued that the “lights were only on Eidingen,” and Peter von Becker (2015) sensed that the peripheral characters had been “abandoned by the director”. Dirk Knipphals (2015) concluded that, if Ostermeier were to be consistent, he “would have played the whole production as the conclusion, namely, as a one-man show”. Again, this sounds a lot like Live Cinema; yet, whereas it is Mitchell’s avowed aim to be selective in these works, redressing an imbalance in aesthetic and feminist terms, it is not so clear that Ostermeier does not intend to see these plays from every characters’ point of view.

In the Q&A at the end of Ostermeier’s talk on Shakespeare (2014), I asked the director if he saw any gendered division between those characters who are able to wield performance and those who are forced to comply with its demands. Ostermeier replied no, citing Ophelia’s use of “performance” in 3.1 when she consciously performs a role in front of her father and the King as she attempts to return Hamlet’s letters. If Ostermeier genuinely believes there is no gender imbalance in terms of who appropriates performance and to what ends in his theatre, this does seem like a potential blind spot. Like Nora’s tarantella, Ophelia’s performance appears consensual but is in fact coerced. These women don’t have much choice in the roles they play, certainly not to the extent that they appropriate performance as a way of exploring the female self, and let alone to unmask who the other is.

It can be argued that, in this, Ostermeier is following the writing. Although the female consciousnesses are numerous and eloquent in *Richard III*, they are intimidated, dominated and disposed of by the angry male. Indeed, Ostermeier shows himself to be alert to the problems that these plays raise for female actors. During a public discussion in Stockholm, he explained that when casting *Hamlet*, one soon encounters the problem of “the poor girl who has to play Ophelia,” describing her as a “victim of male power” (Florin & Meidal 2012). In response, Ostermeier double cast Ophelia and Gertrude as a

way “to undermine this problem,” having one actor play “a victim but also a perpetrator at the same time. Because I do believe that Gertrude knows more than she is telling us” (ibid). The risk with such a strategy is that, in the doubling of Ophelia and Gertrude, the same actor (in this case Judith Rosmair) is subject to double the humiliation, and both times as an instrument in the exploration of a consistent male self. Certainly the male performer is privileged in this theatre – normally through Eidinger, who is given special license to spread anarchy across the stage (and sometimes into the auditorium).

Frequently, masculine dominance is expressed as violence against female bodies in these productions. This attests to the physical freedom and commitment of Ostermeier’s actors; it certainly relates to Ostermeier’s Meyerholdian influences; but it is occasionally troubling to watch. Angelo’s encounter with Isabella in 2.4 of *Maß* looked like a re-run of Hamlet attempting to rape Ophelia and bury her under the earth in 3.1 of *Hamlet*. Played by the same actor (Lars Eidinger), these men dominated their female partners physically. Forcing Jenny König’s Isabella down onto the floor, and pinning her against the fallen, bloody pig carcass lying centre stage, Eidinger’s Angelo put his hand over her mouth and between her legs, before kissing her, rubbing her breasts with his hands, and marking her white smock with pig’s blood at the groin. The visual image of Isabella during her “To whom should I complain” soliloquy (2.4.171), crouched and bloody on top of the dead pig, invoked the visual tableau of Ophelia during her “O what a noble mind” speech (3.1.149), stained with mud, her legs bent unnaturally in the earth.

Intriguingly, although the reviewers of *Richard III* found Eidinger’s dominance of the production to be palpable, this actor has also dominated Ostermeier’s repertoire. Since *Nora* (2002), he has featured in the vast majority of the productions that have served as case studies in this thesis, indicating how consistently Ostermeier casts him. Indeed, when Becker (2015) argued that Ostermeier seemed to have abandoned the other actors in his review of *Richard III*, he made the point with explicit reference to women – Eva Meckbach (Elizabeth) and Jenny König (Anne) – who, he felt, compared less favourably with female actors whom Ostermeier had worked with in the past (such

as Anne Tismer, Katharina Schüttler and Judith Rosmair). Whilst Eidingen has remained a constant presence on Ostermeier's stage, the female faces surrounding him have constantly renewed.

Shakespeare has brought Ostermeier to examine and confront protagonists who exist and achieve a sense of identity through manipulation, triggered by a sense of victimisation that quickly leads them to dominate others – including the audience. After telling Laertes that he himself was “zu der Partei, der Unrecht getan wurde, sein Wahnsinn ist der Feind des armen Hamlet” (*of the party who was wronged, his madness is the enemy of poor Hamlet*)²²⁶ – just as the Duke in *Maß* takes great pains to characterise himself as the wronged faction in that play's last scene – Eidingen once again instructed the DSM to raise the auditorium lights. He then jumped down from the stage to roam the auditorium, blowing raspberries at startled spectators as he thrust imaginary rapiers into their chests. As Lyn Gardner (2011) registered in her review: “The only people [Hamlet] seems to trust are us, the audience, and even then he can be rather abusive.”

In Ostermeier's work, there is a sense that this male anger is a dynamic (and often charismatic) force. Despite Hamlet's inertia in the revenge plot, his experience of alienation generates the energy that propels the drama. Shakespeare has allowed Ostermeier to explore the gap between self and (self)perception – investigating characters who have to “pretend to be someone else” because they “cannot respond in the way the world wants” (Ostermeier 2014). Mitchell's theatre also investigates the discrepancy between how her subjects are seen and who they are. She is interested in marginal and often oppressed characters – the victims of male domination, and often her efforts require the text itself to be repositioned in redressing a representational imbalance. Ostermeier works from the other direction, exploring central protagonists who dominate drama and who enact the violence that Mitchell's women suffer. Unlike Mitchell, Ostermeier doesn't show us internal perception in these productions. Rather, we are invited to explore a self-limiting consciousness that insists on destructive action. Thus,

²²⁶ “of the faction that is wronged. / His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy” (5.2.175-6).

although these directors create very different work, we once more perceive that the issues they are investigating are remarkably similar. In Mitchell's practice, the director's intentions are easier to perceive, and she keeps renewing the form by responding to unique challenges. This chapter has aimed to raise some questions regarding what Ostermeier's more ambiguous exploration of male selfhood reveals. His *Richard III* shows, if anything, a narrowing of the focus, privileging the male body of the violent anarchic clown in ways that, in performative terms, seem to celebrate it. These investigations are ongoing, and therefore hard to analyse. It remains to be seen whether Ostermeier is locked in a pattern, or whether Shakespeare will unlock new dimensions as the director continues to interrogate these plays through his practice-as-research.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began by challenging the critical view that Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier are auteurs. It has aimed to show that, at every step, their innovations are prompted by studied engagement with new textual sources, and that looking to writers helps us understand the work that they make. However, another issue has emerged over the course of these chapters that needs to be addressed: the issue of control.

As Chapter 4 began by outlining, Ostermeier has ostensibly loosened his directorial control, seeking through his work on Shakespeare to release the actor's creativity, encourage exploration, and stimulate improvisation. Indeed, throughout his career the director has stressed the collaborative nature of his art. During his tenure at Die Baracke in the late 1990s, he told a reporter: "When something happens in rehearsal that I don't control, when something is liberated in the actors, then I leave the rehearsal room in bliss" (Merschmeier & Wille 1998: 30). However, what has also emerged throughout this thesis is Ostermeier's interest in precise physicality. In the carefully orchestrated movement score in *Wunschkonzert*, the intense physical sequences that dominated his work on Ibsen, and in the corporeal emphasis of his Shakespeare productions, Ostermeier sees his role as comparable with a choreographer:

I am responsible [...] for making sure that outward sequences of events make the internal processes or events plastic. That is actually everything, that is the

point. I show the inner worlds of characters through sounds, light, space and the art of how they move in space, ‘And you,’ I say to the actor, ‘you think, please, about yellow frogs, and not about having to manufacture an emotional condition. (Treusch-Dieter 2003)

Peter M. Boenisch (2014) has recently explored the meaning and politics of Ostermeier’s practice in his creative process rather than the productions themselves. After having tackled Shakespeare, Ostermeier’s return to Ibsen with *Ein Volksfeind* saw him setting up rehearsal-room scenarios designed make the play’s themes resonate with his actors’ personal biographies, in addition to a contemporary context. The director’s techniques produced what Boenisch termed “emancipated actors,” who were called upon to become “active interpreters” in Ostermeier’s process. Actors were, Boenisch revealed, invited to volunteer stories and share experiences from their own lives that resonated with scenarios in the play itself, scenarios like: “Persuading someone to do something outrageous,” or “Trying to finish something but being constantly prevented from doing so”. They would then enact these scenarios, encountering the play’s events through their own experiences. Boenisch argued that, in “investing the play with real life” via these exercises, Ostermeier frustrated the actors’ ability to reproduce behavioural clichés, generating “a rich reservoir of emotional memory and physical action” as well as “gestures in space” that could be drawn upon during the rehearsal of specific scenes.

Anyone familiar with Mitchell’s book *The Director’s Craft* will find outlined the exact same technique in a section titled “Practical work on ideas” (2009: 150-54). Mitchell asks actors to collaborate with other cast members in recreating moments from their own lives that intersect with the play’s ideas, and then invites them to share this work with the company. Watching these re-enactments, actors and director analyse physicality, notating gestural references that can be incorporated into scene work. The question to be asked here is who determines the ideas, or the scenarios, that form the basis of these rehearsal room exercises. As we saw in Chapter 1, Mitchell’s analytical

methods clearly steer actors towards three or four central Ideas that she has already identified in her preparatory work. Similarly, before working with his actors, Ostermeier has made a series of choices, in collaboration with his adapter, that identify the play's situations and update them to a contemporary context. Because this textual version is prepared in advance, as is all of Mitchell's intricate work processing the script, the scenarios have already been shaped and focused by adaptation. In both approaches, the actors are given freedom to contribute within a framework determined in advance by the director.

Ostermeier continues to select a very young ensemble at the Schaubühne, frequently refreshing the company with new graduates from the Ernst Busch where he now offers classes. At the international symposium devoted to his work in London last September, a panel of his actors discussed their work on *Ein Volksfeind* in terms wholly synonymous with the director's own, suggesting the extent to which they had internalised Ostermeier's approach. The director has discovered the limitations of this ensemble in recent years, needing to invite older actors to participate as guest performers in order to be able to stage certain plays (Gert Voss – who played the Duke in *Maß für Maß* – is a case in point).²²⁷ Lars Eidingen is the exception that proves the rule in Ostermeier's theatre. As the actor with whom Ostermeier has collaborated the longest, he frequently pushes against the director's limits. When *Hamlet* toured to London, Ostermeier described how free – “sometimes too free” – Eidingen can be with audiences: “I can't handle it any more. But every good disciple betrays its master: if it rebels against me then it is probably very good” (McGinn 2011). This suggests what an important a relationship theirs has been in terms of pushing the director, but Eidingen recently made a remark that revealed he had come to understand Ostermeier's realist proclivities through working elsewhere. Visiting Canada playing the lead in Michael Thalheimer's *Tartuffe*, he explained: “I do not think that [Thalheimer] believes in realism on stage.

²²⁷ When asked why he chose to direct *Richard III*, Ostermeier replied: “I could willingly and joyfully direct five or six other Shakespeare plays at the moment, I had no *Lear* in the company, and no Antonio, no Shylock” (Pearson 2015).

And Thomas is very focused on realistic situations, always looking for the right tone; as long as it doesn't sound authentically [sic] or real for him, it doesn't feel right" (2015).

Mitchell's approach to Chekhov, as explored in Chapter 1, saw her defining the parameters of the actor's engagement with the text very heavily in order to generate what the director deemed authentic behavioural realism. Having developed analytical strategies for processing Chekhovian text, and working on ways to convert her findings into generative tasks for the actor, she came to realise that the majority of her work "happens before rehearsals even begin" (Rebellato 2010: 327). Mitchell then sought to refine her application of Stanislavsky in the light of new scientific advances. She invited the neuroscientist Mark Lythgoe to watch her production of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (2004), and he identified "lurch" moments between two types of acting onstage – one involving theatrical clichés and conventions, the other grounded in lifelike behavioural gestures. Mitchell responded to his comments in a revealing way: "For me the big problem about Mark's observation was that I realised that I wasn't aware of the lurches. There was information therefore reaching the audience that I wasn't in control of and this led to a lack of clarity in the work" (Davies 2009).

Both of these details reveal Mitchell's belief in the necessity of guiding her actors towards specific outcomes. Neuroscience offered her a language with which to talk about acting that focused exclusively on legibility. No longer was the actor's emotional or psychological activity the centre of interest, but rather the story told by their body onstage. Actors now had to accomplish physical gestures that may have felt unnatural, but that their experiments in workshops and rehearsal exercises had shown to be accurate bodily manifestations of cognitive reactions to emotional and environmental stimuli. Attending to these physical tics in performance, the actor's task edged further towards performing choreography. Playing with temporality has also led to Mitchell placing increasingly choreographic demands on the actor – the moments-out-of-time in *Three Sisters* (2003) are only one example of a consistent interest in slowing down and speeding up dramatic time; the high-speed sequences in Mitchell's *A Woman Killed with*

Kindness (2011), for instance, saw actors live through month-long time periods in their characters' lives in mere minutes onstage. Bodily action, rather than the actor's psychological interiority, has become one of Mitchell's principle tools in communicating directly with her audience.

Indeed, the aesthetic gains of Live Cinema have pushed Mitchell's actors further along a choreographic trajectory. Saturday rehearsals are dedicated to "cable runs", in which the cast and the assistant director devise ways of untangling the complex knot of cabling that has resulted from the movement of apparatus plotted during the week. To handle the complexities of their task, each actor in these productions authors his or her own book that functions as a movement score, which is referred to as a personal "plot". An extract from Hattie Morahan's "plot" for *...some trace of her* (she played Nastasya on screen) reveals the extent to which the actor's role has transformed since Mitchell's early work on Chekhov:

Position black velvet on floor to cover marks (US edge in line with edge of Lino);
lie down with bottom in line with Blue mark inside tracks (NB careful net isn't
caught on tracks) – be as still as possible so Pandora can light ASAP.

DEAD NASTASYA: lie still!

Get up + shed veils; go to SR table for EARTH MEAL

Cam B: F 4 Z 13 – position so that top edge of arc doesn't go over edge of table,
then bring back to first plate to start

EARTH MEAL: slow pan across table; stop after I reach Jamie's papers; lock off
camera.²²⁸

There is no space or time in which to attend to psychological concerns here; instead, these "plots" document elaborate lists of physical actions that demand considerable

²²⁸ These "plots" form part of the production's archive materials, held at the National Theatre Archive (Some Trace of Her RNT/SM/1/570c).

technical skill. Significantly, Mitchell began directing at 16 because of her frustrated ambitions in becoming a visual artist: “I found I couldn’t actually paint, so I started organising people on stage as if they were components in a painting” (Barnett 2008). However, she has also described how – in comparison to her later work on Stanislavskian approaches to acting – these first experiments involved “painting with people and they were dull” (Rebellato 2010: 327). It is perhaps the case that her most recent work sees her returning to her initial position. Whereas the director once drew heavily on the creativity of her actors in devising *Waves*, Mitchell and Warner now arrive at rehearsals for Live Cinema productions having worked out the shots in advance. *Fräulein Julie*, for example, was plotted with actors in London before the German cast – in a six-week rehearsal period – refined the technical means of delivering an already existing storyboard.

There are, of course, institutional factors to consider here. Unlike Ostermeier, Mitchell does not have her own ensemble. Advanced preparation is a necessity as well as a choice – there is no time to devise work with German actors in a foreign language, or to establish collaborative models akin to her work at the National Theatre in the 2000s. Whether German theatres would give her longer rehearsal periods is not really the issue. Mitchell told me in an interview that, as a working single mother, she had to start earning above a certain threshold just in order to cover childcare costs, which necessitated upping her level of output (Mitchell 2012). Given these constraints, it is hardly surprising that Mitchell no longer spends time inventing intricate biographies for a secondary tier of characters with her German Live Cinema actors. The emphasis instead is on technical and physical precision, and the performer in Mitchell’s theatre seems to have travelled some distance away from the Stanislavskian actor, moving instead towards the dancer.

Dance is undeniably still a form of creativity, but it may be experienced as frustration. When I observed rehearsals for *Die Gelbe Tapete* in Berlin, actors sometimes raised questions regarding the movements that the pre-established storyboard required

of them. In these instances, Mitchell had to help them justify retrospectively choices that her process would previously have allowed them to arrive at independently. However, over the last seven years spent working in Germany, Mitchell has built relationships with specific actors – not least Julia Wieninger in Karen Beier’s ensemble (first at Köln, now at Hamburg), with whom she has now worked six times. It was only in 2013 that she began working in a theatrical mode other than Live Cinema in Germany, staging Martin Crimp’s new play *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino* in Hamburg. It may be the case, as these relationships continue to stabilise, that the director will be returning to more collaborative forms of creation.

Ostermeier’s relationship with actors also shows signs of changing. Chapter 4 discussed the lack of female Eidingers at the Schaubühne, a problem that Ostermeier has recently taken steps to address by luring Nina Höss away from the Deutsches Theater ensemble, where she had worked since 1998. An actor of significant calibre with a high profile in film, Höss has been the focus of two of Ostermeier’s most recent productions at the Schaubühne, starring as Regina in Lillian Hellman’s *Die kleinen Füchse* (*The Little Foxes*, 2014) and as Andrea in *Bella Figura*, a new play written by Yazmina Reza especially for Ostermeier. It may be that her presence will continue to lead the director down a new path, and open up new choices in terms of repertoire.

This discussion of control begins to expose the limitations of existing vocabularies in analysing the work of these directors. As we have seen, their attempts to define new forms of realism responsive to twenty-first century concerns have contested the received understanding of realist and naturalist praxis in twenty-first century critical and scholarly discourse. In addition, their directing methods challenge expectations about collective creation in a theatre that remains committed to exploring text. Although their practice reveals the term “auteur” as a wholly inadequate, simplistic and reductive term, it is the case that their artistry involves collaborating with writers (who are often dead) to a greater degree than with actors. The implications of this require further

consideration. Actors have proved to be these directors' principle onstage resource, but their contribution is often controlled in order to facilitate the director's communication with the audience, albeit grounded in issues they perceive in the writer's text.

This thesis has, however, pursued the notion that these directors' politics reside in their work rather than in their creative process. Coming out of this investigation, I'd like to make some final remarks about the kinds of texts with which they collaborate. Both directors clearly share the conviction that writers are the vital connection between their practice and twenty-first century realities. Most surprisingly and significantly, however, the written works in which they take an interest require them to think through the inadequacy of language as an index of interiority.

Ostermeier turned to in-her-face writers at the outset of his career because he was "sick and tired of incomprehensibility" in German theatre (Raabe 1998). Writers like Mark Ravenhill offered templates for talking about current concerns, rejuvenating an experimental German theatre scene in which, as Ostermeier put it, "we tend to forget the world outside" (Woodall 2010: 365). However, in turning to Ibsen, Ostermeier began interacting with a form of dramatic text that disclosed meanings to audiences at a supplementary level to the words spoken by the characters, often through the actor's body. With very little "textual" adaptation, these plays easily resonated with contemporary reality because so much of Ostermeier's (and the actors') work was communicated outside of language, grounded in the sociological observation of behaviour. In Shakespeare, Ostermeier became fascinated by the problem of a language that is impossible to translate. Finding performative means of investigating its complexities in ways other than the spoken word, Ostermeier has ended up committing to a form of text that Mitchell encountered early on in her career and soon abandoned. This points towards important cultural differences, for whereas he has found in Shakespeare great freedom, Mitchell only encountered limitations.

Indeed, of the decade spent at the RSC that began her professional practice, Mitchell remembers feeling uncomfortable: "There seemed to be so many rules and

regulations about the presentation of that text by that writer” (Mitchell 2011).²²⁹ After her single foray into Shakespeare with *3 Henry VI*, she decided not to tackle his plays again because they were “owned by someone else” (ibid). Although Ostermeier, staking his claim in drama, found himself alienated by the predominance of a postdramatic paradigm in Germany, Mitchell experienced the same sensation because of the fetish of the text in British theatre practice – or, more specifically, the premium it places on spoken language.

Chekhov offered her a means of processing her frustrations that remained rooted in writing. In his plays, as in Ibsen’s, dialogue is only one limited aspect of the complex behavioural dimensions they support in performance. This reveals why naturalist text has been so fruitful for both practitioners. These writers, Strindberg included, explored the limits of a naturalist frame as they pushed through into expressionist and impressionist territories. In using Chekhov to pursue her own investigation of the spoken word’s limitations, Mitchell began to exceed even his liberal poetic realist limits. Woolf’s writing thus became crucial to her project of laying bare consciousness.

Mitchell’s theatre took a modernist turn, although the consistent presence of Beckett in her body of work reveals the director’s ongoing interest in writers who explore the limits and failures of language. Her work on his drama requires further attention. Mitchell told Dan Rebellato: “I am often struck by the way in which theatre practice has not completely embraced modernist texts from the twentieth century, and how mainstream theatre operates mainly inside nineteenth-century narrative structures” (Rebellato 2014: 217). For her, a return to modernism offered a means of overcoming dominant theatrical conventions. Just as Laura Mulvey was drawing attention to the masculinist conventions of mainstream narrative cinema in 1975, Mitchell has described how her explorations of consciousness, through the resistance they have met, expose

²²⁹ Mitchell began as an assistant director at the RSC in 1988, directed a series of productions there in the early 1990s, and was the Artistic Director of *The Other Place* from 1996-98. See Chambers (2004: 103-4).

“patriarchal structures and systems, which lie invisibly, somewhere deep in British society” (ibid: 218). Mitchell’s Live Cinema technique, then, is not a reactionary return to a modernist moment, offering an ahistorical response to the chaos of the modern subject’s experience in a generic modern world. Rather, it is a deeply political innovation, redressing a formal imbalance in contemporary theatre practice and insisting on new areas of perception and experience as a valid subject for art. In the same interview, Mitchell concluded that after 30 years of directing she was “coming to the conclusion that female perception and experience is maybe different from male perception and experience” (ibid: 218); making work in a medium where masculinist models dominated required her to reinvent theatrical form.

Modernism has proved equally resonant for Ostermeier. Although his influences differ starkly from Woolf, Ostermeier has returned to the principles of Meyerhold and Brecht as a way of countering the specifically *postmodern* malaise of a post-1989 generation:

This generation believes that it has already played a role in history. It does not want a ‘permanent revolution’. Everyone wants a quiet private life. [...] Everyone just wants to live mindlessly, they do not want to change, do not to think, do not want to ask questions. And I’m not a private person. I do not like privacy. (2011c)

Indeed, with a certain degree of urgency Ostermeier had turned to Ibsen – in whose work he discovered a proto-Brechtian politics that, as we have seen, Toril Moi linked with modernism – as a way of counteracting the sense that history has ended. Finding in his plays a scandalous congruence with life in contemporary Berlin, Ostermeier sought to share his findings with the contemporary public. As he told James Woodall:

The appearance of Ibsen in Germany came precisely at a time when Germany had more or less the same kind of crisis as we had here in the beginning of 2000. There was the Gründerzeit, when a great deal of building in Berlin was done and there was a lot of money around in industry, followed by a big economic crisis. You had the same thing in Berlin in the 1990s, with all the building and e-commerce, and then certain economic depressants. (Woodall 2010: 370)

There are many questions to pursue here. Mitchell's neo-modernism perhaps makes sense of the stress placed in her theatre on aesthetic beauty. Similarly, as Woolf's prose charts the psychic strain of subjectivities in flux, her writing consoles in its stylistic coherence. Mitchell's productions systematically assert sensual and sumptuous visual imagery, grounded in their director's careful study of art history. This is especially the case in productions where women suffer male violence – a city may be burning in the background of *Women of Troy*, but the women are in ball gowns; a mother may be suffering post-natal depression in *Die Gelbe Tapete*, but the yellow patterned wallpaper in which she believes herself trapped is beautiful. In climactic moments of violent intensity Mitchell's stage asserts images of aesthetic beauty that survive the destruction of the characters in narrative terms. For example, as Clytemnestra and her attendants were forced out of their holding dock at the end of *Women of Troy*, sirens wailed, and emergency lights flashed, triggering a sprinkler system. A lone chorus member, left behind in the chaos, sat applying lipstick with a hand-mirror – as her body trembled in shock. Ostermeier's investigation of masculine domination also introduces a whole host of questions. From his work on Ibsen, and his assertion that one feels and finds oneself in suffering, Ostermeier's theatre is one in which corporeal intensities leap the gap between stage and auditorium and infect the bodies of spectators. Both he and Mitchell seek to make their onstage consciousnesses palpably present, even in their absence. Both seek to work on the nerves and the bodies of their spectators, as well as exploring what we have come to recognise as highly gendered patterns of cognition. That Ostermeier has moved

from exploring female victimhood to male domination perhaps sees issues clarifying that were there all along – for as we saw in his work on Ibsen, both Nora and Hedda found themselves objectified by their male counterparts, stuck in a domestic sphere and a dramatic world in which “violence is gendered” (Helland 2015: 26).

It seems appropriate to end a study of two practitioners who are still producing by considering what questions they are raising now. At the end of 2014 Mitchell began a new strand of output, directing an opera for children, co-produced by the Young Vic and the ENO called *The Way Back Home*. Mitchell talked to Andrew Haydon about her plans for this project in 2013, following her success in initiating a new trend for children’s theatre at the National Theatre with *The Cat in The Hat* (2009). Of her designs in children’s opera, she said:

We thought it would be really interesting to start that ball rolling. Because, now, at the National, everyone’s doing [children’s shows]. It’s great, isn’t it?
(Haydon 2013b).

In a 2013 interview, Ostermeier revealed to Andrew Dickson details of a project scheduled for Paris in 2016:

I’m going to do the Purcell *Fairy-Queen* [1692]. With a Baroque orchestra. With real instruments of the time. (Dickson 2013a)

These projects reveal that their directors cannot be circumscribed within a single model. They are constantly revising themselves. Ostermeier is not content to be the director he was in the late 1990s, staging in-yer-face British writing. His use of baroque instruments will offer a pointed contrast to “Rockstar” by N.E.R.D, which boomed out of his theatre’s speakers in the early 2000s. This project also shows a progression in terms of

Ostermeier's exploration of Shakespeare, moving into music and exploring the afterlife of one of his plays as it was carried through into the seventeenth century.

Mitchell too keeps evolving, but her pursuit of children's theatre shows how interconnected her work is, acting as a pointed feminist statement in asserting that National Theatres should cater to mothers and children. Having asked her why her naturalist aesthetic was full of repetitive tropes, Jane Edwardes (2007) reported, "[Mitchell] throws up her hands in defeat, crying: 'Yes. Do you think I should start again? I tried to in *Waves* to see where else you could go'". Although accused at many points in her career of not doing things right, she keeps opening up new areas of enquiry. So too does Ostermeier, who most clearly began scrutinising his own contradictions as he turned the critical lens on himself with *Ein Volksfeind*.

These are two artists who accept that they aren't doing things right, but they don't let that prevent them from asking new questions and raising new issues – making their own definitions that seek to connect theatre practice with a politics of perception rooted firmly in reality. This is what makes them significant figures and demands that we take their work seriously. These are directors who are continuously trying to see where else we can go.

SELECT CHRONOLOGY: KATIE MITCHELL

<i>A Woman Killed with Kindness</i> Thomas Heywood	1991 (RSC)
<i>Ghosts</i> Henrik Ibsen	1993 (RSC)
<i>Henry VI: The Battle for the Throne</i> Shakespeare	1994 (RSC)
<i>Three Sisters</i> Anton Chekhov	2003 (National Theatre)
<i>Iphigenia at Aulis</i> Euripides	2004 (National Theatre)
<i>The Seagull</i> Anton Chekhov	2006 (National Theatre)
<i>Waves</i> Virginia Woolf	2006 (National Theatre)
<i>Attempts on Her Life</i> Martin Crimp	2007 (National Theatre)
<i>...some trace of her</i> Dostoevsky	2008 (National Theatre)
<i>Wunschkonzert (Request Concert)</i> Franz Xaver Kroetz	2008 (Schauspiel Köln)
<i>Fräulein Julie (Miss Julie)</i> August Strindberg	2010 (Schaubühne)
<i>A Woman Killed with Kindness</i> Thomas Heywood	2011 (National Theatre)
<i>Reise durch die Nacht (Night Train)</i> Friederike Mayröcker	2012 (Schauspiel Köln)
<i>Die Gelbe Tapete (The Yellow Wallpaper)</i> Charlotte Perkins Gilman	2013 (Schaubühne)
<i>Atmen (Lungs)</i> Duncan Macmillan	2013 (Schaubühne)
<i>The Cherry Orchard</i> Anton Chekhov	2014 (Young Vic)
<i>The Forbidden Zone</i> Duncan Macmillan	2014 (Schaubühne/Salzburg)

SELECT CHRONOLOGY: THOMAS OSTERMEIER

<i>Die Unbekannte</i> (<i>The Unknown</i>) Alexander Bloch	1995 (Ernst Busch Studio)
<i>Shoppen & Ficken</i> (<i>Shopping and Fucking</i>) Mark Ravenhill	1998 (Die Baracke)
<i>Personenkreis 3.1</i> (<i>Human Circle 3.1</i>) Lars Norèn	2000 (Schaubühne)
<i>Danton's Tod</i> (<i>Danton's Death</i>) Georg Büchner	2001 (Schaubühne)
<i>Nora</i> (<i>A Doll's House</i>) Henrik Ibsen	2002 (Schaubühne)
<i>Wunschkonzert</i> (<i>Request Concert</i>) Franz Xaver Kroetz	2003 (Schaubühne)
<i>Baumeister Solness</i> (<i>The Master Builder</i>) Henrik Ibsen	2004 (Burgtheater, Wien)
<i>Hedda Gabler</i> Henrik Ibsen	2005 (Schaubühne)
<i>Ein Sommernachtstraum</i> (<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>) Shakespeare	2006 (Schaubühne)
<i>Hamlet</i> Shakespeare	2008 (Schaubühne)
<i>John Gabriel Borkmann</i> Henrik Ibsen	2008/9 (Schaubühne)
<i>Othello</i> Shakespeare	2010 (Schaubühne)
<i>Spoken</i> (<i>Ghosts</i>) Henrik Ibsen	2011 (Toneelgroep Amsterdam)
<i>Maß für Maß</i> (<i>Measure for Measure</i>) Shakespeare	2011 (Schaubühne)
<i>Miss Julie</i> August Strindberg	2011 (Theatre of Nations, Moscow)
<i>Ein Volksfeind</i> (<i>An Enemy of the People</i>) Henrik Ibsen	2012 (Schaubühne)
<i>Richard III</i> Shakespeare	2015 (Schaubühne)

APPENDIX

This is a transcript of text used in Katie Mitchell's *Waves* (2006), during the sequence described in Chapter 3.

I hate the small looking glass on the stairs, said Jinny. It shows our heads only. And my lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together. I show my gums too much when I laugh. So I skip up the stairs past them, to the next landing, where the long glass hangs and I see myself entire. (Woolf 2000 [1931]: 29-30)

At home the hay weaves over the meadows, said Susan. My father leans upon the stile, smoking. In the house one door bangs and then another, as the summer air puffs along the empty passages. Some old picture perhaps swings on the wall. All this I see, I always see, as I pass the looking-glass on the landing, with Jinny in front and Rhoda lagging behind. (ibid: 29)

This is my face, said Rhoda. In the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder—that face is my face. But I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second. Therefore I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (ibid: 30-31)

I love his voice on the stair, his old shoes and moments of being together. I think of death sometimes as the end of an excursion which I went on when he died. As if I should come in and say well, here you are. (Mitchell 2008: 33)

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